

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

In this lesson, you will study about inequality among human beings. So far, in earlier lessons, you have learnt that division of labour is universally found in human societies. Even those societies that lack specialization and complexity, like hunting and food-gathering societies, do have jobs allocated to people on the basis of sex and age. Women carry out tasks that are different from those that men do. Similarly, jobs assigned to people of different age-groups are also different. The tasks that different people perform in a society are complementary. Because of the work people carry out, their life-styles acquire an identity of their own. For instance, the house of a carpenter will have a workshop where he does wood-work. The house of a weaver will have a loom.

Therefore, the first principle you will learn here is that no society is completely homogeneous, where groups look alike, as do the individuals. Rather, what you find in a society is 'difference'. Women's work is different from that of men. People of different age-groups do different works, and then, there are groups of people where one is different from the other. One clan is different from the other because of its association with a different *totem*. One caste is different from the other because of its occupation.

OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- define the concept of social stratification;
- describe the central ideas in stratification;
- explain what is status and its types; and
- describe the caste system.



Notes

16.1 DIFFERENCE AND INEQUALITY

Difference between individuals and groups is a universal characteristic. It does not imply that one group or individual is superior to the other, or it enjoys more privileges than the other. In other words, difference does not imply ranking or inequality. It only shows that diversity exists.

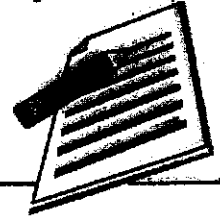
Our first point here is that we should distinguish the idea of *difference* from the idea of *inequality*. By difference, we mean the existence of certain dissimilarities between the objects or units under consideration. But these dissimilarities are complementary. Men and women are different in their biological compositions, but it is their complementariness that is the basis of reproduction. Weavers are different from carpenters, but they are dependent upon each other for the goods they respectively produce. Weavers buy wooden objects from carpenters while carpenters buy shawls or mats from weavers.

By inequality, we imply a distribution of privileges and resources, as a consequence of which some are more privileged or better placed than others. Or, in other words, some have under their control more resources than others. What results is a ranking of people and their groups.

Sociologists also make a distinction between 'natural inequalities between people' and 'inequalities in their conditions of existence'. The first types of inequalities are also known as physical inequalities, by which we mean differences of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind. But these inequalities are small in comparison to social inequalities. Sociologists are concerned with a study of social inequalities. Natural inequalities may affect the performance of individuals. There may be a factor accounting for the differences between individuals belonging to the same social category. But social inequalities are founded on principles that are different from those involved in physical inequalities.

In theoretical terms, the existence of difference between two entities does not imply that they are unequal. But the opposite is not true. The existence of inequality necessarily implies the existence of difference between them, and this difference becomes the basis of inequality. Therefore, we may say that difference and inequality deal with different things, but in reality, they are inter-connected.

Difference between things is attached to different values, leading to their unequal position in society. We have earlier said that men and women are different, and they are complementary as well. Yet, they are ranked. Women have a status inferior to men in most societies. Sometimes, this also includes matrilineal societies, where men take all the important decisions, in spite of the fact that property is transmitted in the female line. Similarly, in spite of the complementariness of carpenters and



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weavers, they are ranked differently in an Indian village. Sociologists say that both difference and inequality are universal.

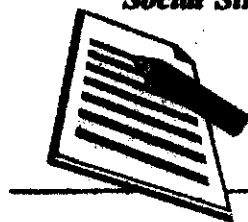
16.2 CONCEPT OF STRATIFICATION

The concept of social stratification came into existence in the 1940s. The term stratification was borrowed from the earth science, the science of geology. The earth scientists say that the earth is made up of a number of layers, one placed upon the other. Each of these layers has its own composition and can be distinguished from the other. In technical terms, each layer is known as stratum, the plural of which is strata, and the system of the composition of earth is called stratification.

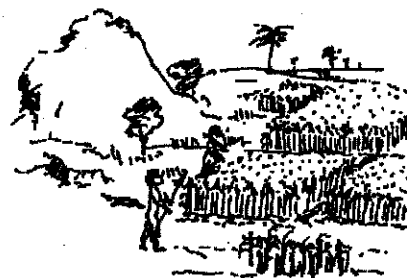
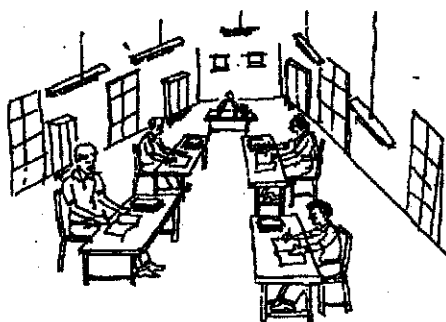
Similar to the structure of earth, sociologists also think that human society is divided into layers, one placed upon the other. Social stratification, therefore, may be defined as the division of society into strata. But there is an important distinction between the geological and the sociological use of the term stratification. For geologists, all the strata that constitute earth are of equal value. There is no question of one being more privileged than the other. By comparison, in human society, there is an unequal distribution of privileges across the strata. In other words, the layers of a society are ranked. Those occupying higher positions are more privileged than those who occupy lower positions.

Let us illustrate this with the help of examples. Rich people can afford more expensive education than poor people. They can also buy luxury goods, such as air conditioners, refrigerators, cars and live in costly houses in good colonies, etc. The members of a village council can take decisions that the others will follow without any question. In a caste-divided society of a south Indian village, as used to happen in the past, those who were placed at the lowest level were not supposed to come out of their houses during the day lest they should defile the high castes with their shadow or contact. They were thus condemned to lead a nocturnal (night) existence. It was believed that the lowest castes were the permanent carriers of impurity.

The examples given below show that the privileges people have are an outcome of the unequal distribution of power, wealth, and prestige. Let us understand the meaning of each of these concepts.



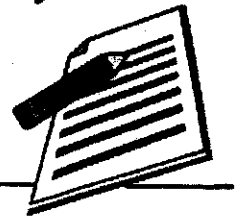
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In human society; there is an unequal distribution of privileges

16.2.1 Definition of Power, Wealth, and Prestige

Power, as you have read in the chapter on political institution, refers to the degree to which individuals or groups can impose their will on others and seek obedience from them even in the absence of their consent. When the exercise of power is legitimate, it is called authority. Wealth refers to material possessions – such as property, livestock, land, building, money, jewelry, and many other forms of property – that are regarded as valuable in most societies. Prestige refers to honour and respect that is associated with social positions that individuals occupy. It is also associated with the qualities of individuals and their styles of life. Certain qualities and lifestyles are regarded as more prestigious than others. Social stratification deals with the inequalities of power, wealth, and prestige.



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16.4.2 Social Stratification and Social Inequality

Till now you have learnt that social stratification is concerned with social inequality. But, does it deal with all types of social inequality?

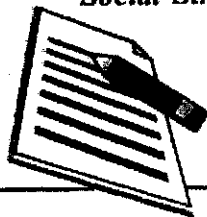
Social inequality is not only between groups in terms of the amount of power, wealth, and prestige their members possess. It is also between members of different sex and age groups. Here, it may be noted that the inequality between men and women, or between different age-groups, is not regarded as social stratification. So, we may say that social stratification deals with social inequality but not with all types of social inequality.

Social stratification is a type of social inequality. It refers to the presence of social groups, which are ranked one above the other, usually with respect to the amount of power, wealth and prestige their members possess. Those who belong to a stratum usually share a set of common sentiments and interests. Generally, they also share a similar style of life that distinguishes them from the members located in other social layers.

16.2.3 Universality of Social Stratification

Is social stratification universal? Sociologists point out that simple societies of hunters and food gatherers usually do not have groups, which are ranked one above the other. Differences of power, wealth, and prestige do not exist at the level of groups. All clans are equally placed. No ranking exists between them. All members of these communities have equal access to resources. As a result, there are no rich or poor people among them. Whatever inequality exists between them is at the level of sex and age. Women (or men) may have more or less prestige in different societies. Elders may be respected. The solutions they offer in matters of conflict may not be binding on the individuals involved, yet they are respected and followed. From this we may conclude that although social inequality may be found in all societies, social stratification may not be universal.

That is why, sociologists today no more support the idea of 'primitive communism', where it was believed there were simple societies marked by a state of complete equality between the individual members. On closer observation, it was found that while these societies lacked stratification, they still had inequality on the lines of gender and age. They also had the concepts of 'best hunters', 'best craftsmen', 'best magicians', who commanded more respect than the others. All adult men knew the techniques of hunting, but some excelled over others. Thus, they were the ones who enjoyed more prestige than the others. The point to be kept in mind is that even in simple societies, an individual may carry more respect



Notes

or may be richer than others. For instance, the chief may be the richest man because he receives gifts from his subjects. But prestige or wealth is not necessarily associated with a group. It may be associated with an individual. From this, we may repeat our conclusion that stratification is not universally found to the same extent and in the same sense. What is found, however, is some form of social inequality.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 16.1

Answer the following questions in one sentence only.

a) Define social inequality.

b) What is stratification?

c) Describe the notion of 'primitive communism'.

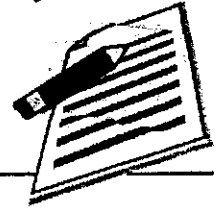
d) Give the definition of the term prestige.

16.3 SOME IMPORTANT CONCEPTS AND IDEAS ON STRATIFICATION

In this section, we shall study two most important view-points on social stratification. Both of these were given by the German thinkers. One was Karl Marx, and the other was Max Weber.

16.3.1 Views of Karl Marx

Karl Marx made a seminal contribution to the concept of social stratification. For him, stratification divides the society into two mutually opposed or contrary social categories where one exploits the other. In his view, there are two main social groups in society. First, there are those who own and control resources, technology, and valued goods. These things are collectively called *means of production*. The second group is of those who do not have any ownership or control over these things. They work for the members of the first category, who own and control resources and thus survive on the wages they receive from their employers for rendering their labour. For both the social categories, Marx used the word 'class',



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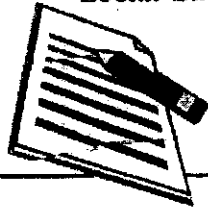
which is defined in terms of the *ownership* and *non-ownership* of the means of production. Thus, **class** is a social group whose members share a similar relationship to the means of production.

Marx also believes that those who own the means of production also exercise political power. Economic power leads to political and legal power, because of which they are able to consolidate their legal control over economic resources. Therefore, Marx uses the concept of 'ruling class' for the class that owns the means of production, because this ownership gives them political and legal power. The class that does not own but works on the means of production owned by the first class, is called the 'service class'. It remains in a subordinate position because it lacks the political power. It has to abide by the laws that the ruling class creates to protect its interests. For Marx, law is an instrument of exploitation because the ruling class creates and controls it.

It is not only that the ownership of resources yields political power. But also, it leads to a privileged position where the ruling class is able to control the ideas and thoughts (in a nutshell, the ideology) prevalent in a society at a given point of time. It is also able to create an ideology that justifies its superior position. Marx says that the ideas prevalent in a given society at a given point of time are in fact the ideas of the dominant class. Control over power and ideology ensures the perpetuation of the class structure as it is. Those who control the means of production keep on controlling them over time and over generations. Those who are of the service class keep on remaining in a subordinate position for all times to come unless the system of stratification undergoes a qualitative change.

Marx believed that not all societies were divided into classes. The first stage in the evolution of human societies was one where classes did not exist. In this society, there was neither law nor state. Nor was there any private property. Complete equality prevailed in this society, and this society was defined as having primitive communism.

After this stage, human societies were always marked by a division into classes, the ruling class and the service class. According to Marx, the last stage of a class-divided society would be capitalism, where conflict would take place between the ruling class and the service class. This conflict that Marx called class conflict would culminate in a society where there would be no classes. This would be a state of classlessness. This society is called the **communist society**. Thus, for Marx, stratification would not be a characteristic of human society for all times to come. Human society began with classlessness and would return to it after spending thousands of years in a class-divided system.



16.3.2 Views of Max Weber

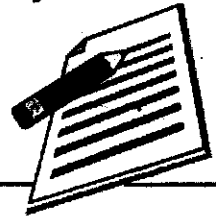
After Marx, Max Weber made an important contribution to the ideas on stratification. While Marx thinks that the principal form of stratification is *class*, Weber believes that besides class, there are two other forms, namely *status* and *power*.

Like Marx, Weber also sees class in economic terms. But he moves ahead of Marx because he says that classes develop in market economies. Thus, class is a characteristic of capitalist societies because these societies have market economies. In capitalism, family is not the unit of production. The market takes over the processes of production and distribution of produce. People depend upon the market for virtually all types of goods and services.

People sell their skills in the market and derive their livelihood from the income they get. Certain skills (like of engineering, technology, medicine) fetch a higher price in the market than certain others. Those who have such skills, which may be called marketable skills, have better chances to survive and make use of the facilities than those who are unskilled or semi-skilled, or have those skills that are not a priority in the market.

The same principle also applies to property. The returns from property vary with respect to its location, even the part of the city or village where it is located. The market also determines the prices of property. From this, it follows that the chances of survival of an individual, which are called *life chances*, depend upon the market situation. The individual's skills determine his class, which is dependent upon the market. People who have no ownership of property but have skills that are much needed by the market have good chances to survive. Thus, they are not 'have-nots', as the Marxian theory would call them. Weber also rejected the idea of the *ruling class*.

- According to Marx, class that owns the means of production also controls political power.
- According to Weber, ownership of the means of production may not always lead to a control over political power.
- Individuals get political power not because of economic power but because of their political skills, like their ability to communicate as effectively as possible, their ideology, their manifesto, their organizational skills and commitment to goals, etc.
- Thus, economic power and political power may not go hand in hand in modern societies.



- There will be two hierarchies, the economic, which has people that own the means of production, and the political, which has people who exercise political power.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 16.2

Find out which of the following statements is true or false. Write T after the statement that is true, and F after the statement that is false.

- According to Marx, there are two main classes in society.
- For Marx, classes are defined in terms of the mental abilities of persons.
- The means of production include technology, capital, and resources.
- According to Marx, ownership of the means of production leads to a control over political power.
- Classes existed in human society right from the beginning of humankind.

16.4 STATUS

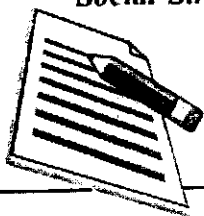
In addition to these two hierarchies, the economic and political, there is one more, which is called the hierarchy of statuses. Analytically, it could be regarded as independent of the other two rankings.

The term status implies 'social position'. Each individual occupies a social position in a situation of interaction. For instance, right now, you are occupying the position of a reader, while I am occupying the position of a lesson-writer. You occupy the position of a son, nephew, grandson, student, player, friend, and several others, depending upon the social situation in which you are placed; in other words, depending upon the individual or individuals with whom you interact. With respect to each social position, you play a role, that is, you carry out the type of action expected from/from you in a given social position. So, if status refers to a 'position', role refers to the 'behaviour' expected from that position.

16.4.1 Ascribed and achieved statuses

Sociologists speak of two types of statuses, respectively called ascribed and achieved. **Ascribed statuses are given to the individual because of the facts related to his/her birth.** It is a matter of accident that because of my birth in a Brahmin family, I happen to be a Brahmin. I did not choose the social position of

MODULE - II
Social Institution and
Social Stratification



Notes

a Brahmin. In the same way, because of my birth as a female, I happen to occupy the position of a daughter, niece, granddaughter, and later in life, of a wife, mother, aunt and grandmother, etc. The positions I occupy by being born in a family, a particular social category, or a particular sex category, are ascribed statuses. They cannot be changed. Once an individual occupies a particular social position because of birth, the other social positions that he would occupy over time, can be easily predicted. If an individual is born a male, we may easily predict that he would be a son, father, uncle, grandfather, and so on.

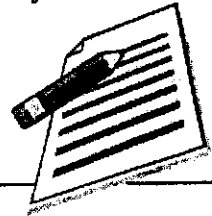
The other social position is called 'achieved status'. In each society, certain positions are left open to be filled in by competition. Individuals compete for certain social positions, and these positions for which there is competition are known as achieved statuses. If a person gets through the Civil Services Examination and becomes a civil servant, then we would say that he has achieved the status. In a simple society, social positions are predominantly ascribed, but there are certain positions that are filled by competition. For instance, the positions of the 'best hunter', the 'best craftsman', the 'best gardener', are the examples of achieved statuses. By comparison, in a complex society, social positions are largely achieved, but it does not imply that ascribed positions disappear. Rather, they continue to be important in many situations. Moreover, ascribed positions often influence the achievement of a status. Being a male in many societies also brings several privileges. A man may be more easily permitted to go for higher education than a woman. Thus, there are more chances of males achieving certain statuses than of females.

Statuses are ranked. The principle of ranking will differ from one society to another, but in all of them a status group (that is, a group of people occupying the same status) is also defined in terms of the style of life its members lead. One status group is distinguished from the other with respect to the way its members live. A prominent example of the status group is caste system.

INTEXT QUESTIONS 16.3

Fill in the blanks with appropriate word given in brackets.

- Status is defined as 'social _____.' (position, action, behaviour)
- Role refers to _____. (behaviour, situation, individual)
- Statuses acquired by birth are called _____. (ascribed, higher, different)



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- d Achieved statuses are found more in _____ societies. (complex, simple, joint)
- e The status of son is an example of _____ status. (achieved, ascribed, both)

16.5 CASTE

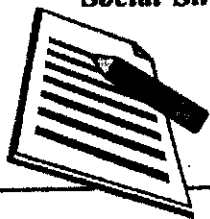
We earlier said that status is independent of class and power. There may be a hierarchy of social positions, each defined in terms of lifestyle that its members lead. A poor Brahmin priest may command far higher respect than a politically powerful person or a rich merchant. Both the king and the merchant will touch his feet and seek blessings. A new king can not occupy the throne unless the Brahmin priest has performed rituals. For all matters pertaining to Hindu law and religion, the advice of the Brahmin priests continues to be sought. Brahmins are regarded as the members of the learned class, which specializes in religious matters and the performance of rituals. This example shows that the system of ranking in which the Brahmins are placed at the top is one that is independent of economic and political power.

Caste system is a characteristic of Indian society, but is also found in many parts of South Asia. Although caste is the way in which Hindus organize their society, the elements of caste are seen in non-Hindu communities as well. Those religions and sects that emerged as a reaction to caste inequalities have ended up tolerating its members to follow caste practices. As a result, castes are found among Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Jews and Zoroastrians. Not only those, many tribal communities have been absorbed in caste system. This process is called *tribe-caste continuum*, meaning thereby that some tribes have become castes over time.

Caste system derives its basis from Hinduism. The Hindu text, Rig Veda, pronounces that different castes have emerged from different parts of God's body. From his mouth emerged the Brahmins, from his arms, the Kshatriya, from his thighs, the Vaishya, and from his feet came the Sudra. Hindu society, therefore, is divided into four social categories, called *varna*, and each one of them is supposed to perform a particular occupation. The Brahmins perform rituals. They read and comment upon religious texts. The Kshatriya is a warrior caste. The members of this caste protect their people against external attacks. The Vaishya specialize in trading. At the bottom of the hierarchy is placed the caste of the Sudra, whose main job is to serve the upper castes. Each of these social categories is further divided into a number of other smaller categories.

MODULE - II

Social Institution and Social Stratification



Notes

Some of the salient characteristics of caste may be noted below. All these characteristics of caste are inter-related.

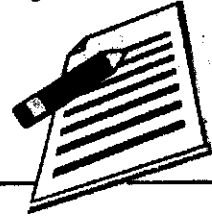
- Caste system is based on the ideas of purity and pollution.
- Besides occupation, each caste has its own style of living.
- In a village, a person's caste may be identified by looking at his dress and jewelry, house types, food habits, and the manner of speaking.
- It has been found that each caste has its own dialect, which may be distinguished from the others.
- Each caste follows the rules of endogamy, that is, its members marry within their own caste, but they marry outside their village. Village exogamy, i.e. marrying out accompanies caste endogamy.
- Each caste has its own council, locally called caste *panchayat*, which takes up disputes and other matters pertaining to the caste.
- Each caste has its own complex of gods and goddesses, ritual-complex, and folklore.

The above elucidation of caste, its nature and attributes is true only in an ideal-typical fashion. As of now, the system of caste has lost its purity under the influence of humanitarian values and other forces of modernization. Urbanization and communication have also broken down the rigour of inter-caste prejudices and antipathies.

The unity of a caste results from the characteristics shared by members.

It, however, should not give the impression that each caste is autonomous. It is not isolated as may be the case with tribal societies. Each caste depends upon the other caste, because each one of them specializes in a particular occupation. The unity in the village follows from inter-caste dependence.

It also seems that since the birth-related factors determine caste, it cannot be changed. But it is not really true. Right from the ancient times, there have been cases of castes trying to move up in the hierarchy (the ranked order) of castes. This is the process of upward mobility whereby lower castes try to change their styles of living in the direction of upper castes. This process is known as Sanskritization.



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16.5.1 Caste and Class

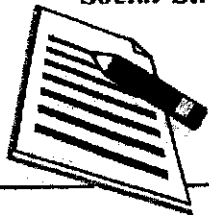
Caste is different from class. A class is defined in economic terms, whereas a caste is understood as a hereditary unit, defined as a way of life. An individual is born in a class but he always has a chance to improve upon it. By comparison, in theoretical terms, the position of an individual in caste is fixed forever, unless his entire group tries particularly hard to move up. That is why sociologists say that caste system is a 'closed' system. In comparison, class is an 'open' system, because of the general possibility of individual mobility. The individual has not to depend upon his group to move up. He may work hard, try newer avenues of improving upon his economic condition and move up from lower class to middle class, and so on.

Also, we should remember that caste system derives its legitimacy from religion, which is not the case with class. Caste is based on the notions of purity and pollution, which assumes that an individual is born in a caste according to the merits earned during his previous incarnation. The Brahmins are ritually the purest and are at the top of the ritual hierarchy, and at the bottom of the hierarchy are the those who are considered least pure in the ritual sense. As one goes down the caste hierarchy, purity decreases while impurity increases, and as one goes up, there is an increase in purity and decrease in impurity. According to some sociologists, one of the hallmarks of caste system has been the practice of untouchability, which was legally abolished in 1955. Such a practice is not found in any other system of stratification.

16.5.2 Significance of Caste in Contemporary India

In contemporary India, class system has become quite important. But we should not infer that caste has become irrelevant. This is so for the following reasons.

- Many studies show that caste is important in matters of marriage.
- Caste also specifies the rituals people perform.
- Associations are formed on the basis of caste.
- The caste associations may establish banks, schools, colleges, rest houses and hospitals, etc., in the name of their castes.
- In the field of politics, caste is a significant factor in the mobilization of votes. The members of a caste may constitute what has come to be known as 'vote-bank.'



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INTEXT QUESTIONS 16.4

Find out which of the following statements is true and which one is false. Write T after the statement that you think is true, and F after the statement that is false.

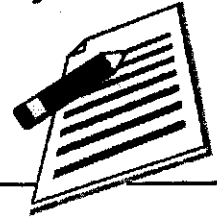
- a Caste is an example of a status group.
- b Caste is basically an example of achieved status.
- c Castes are found in all parts of the world.
- d Castes and classes refer to the same social category.
- e Untouchability has been abolished in India.
- f Sanskritization is a process of upward mobility in caste system.
- g Castes are also found in many non-Hindu communities.
- h Kshatriyas are also known as the members of the 'merchant caste'.
- i At the bottom of caste hierarchy are placed the members of the caste called Sudra.
- j Caste is an open system of social stratification.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- Social inequality is universally found.
- Social stratification is defined as the division of a society into layers that are ranked and differ in terms of the distribution of privileges and resources.
- Social stratification deals with social inequality but not with all types of social inequality.
- Inequalities of gender and age are not the inequalities of stratification.
- Karl Marx thought that the basic division of society was in terms of classes.
- Max Weber corrected Marx's notion by saying that besides class, status and power were the other principles of stratification.
- Caste is an outstanding example of the status group.
- Caste has its basis in Hinduism.
- It is based on the notions of purity and impurity.

- Classes are economic entities.
- In present day India, classes have become important but it does not imply that castes have taken the backseat.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. Is social stratification universal? Discuss.
2. Describe in your own words what do you mean by ascribed and achieved statuses, with examples?
3. What are the salient characteristics of caste?
4. How caste is different from class? Explain.

Notes



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

16.1

1. Some have more privileges and resources than others, as a result of which people and groups are ranked which creates inequality.
2. Division of society into strata or different layers.
3. Simple societies having a state of complete equality.
4. Prestige is associated with an individual who excels in some field, carries more respect and may be richer than others.

16.2

- a) T b) F c) T
d) T e) F

16.3

- a) position
- b) behaviour
- c) ascribed
- d) complex
- e) ascribed

MODULE - II***Social Institution and
Social Stratification*****Notes****16.4**

- a - T
- b - F
- c - F
- d - F
- e - T
- f - T
- g - T
- h - F
- i - T
- j - F