

## **Social class stratification**

**Social class:** In modern industrialized societies, the dominant form of social stratification is social class. It is an open system of division consisting of broad groups of people who share a similar economic situation such as occupation, income and ownership of wealth.

In modern industrial societies, the class structure is divided into three broad groups

a. The upper class b. The middle class c. The working class

### **The upper class**

The highest or the most superior class of the society that is wealthy enough not to need to work. There exist further groups within upper class and it appears all groups in upper class possess similar wealth or possession and same life style. These groups are:

- The traditional aristocracy / the landlords
- Media and entertainment personalities/pop aristocracy
- The owners of industry and commerce

These extremely rich groups remain rich over a long time as they share these attributes

- They are powerful in terms of wealth and influence
- Pass on wealth from one generation to the next
- Are linked with each other due to intermarriage and mutual benefit
- Pass on cultural and social capital
- Appointments of family members in senior positions because of strong family backgrounds / schooling in the best institutes due to same reasons

### **Middle class**

The modern usage of the term middle class means a class falling between the upper class and the working class. The following factors are associated to describe this class more clearly.

- Attainment of higher education
- Holding professional qualification in law, engineering , accounts, medicine or so on
- Belief in middle class (bourgeois) values such as house ownership, good life style, secure jobs etc.

However middle class is not just one unified class in social stratification structure. There are various subdivisions within the middle class.

#### **1. The petty bourgeoisie (old middle class)**

These are the owners of small businesses. They may own a shop or a workshop, employing a small number of people, or be employed as a plumber, or electrician etc. These people are more attracted by the idea of working for themselves rather than for a boss. Marx expected this group to disappear but this has not happened. This class still survives because of government incentives.

#### **2. The upper middle class**

These are the managers and the professionals who have specialized knowledge and qualifications that are gained after a long period of training. They include lawyers, architects, lecturers, teachers, social workers and doctors.

### 3. The lower middle class

This includes occupations such as clerks, nurses, office workers and shop workers. They are sometimes referred as 'white collar workers'. Lower middle class jobs today are often not very well paid and do not require high qualifications. This group has experienced downward mobility over the last century and largely feminized (contains a higher proportion of women).

#### The Proletarianisation debate

The modern thinkers and critics have criticized Marx a lot when he emphasized on Proletariat's conditions. The idea that the lower levels of the middle class are becoming working class is happening now. This process is called **proletarianisation** and is experienced by these groups

- Clerical workers/ receptionists/administrative workers in offices
  - Shop and sales workers
  - Sometimes higher groups such as teachers
- (Reasons of proletarianisation)

Reference: page 115 'Sociology Coursebook' by Jonathan Blundell

#### The working class

The working class or labour class are the people employed for wages specially in manual labour occupations and in skilled industrial work. Sometimes, the jobs done by working class is also referred to as 'blue collar jobs'. The working class is usually divided into three categories.

- Skilled
- Semiskilled
- Unskilled

Like all the other class divisions, the working class too has undergone changes due to the spread of wealth among large sections of society.

#### 1. The new working class (Affluent worker)

The new working class is characterized by having home ownership, better incomes, secure employment, and materialistic lifestyle. The idea of emerging working class just appeared in 1960s under the term of 'affluent worker'. Due to their better living standard, the members of new working class resembled more with middle class. This whole phenomenon of merging into middle class or new working class becoming rich is called '**embourgeoisement**'. (ref: page 116 Jonathan Blundell)

#### 2. The Underclass

On the other extreme, there has emerged an underclass living in a state of poverty mostly in the inner city areas. This is a group of the very poor primarily the sick, the elderly, single parents and the long term unemployed. They are mostly dependant on state benefit system and have little or no interest in contributing to the society. These groups also resort to crime or drug abuse due to extreme poverty and weak moral values.