

Social Stratification & Kashmiri Society

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Abstract:

This study is an attempt to study the broad patterns of social stratification prevailing in district Pulwama. As a complex social phenomenon, social stratification which refers to the division of the society into various hierarchical strata is as old as human civilization, while many have talked about a „classless“ societies of either the past or the future, but these ideas found very little support in historical experience. Though the phenomenon is common to all societies but its nature and forms vary from society to society, and from culture to culture.

Key words: 1.Social Stratification, 2.Inequality, 3.Kashmir, 4.caste, 5.Class, 6.Power, 7.Indian Society, 8.Islam.

Introduction

Social stratification / social inequalities exist in all types of human societies. Even the simplest cultures, where variations in wealth or property are virtually non-existent, there are inequalities between individuals, men and women, the young and old. A person may have a higher status than others, because of, particular prowess at hunting, or because he /she have special access to the ancestral spirits. To describe inequalities, sociologists speak social stratification. Stratification can be defined as structured in equalities between different groupings of people (*Giddens, 1997*).

The systems of social stratification exhibit wide variance in different societies of the world. This variation may be in the criteria, utilized for placing individual and groups in various social strata of the system, or in the number of strata in the system, and with some having two broad strata such as, feudal lords and serfs, or nobility and commoners and other's having more. There may be flexibility and the sharpness with which each stratum are demarcated. In some systems different strata are easily identifiable, while in others the boundaries are hard to locate. Considering the various societies that have existed and do exist in the world, certain recurrent forms of social stratification generally can be identified. Which have different differences between them, the Slavery, the Feudal Estates, the Caste and the Class System?

Social stratification deals with the ways in which human population is socially differentiated i.e. "differentiated publicly and demonstrably". The criteria for differentiation may be one but the social display of differentiation usually include a host of factors including, Race, religion, family, lineage, kind and amount of property or income, occupation, or some other

characteristics. Thus, the process by which individuals and groups are ranked in a more or less enduring hierarchy of status is known as social stratification (*Ogburn & Nimkoff, 1940*).

The study of social stratification is of central concern to sociologists because modern societies display such a wide range of inequalities. These include inequalities between rich and poor, between social classes, between men and women, and between black and white. Inequalities in wide range in almost every area of social life, such as in job security, leisure opportunities, health, housing, income and the power to influence events in society (*Browne, 2005*).

Social Stratification & India

The theme of social stratification in India constitutes much literature as the research in traditional Indian sociology offers depth and area both, backed by a history that is unique in its layers and strata. The uniqueness of this social nexus has attracted local as well as foreign studies of the stratification theme, producing works from diverse perspectives, influenced and uninfluenced. Caste is the integral core of this theme, and understanding its dynamics, implication and origin carries its flux. A lot of statistical data is also available in this regard, supplementing objective and ground numbers.

The rise of Indian sociology owes its origin mainly to the interest in understanding Hindu Social Organization and the typical caste institution. A large of Indian as well as western sociologists interested in understanding Indian society have paid special attention to the analysis of the traditional caste system and the changes taking place therein. But along with this interest in Hindu social life, some attention is also now being paid to understand the socio-cultural life of Muslim community who constitute the largest minority of the country. In this way the sociological study of Muslims has also come to the forefront in the development of sociological literature in India today. *Beteille (1965)* has contributed immensely in this field. *Andre Beteilles* study of village Sripurum in Tamil Nadu is based on the assumption of a rational distinction between *caste, class and power*, changing relation of stratification in Tanjore District, brought to light the traditional caste structures as well as the forces of change that were making way into it . The major contributions of Indian as well as foreign sociologists in the field of social stratification are: *Beteille, 1974; Singh, 1974; Menchar, 1979; Pandit, 1979; Srinivas, 1966; Powell, 1896; Ghurye, 1932; Iyers, 1909-12; Desai, 1912; Bailey, 1957- 60; Barreman, 1960; Beteille, 1965; Chauhan, 1967; Dube, 1958; Majumdar, 1958; Madan, 1965; Mukherjee, 1957; Orenstein , 1965; Bose, 1968; Leach, 1960; Ansari, 1960; Dumont, 1961; Risley, 1961; Ahmad, 1962; D'Souza, 1962; Bailey, 1965; Marriot, 1968; Nesfield, 1985; Webber, 1952; Kroeber, 1930; Dubois, 1960; Singh, 1978; Gough, 1979; Singh, 1979; Jha, 1970; Bose, 1981; Iye, 1985; Nandu Ram, 1986; Sharma, 1986; Ehsan, 1981; Vashista, 1992; and Beteille, 2002.*

The present study also throws light on the contributions made by sociologists towards understanding social stratification and forms of inequality in India. The literature generated by Indian sociologists is divided into decades starting from **1950** onwards. In these years many

sociologists have put forward their views on social stratification. In **1950-60**, *M.N. Srinivas, G.S. Ghurye, S.C. Dube, R.K. Mukherjee, K.S. Mathur, H. Orenstein* and many more, is taken up for analysis. They argued caste system is the sole institution of social ranking. Their theories are known as „caste model of Indian society. The decade of **1960-70** saw few studies on social differentiation, evolution and change in caste and class. These sociologists have taken up studies from structural historical perspective particularly of agrarian and industrial stratification. These studies have been taken by *E.R. Leach, Victor D'Souza, Andre Beteille, L. Dumont, M. Marriot, A.R. Desai, and N.K. Bose* etc in this regard. The **decade 1970-80** has contributed richly to the emergence of new substantive and theoretical concern in the study of social stratification. Many sociologists have contributed for the further understanding of social stratification; these were *Y. Singh, K.L. Sharma, T.N. Madan, K. Gough, Nirmal Singh, Dhanagara, Zarina Bhatti, A. Jha* etc. During the period of **1980-90s** an important development has been the rich impute of the study of social stratification, the new emerging consciousness of the mobile classes among the weaker sections of the Indian society. Both the conceptual and methodological studies were carried out by many sociologists these are *P.K. Bose, Klass, H.A. Lye, Dipankar Gupta, Ehsan-ul-Haq, A.M. Shah, A.F.I Ali, Nandu Ram* etc. Besides these sociologists there were other sociologists, who in **1990's-2002** have talked about the transformation of class structure in contemporary India, in which class formation, class disintegration, and class conflict has become important in the process of change in class structure. These are *P.K. Bose, R.K. Shukla, V.K. Vashista, S. Jaswal, and Andre Beteille*.

A number of studies have also been conducted on Indian Muslims in different parts of the country. In the beginning these studies were conducted by social Historians and social Anthropologists. Later on, sociologists also joining in analyzing and understanding different aspects of community life among Muslims and these studies were generally micro-sociological in nature concentrating mainly on the analysis of Muslim communities living in specific villages, towns or localities. These throw some light on various aspects like patterns of stratification and local hierarchy, family and marriage, economic organizations, religious attachment and degree of religiosity, virtual and festivities and patterns of interaction in Muslim community. Moreover in course of such studies efforts have also been made to find out the impact of traditional Hindu Culture, deviation from Islamic sanctions, acceptance of western values and exposure to the forces of modernity in Muslim community. Thus, such studies on Muslim communities, no doubt, provide materials on different aspects of social life in the context of the past tradition as well as the present phase of transition.

The important studies in this field are those by; *Ghaus Ansari, 1959; S.C. Misra, 1964; M. R. Siddiqui, 1974; Imtiyaz Ahmad, 1973; Zeyauddin Ahmad, 1977; Saghir Ahmad, 1977; S. M. Raza, 1976; Ali Ashraf, S.M. Raza, 1976, P.C. Aggarwal, 1973; Victor D'Souza, Zarina Bhatti, Hamza Ali, T.N. Madan, etc* The revelation made by most of these studies on various trends and patterns of social stratification that these studies were caste – oriented and caste based. Caste being the sole basis of social stratification, but not the only dominating factor, as for classes like

political elites, new capitalists, bureaucrats, technocrats and others were emerging as factors for social inequality in past 1947 scenario. It is very clear that the sociologist failed to address these factors and also the cause of their emergence. The result of it was that sociologist's studies caste stratification devoid of above mentioned factors have distorted the reality and the actuality of the situation did not come into light. The sociologists thus, were not able to analyze the role of these factors.

Whereas stratification and its evolution are gradual, socio-cultural shifts are drawn only from mass acceptance. No society is free from a certain degree of stratification, nor is there any evidence of an ideal commune that existed. Kashmiri society in its transition to modern history presents a clash of community traditions and the sanctioned religious upsurge. It may not be appropriate to confine this interpretation to religious rift; rather its intricacy is delivered from traditions, customs and the Hindu social set up. Shifts in Kashmiri Social stratification are apparent as is its innate history of class and labour divide.

Most of studies on social stratification in India have taken for their subject matter the 'India' (Caste) system, and thus limited its understanding to Hindu society & culture. However, empirical demands suggest the non-Hindu studies too for a comprehensive understanding of this theme.

Some work has been done by *Prof. Imtiyaz Ahmad*, producing satisfactory literature in this regard about Muslims in India yet he excluded Kashmiri society from his coverage and as so it remains largely unexplored. What makes a sociological study of Social stratification in Kashmir speculatively interesting and subjectively important is that rather than incorporating new social dogmas within itself as has been the case in rest of the sub-continent, it presents a rare picture of elimination & substitution. However it has to be kept in mind that this shifts in Kashmiri society lets the social history sustain in cultural evolution rather than purely eliminate it.

In recent times some attention is being paid to the study of social stratification and modes of life prevailing among Muslims in India. This study is also an attempt to study social stratification among Muslims in Kashmiri society. This Article on Kashmiri society is studied on the basis of Caste, Class and Power. Caste system is radically different from Caste system in Indian society. The rigid aspect is missing and very few people are ready to attach any importance to ascribed status. In Kashmir Class is the base of social stratification and most of the times its bases are economic. However, the process of Modernization, secularization, education and new found economic prosperity has made the lines of demarcation very blur and flexibility is quite visible while analyzing social stratification in Kashmiri society.

Social Stratification & Kashmir

In pre-Islamic period, the valley was wholly peopled with Hindus, in which the Brahmans were at the top of the social hierarchy because they were considered the most knowledgeable person. They enjoyed the superiority and exploited the lower castes (*Shudra*) for their vested interests. But it was only after the 14th century, when Muslim saints reached here and started their

mission by converting the people (*Hindus*) in to the Islamic religion. They taught the basic philosophy of Islam, which is based on the equality of all. It is because of this egalitarian philosophy, most of Pundits convert into Muslims and had a sigh of relief of the oppression which they had faced in the typical Hindu caste system. The Islamic religion, when we see from the strict theoretical sense, is without the caste barriers. In fact, it negates the very notion of caste stratification. It generally emphasizes on egalitarian system, *the holy Quran* says:
O mankind! We (God) created you from a single pair of male and female and made you into peoples and tribes, that ye may know each other (not despise each other). Verily, the most honored in the sight of God is (he who is) the righteous among you..... (Surah Al-hujuraat verse-13)

This verse makes it quite clear that though Islam accepts differentiation based on gender and tribe. It does not recognize social stratification. It clearly opposes to draw the line of demarcation on the basis of race, colour, creed and caste. But, at the same time, it is true only up to the theoretical understanding of Islam. But in reality, the Muslim community remains diversified, fragmented and as caste-ridden as any other community of India. Practically, the situation in the Muslim society is somewhat different. Muslims too are stratified on the basis of caste. There had been always an element of superiority present with those castes which are considered to be at top, and a kind of inferiority present with those castes which are considered to be at the bottom.

The present study undertakes an analysis of the social stratification among the Muslims of the Kashmir Valley. The study of stratification in the Kashmiri Society throws light on social hierarchy and the attitude of people in respect of discriminatory behaviour and inequalities found among Muslims, though Islamic sanctions do not support any form of stratification or social hierarchy among the believers in Islam.

The facts collected from the field indicated that within the traditional structure of the Pulwama, Syeds, Pirs, and Ulemas, used to dominate the life of the people as a whole. As it is believed that they are the descendants of *Prophet Muhammad^{PBUH}*, that they are the people who have brought Islam in this society, and that they were the only people who were having good religious knowledge. So, the masses in general were giving them good respect and treated them as *Superior* human beings. But at present the monopoly of this group has been challenged because of them *modern education, modernization, secularization, and new found economic prosperity*. In the past, people completely follow their teachings and considered them the sole preaching class. This particular class occupied the top most position in the hierarchical arrangements. They used to settle down the village disputes including domestic ones as well. The social status of Syeds was ascribed one. They maintained their social identity and status by the religious preaching and foreign ancestry. But at present people follow them partly, because they have now better religious knowledge than Syeds. People also think that Syeds don't remain confined to their religious work and they also take participation in other social and political activities.

Another reason for it that in present age the distance between upper and lower castes is narrowing and greater frequency of interaction is found, Although the sense of superiority on the basis of lineage is still persisting but not with the same zeal and consciousness. People of lower caste enjoying better economic portion and having better educational background are being treated at par with the members of upper caste people. The only institution where lineages still persists is at the time of steeling marriages of their wards. The Syeds do not like marital relations

with low caste people no marriage in the area of study was reported between the high caste boy and girl with counterpart in the lower castes. Hence, the caste restriction and lineage distinctions are taken in to consideration only on the occasion of fixing marriages

Class Stratification

The Kashmiri society is presently class-based rather than caste based. People at present are stratified on the basis of class. Some are placed at the top of the hierarchy; some at the bottom and rest in between. This system is explained in terms of class, particularly an economic class. People in the past were differentiating on the basis of large land holding and religious knowledge. But, at present it is not the land holding, but the monthly income of the person which differentiates families from one another. Now it is one's income which determines his/her social position or status in the society. Economic class is purely seen in relation to the property, nature of service, trade, business and the standard of living, but belonging to a higher caste gives additional status to the person.

The class structure of Kashmiri Society is aptly reflected by the agrarian class structure. The economy of the Pulwama division was based primarily upon agriculture and hence the relation of production depends upon the process of agriculture, such categories include, landlords, cultivators, tenants & agricultural labourers. So, this indicates that in Pulwama class stratification was based upon the landholding. In Kashmiri Society, those who own the land were called, **Zamindar's** (*Land lords*) & those who don't were called as '**Nangars**' (*Landless/serf's*). This system of class stratification was known as **Shaksi or Shaksiyaatic Raj** (*feudalism*), in which the Zamindar's (*landlords*) were at the top & the '**Nangars**' (*landless peasants*) were at the lowest rung.

Power Stratification

The study further indicates the emergence of new bases of power. The findings in this connection show that in the past there was correlation between the land ownership and the power. People who were possessing large size of land were at the same time monopolizing power in the society. The people holding large size of land were called **Zaildars** (*Feudal lord*). The **Zaildar** was the absolute authority in the village and the masses (tenants) always obeying his orders to avoid the harm which he was capable of inflicting. This pattern of power structure in the Kashmir continued up to 1947. The political climate of India as well as of Kashmir has been changing fast since the very beginning of the 20th century.

After independence, new bases of power emerged. The findings in this connection show that out of many bases that are perceived to determine power, "**land and wealth**" gets the **first rank**

followed by **education** “having a large following political connection, belonging to a higher caste and capacity to use physical force in order of preference. In the past, large size of land holding and physical strength of an individual was determinant of power in the society. They were called **Zaildars**. Power is the dominating feature of social stratification in rural Kashmir. It has to do less with land holding as was the case in the past. In fact, power is followed by class and the basis of which are property, trade and business. In the present era, the old basis of power has been replaced by ones relation with political parties which coincide with economic position.

After the achievement of independence the parliamentary form of the democracy facilitated the common people to participate in politics not only as voter but also as a candidate as well as campaigner or organizer of election campaign. Because of that, drastic changes were experienced in the power structure soon. The major reason for this change was the abolition of Zamindari system and the introduction of land reforms acts in 1952.

Wrapping up the dialogue

Theoretically speaking, Islam as a form of religion has never uphold or allowed caste, creed, and colour as the basis of social hierarchy / inequality. But from the empirical point of view, Muslims all over the world and in this district too are stratified, In some societies, on the basis of caste (*Indian sub-continent*), in other societies on the basis of social and economic standing (*Developed societies*). So, the Kashmir being part of the broader Indian sub-continent is also stratified on the basis of **caste, class, and power**.

After independence and contact with developed countries, tremendous changes have been experienced in the overall structure of the Kashmir society. Such changes had left no area unaffected. In rural areas as compared to urban areas the change has been a bit slow. It is because of illiteracy, ignorance and the lack of opportunities to the rural people. Another factor is that the rural people are superstitious and religious dogmatic which is not the case in urban areas. In the past, patterns of living in this area were determined by land holdings religious knowledge and traditional practices .But the facts collected from the field suggests that past patterns of differentiation has started changing gradually due to the changes in the relational and institutional aspects of community life. As we have already mentioned, that Islam do not support any form of stratification or social hierarchy among its believers. Descent or hereditary is not at all a consideration for determining the status and position of the individual in an Islamic society. Only piety and virtuous qualities are the bases for differentiating the people, and this differentiation is not associated with the distribution of social status. But in the traditional society this ideal sanction of Islam did not remain operative. After conversion, people differentiate one another on the basis of descent and lineage. **Syeds, Pir,** and **Ulemas** sat at the top, because of their foreign ancestry and religious knowledge, where as the **wattals, Wagays** and **Dums** at the lowest wrung because of their ignorance and occupation. At present the situation is changing.

Modernization, secularization, education and new found economic prosperity has changed the attitude and actual practices regarding the ascribed and achieved status and prestige and facilitated social mobility. Social hierarchy is still persisting but the traditional form of rigid stratification is not in practice. This change in the patterns of social stratification and hierarchy is an index of change in the social structure of the area under study. Again, Islamic sanctions do not divided the community in to different endogamous groups, but under the impact of traditional culture, the Muslims also developed a caste-like hierarchy and the concept of superior or inferior prevailed on the basis of birth, descent and religious knowledge. This was given due importance and Muslims also performed marriages within the same castes. But after independence, different caste people work shoulder to shoulder in day today activities but in spite of that people still follow the very tradition in the matters of mate selection. At present within caste marriages occur. This is the only institution where caste system still plays a vital role.

After modernization things got better and better each day in our state as well as in the area under study. The area of Pulwama has always prone to the adoption of social changes. It is primarily because majority of the people are earning their livelihood from the broader economic activities present here and in other parts of the J&K. In the past, the vast majority of the population was dependent on agriculture. So, the social stratification was primarily based on how much land one owns. But, this kind of social stratification has gone through basic change. People have switched over to trade, business and government services. The whole exploitative and dehumanizing system diminished. Spread of education, land reform acts, reservation for lower castes, democratic ideas, and new found economic prosperity changed the traditional pattern of social stratification.

Due to change in peoples standard of living, had made them conscious about the exploitation they faced by the hands of upper castes. At present it is not one's caste, religious knowledge, land holding, residence, occupation or physical strength, but one's monthly income, the style of lire or achievements and education which determines his status. All the past criteria had shedded in this society. But still, only at the time of marriage the effect of caste system comes into being. In district Pulwama, old bases of power such as the high rank on caste hierarchy and the landed property have decreased. The rise and development of political awareness and political consciousness among the villagers are found these days. This rise of political awareness is an index of changing political relations and thus the change in the structure of this society. New sources of power like political affiliation and education are emerging. In fact the lower castes are also having equal say in the present political system which was not the case in Maharaja's reign. Most of the disputes in district Pulwama are referred to the court of law. It is also important to keep in mind that the whole Kashmir as well as the area of study is captured by the terrorists, but in spite of that people are participating freely in the elections. Finally, family, caste and religious knowledge do play important role in the forms of social stratification. But the dominating factors which stratify the Pulwama society are monthly income, education and political connections. Because of this, Pulwama society is becoming class-based rather caste-based, and importance of

land holding in determining the power of the family has been replaced by wealth. At the same time, it is incorrect to say that the institution of caste has eroded. Higher caste status definitely increases the social standing of a person with higher income, education and political affiliation. The finding of the study reveals that modernization, education, economic prosperity and mass media had a decisive impact on our society in general and social stratification in particular:-

- ❖ Education has been one of the major factors responsible for the change emerging in social stratification. In the past education was discouraged by religious heads (i.e., Syeds, Pirs, and Ulemas), because they believed that it goes against the teaching of Islam. But at present modern education is encouraged by the masses, this is evident by the fact that for higher education people moves to the other parts of the country. So, education has certainly helped in the mobility of the people.
- ❖ In the past, social stratification was primarily based on how much land one was holding. But this kind of social stratification has gone through basic changes. Now it is monthly income, nature of services, business and trade which determines ones position in the society.
- ❖ Modernization, secularization and economic independence of women have bought lots of changes in the society. Previously the women of Pulwama were mostly confined to the domestic activities, but due to the above mentioned factors, women are visible in every field, whether it is government service, business or any other economic activity. These changes are reflected in the changes taking place in their traditional family system and in marriage as well.
- ❖ Modern avenues of employment have changed the traditional economic structure. The economic competition among the members of the same caste or of other castes enable people to choose caste-free occupations and various means and diversified ways to earn more and more money and acquire property. They have crossed the boundaries of traditional division of labour. Truly speaking, the emergence of caste-free occupation has contributed towards dissociating class relations from caste structure.
- ❖ Mass media has also helped in bringing change in the pattern of social stratification. Media has greatly influenced different spheres of social life in the Pulwama society. Particularly after 2000, media played vital role in exploring different aspects of this society.
- ❖ The rural power is becoming more differentiated and dispersed because of the impact of modern political forces in contrast to the power structure which existed in the past. New sources of power like political connections and education have emerged because of the political modernization and industrialization.

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