

Social Mobility: The Meaning, Types and Factors Responsible for Social Mobility

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Meaning of Social Mobility:

Mobility stands for shift, change and movement. The change may be of a place or from one position to another. Further, change is value free i.e it cannot be said that change is for good or bad. When we prefix 'social' along with mobility it would imply that people or individual occupying a social position, move to another position or status.

In the social ladder this movement may be upward or downward or it may be inter-generational or intra-generational. In short, social mobility stands for change in the position of an individual or a group of individuals from one status to another.

On mobility Sorokin was the first sociologist who wrote a book "Social and Cultural Mobility". He was of the opinion that there is no society which is closed (Caste System in India) and no society which is completely open (Class System). He further contended that no two societies are exactly same in the amount of movement allowed or discouraged. Further the speed of movement or change may differ from one period of time to another. The rate of change depends upon the level of modernization of a given society.

In this sense, mobility "provides the individual with more or less of the benefits which his economy and society have to offer." A rickshaw puller's son becomes a lawyer; a clerk's son becomes a doctor. In each case, a change in role between father and son provides the latter with more of the good things of life.

The roles of lawyer, doctor and engineer require initiative, training and self-sacrifice. Persons are motivated according to a complex variety of factors to work toward new roles, with their higher status and greater rewards. The good things of life are scarce and individuals must compete, conflict and cooperate with others to gain them.

The mobile individual must constantly adapt to socially unfamiliar situations a new class, new norms, new values. A member of a closed society spends his life in an environment that is familiar to him. In other words, an open society, with its high degree of mobility, does not guarantee happiness.

Mobility may be considered in different senses, such as:

- (a) A change in occupation that involves a consequent change in status.
- (b) A promotion within the same occupational group.
- (c) The accumulation of seniority within a given occupation.
- (d) A change in occupation from one generation to another, as from father to son.

Types of Mobility:

Change of social position of an individual or group of individuals takes different forms and shapes. At one period of time there would be one type of mobility and another period of time it can be another type. Each of the

following types are not exclusive but they may overlap, it is only for the purpose of convenience and analysis they are given different labels.

1. Horizontal Mobility:

Under this type of social mobility, a person changes his or her occupation but the overall social standing remains the same. Certain occupations like Doctor, Engineer, and Professor may enjoy the same status but when an engineer changes his occupation from engineer to teaching engineering, he has horizontally moved from one occupational category to another. But no change has taken place in the system of social stratification.

According to Sorokin, “Horizontal mobility refers to territorial, religious, political party, family, occupational and other horizontal shifting without any noticeable change in vertical position.” An increase of territorial circulation of individuals within Western societies since the second half of the nineteenth century indicate horizontal mobility.

The individuals are no more attached to their place of birth. The individuals move from one place to another in search of jobs which may be of same prestige. The modern means of transportation have brought in more territorial movement of individuals.

The other expression of territorial mobility, according to Sorokin, is greater circulation of social things and values which refer to newspaper news, automobile implements, birth control or money, if social thing is used by more and more people of the same class, regardless of the country or territorial boundaries, then this is an example of horizontal expression.

2. Vertical Mobility:

Vertical mobility refers to any change in the occupational, economic or political status of an individual or a group which leads to change of their position. In the words of Sorokin, by vertical social mobility is meant the relations involved in transition of an individual (or a social object) from one social stratum to another.

According to the direction of transition, there are two types of vertical social mobility – ascending and descending or social climbing and social sinking. The ascending currents exist in the two principal forms – as an infiltration of the individuals of a lower stratum into an existing higher one, and as a creation of such a group into a higher stratum instead of, or side by side, with the existing group of this stratum.

In simple words, vertical mobility stands for change of social position either upward or downward, which can be labelled as ascending or descending type of mobility. When a big businessman meets with losses in his business and is declared bankrupt, he occupies a low status. On the other hand, if a small businessman with occupational skills of money and manipulation becomes an industrialist he occupies a higher position in the social ladder. Hence his position improves in the hierarchical order.

Vertical mobility is intensive in relatively open societies. Sorokin has indicated the following general principles of vertical mobility:

(i) There has scarcely been any society whose strata were absolutely closed or in which vertical mobility in its three forms – economic, political and occupational was not present.

(ii) There has never been existed a society in which vertical social mobility has been absolutely free and the transition from one social stratum to another has had no resistance.

(iii) The intensiveness as well as the generality of vertical social mobility, varies from society to society.

(iv) The intensiveness and generality of the vertical mobility – the economic, the political and the occupational-fluctuate in the same society at different lines.

3. Upward Mobility:

When a person or a group of persons move from lower position to upper position it is called Upward Mobility e.g. a person belonging to a lower caste and occupying a lower position after winning elections becomes a Minister and occupies a higher position. He may not be able to change his caste but with his economic and political power he may move upward. For example, Yadavs in India stand as a testimony to this fact.

For the individuals involved, there are many social and psychic costs of upward mobility. Some of the costs are obvious, as men and women break under the strain of a consistent drive for 'success'. In the course of his upward movement, the mobile man must leave behind many people and places. He must leave the ways of thinking and behaving that characterized many of his earlier associations and he must learn, if he can, new ways of thinking and behaving appropriate to his new status.

4. Downward Mobility:

Downward mobility indicates that one loses his higher position and occupies a lower position. We can take the example of an individual, who is an Engineer and occupies a respectable position in the society because of his occupational position, education and may be caste.

If he is caught for accepting bribe or has committed a sin or has done something wrong, he may be sentenced to jail or members of his caste may outcaste him and as a criminal or as an outcaste he may occupy a lower position vis-a-vis position he was occupying earlier. Under the traditional Indian system if a lady of higher Brahmin caste married a man of Sudra caste, not only the man and woman were out casted but their children were declared as 'chandals.'

5. Inter-Generational Mobility:

This type of mobility means that one generation changes its social status in contrast to preceding generation. However, this mobility may be upward or downward e.g. people of lower caste or class may provide facilities to their children to get higher education, training and skills.

With the help of these skills the younger generation may get employment in higher position. If the father is a shoemaker but his son after acquiring education becomes a clerk or a doctor or an engineer, this would be called upward inter- generational mobility.

With the improvement in economic position, people start changing their style of living by discarding the old practices and adopting the practices of those who are high in social ladder. After two or three generations their new position may be recognized. This process of social mobility, according to Srinivas is a process of Sanskritizon.

Conditions for Inter-generational Mobility:

According to Sorokin, the following conditions affect rates of mobility between generations:

(a) Differences between Parents and Offspring's:

If a parent occupies an important position requiring high capacity, his children who are less capable are likely to be downward mobile. Conversely, children who are more capable than their parents are likely to be upwardly mobile, especially open-class societies.

(b) Population Change:

In developed and developing countries, greater population expansion at the lower than at the higher levels contribute to upward mobility. Overall population growth creates new positions in the upper and middle levels, where growth is not great enough to fill the vacancies.

(c) Changes in Occupational Structure:

With the changing times many occupations have been upgraded and downgraded because their socially defined importance has changed. Some occupations have moved up or down because of changes in the scarcity of workers willing and able to perform their tasks. Such changes in occupational structure has also effected the rates of mobility between generations.

6. Intra-Generational Mobility:

This type of mobility takes place in life span of one generation. This can be further divided into two:

(a) Change in the position of one individual in his life span

(b) Change in the position of one brother but no change in the position of another brother.

A person may start his career as a clerk. He acquires more education and skills. Over a period of time, he becomes an IAS officer or a Professor. In this way he moves up and occupies a higher social position than the one with which he had started his career.

His brother may have also started his career as a clerk but did not occupy higher position in his life span and continued to remain at the same position. Hence, within the same generation we find that one brother changes his position and other brother does not.

7. Occupational Mobility:

Occupational mobility means change from one occupation to another. Different occupations' are hierarchically arranged because the incumbent of these occupations gets different economic rewards and enjoys different power, prestige and privileges based on the economic returns, authority and prestige.

These occupations are stratified or hierarchically arranged. When a person or a group of persons move from occupations of lower prestige to occupations of higher prestige, this is called Upward Vertical Mobility. Similarly if an individual or a group of individuals from occupations of higher prestige take up occupations of lower prestige, then this occupational mobility is called Downward Vertical Mobility.

Factors Responsible for Social Mobility:

The following factors facilitate Social Mobility:

1. Motivation:

Each individual has a desire not only to have a better way of living but also wants to improve upon his social stand. In open system it is possible to achieve any status. This openness motivates people to work hard and improve upon the skills so that one can attain higher social status. Without such motivation and efforts on the part of the individual social mobility is impossible.

2. Achievements and Failures:

Achievement here refers to extra ordinary, usually unexpected performance, which attracts the attention of a wider public to the abilities of a person. Not all achievements will result in social mobility. Achievements affect status only if they are remarkable. For example, a poor man who has acquired wealth or an unknown writer who has won a literary prize will improve his status.

Failures and misdeeds have a similar effect on downward mobility. Fraudulent bankruptcy will remove a member of the upper classes from blue books; he will receive no dinner invitations from his peers and he will become ineligible as a marriage partner. If he is already married, his wife may divorce him. He will have to resign from his clubs and all positions he holds. But he will not become a member of the lowest stratum, although it will be difficult for him to find new association.

3. Education:

Education not only helps an individual to acquire knowledge but is also a passport for occupational position for higher prestige. To become a doctor one has to have education in science subjects. Similarly, to appear in a competitive examination of I.A.S., one has to be at least graduate.

It is only after acquiring minimum formal education that individual can aspire to occupy higher positions. It is through education that in modern India the members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are not only able to change their traditional occupation but have also started occupying jobs of higher prestige. In the modern industrial society in which statuses can be achieved, education is basic requirement.

4. Skills and Training:

Each society makes provision to impart skill and training to the younger generation. To acquire skill and training one has to spend a lot of time as well as money. Why these persons spend money and time? The reason being that society gives incentives to such persons. When they complete their training, they are entitled to high positions, which are far better than those positions which they might have taken without such training.

Society not only assigns higher social status but also gives higher economic rewards and other privileges to those persons who have these training. Keeping in view these incentives people undergo these training with a hope to move up in the social ladder. In other words, skills and training facilitate in improvement of the position, this leading to social mobility.

5. Migration:

Migration also facilitates social mobility. People migrate from one place to another either due to pull or push factors. A particular place may not have opportunities and facilities to improve upon. Hence, people are forced to migrate to other places to earn their livelihood. At new places, where they migrate, may have different openings and opportunities.

These persons avail of these opportunities and improve upon their social position. We can take the example of people belonging to the Scheduled Castes of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, who migrate to the States of Punjab and Haryana to earn their livelihood. Here they become farm labourers.

After acquiring an accumulating money they go back to their villages and buy land. They till their own land and become owner cultivators. Hence, from traditional work of Chamars or scavengers, they improve their status and become owner cultivators. Similar is the situation with regard to Asians who migrate to various European countries and the United State of America.

The pull factors attract the people because they do not have those facilities at their place of residence and the new place attracts them by providing these facilities, so that after acquiring new skills and knowledge they could occupy better positions.

6. Industrialization:

Industrial Revolution ushered in a new social system in which people are given status according to their ability and training. No importance was given to their caste, race, religion and ethnicity. Industrialization, resulted in mass production at cheaper rate. This forced the artisans out of their work. In search of jobs they migrated to industrial towns.

They acquired new vocational training and got jobs in industries. With experience and training they moved up in the social ladder. In the industrial society, the statuses are achieved, whereas in the traditional society like India, the statuses are ascribed according to birth. Hence industrialization facilitates greater social mobility.

7. Urbanization:

In the cities there are more people, they have formal relations. People do not know each other intimately. Urban centres are marked by anonymity. People are close to their friends and relatives only. Urban settlements provide secrecy to individual's caste and background. Individual's position is largely dependent upon his education, occupation and income rather than his background.

If an individual has higher education, income and is engaged in occupation of higher prestige, he occupies high social status irrespective of his caste. Urbanization facilitates social mobility by removing those factors which hinder social mobility.

8. Legislation:

The enactment of new laws can also facilitate social mobility. When Zamindari Abolition Act was passed, most of the tenant cultivators became owner cultivators which indicates improvement in their status i.e. from tenants to owner cultivators. Similarly, the legal provision for reservation of jobs and promotion for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has also helped in social mobility.

Reservation with regard to admission in professional colleges, job reservation and promotions have a large number of individuals from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to improve upon their status. When V.R Singh Government accepted the Mandal Commission report it provided job reservation for the other Backward Classes (OBCs) also.

9. Politicisation:

With education and greater exposure to mass media of communication as well as greater contacts have made people aware about their rights. The political parties also educate the people about their rights. To achieve their rights people unite and force the authority in power to accept their demands. These persons may use agitations, strikes etc. as methods of attaining the desired goals.

The political party to get votes provides a number of concessions. With the help of these new concessions and provisions, they improve upon their social status. A few persons may become political leaders, Ministers, Cabinet Ministers or Chief Minister of a State.

10. Modernization:

The process of modernization involves use of scientific knowledge and modern technology. It also refers to rationality and secular way of life. With the improvement in technology, people engaged in occupations of low prestige like scavengers discard their traditional occupations and take up occupations which are not dirty and have no polluting effects.

In this way, they change their position upward. Similarly, the level of development of a country also facilitates or hinders social mobility. The less developed and traditional societies continue with old system of stratification and with accretive statuses.

Whereas the developed and modern societies paved the way for greater opportunities and competition, it is only in the developed countries that there is a greater possibility of achieved statuses. In other words, modernization facilitates social mobility.