

CUET · SOCIOLOGY · CLASS XI · CODE 326

# Social Structure, Stratification and Social Processes in Society

CUET unit: Understanding Society — Social Structure,  
Stratification and Social Processes  
By UniDrill · NCERT-grounded study material

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## Snapshot

- Establishes the dialectical relationship between individual and society — how social structure and stratification constrain action while individuals also reproduce and change them.
- Defines social structure (patterned regularities in behaviour) and social stratification (structured inequalities between groups in access to material/symbolic rewards).
- Introduces three core social processes — cooperation, competition and conflict — and analyses them through functionalist (Durkheim) and conflict (Marx) lenses.
- Distinguishes mechanical from organic solidarity, voluntary from enforced cooperation, and overt from covert conflict, using examples like women's property rights and land disputes.
- CUET regularly tests definitions (alienation, anomie, solidarity types), thinker attributions (Durkheim, Marx, Mill, Sen, Srinivas), and the three forms of advantage (life chances, social status, political influence).

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

- Each individual is located in many overlapping collectivities — peer group, family and kin, class and gender, country and region — and this multi-layered location decides the level and type of access an individual has to social resources like schooling, food, clothing, healthcare, leisure and lifestyle in general (NCERT §Introduction, p. 1).
- C. Wright Mills's notion of the **sociological imagination** unfolds the interplay between an individual's biography and society's history; this lens reveals the structure–individual dialectic running through the whole topic (NCERT §Introduction, p. 1).
- The central question is to what extent the individual is constrained by, and to what extent free of, the social structure — does one's location in society or in the stratification system govern individual choice, and do structure and stratification shape how people cooperate, compete and conflict (NCERT §Introduction, pp. 1–2).
- **Social structure** points to the fact that society is structured — organised or arranged in particular ways. Social environments are not random assortments of

- events or actions; there are underlying regularities and patterns in how people behave and relate (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 2).
- Anthony Giddens compares structural characteristics of societies to the structure of a building — walls, floor and roof give a building its 'shape' or form (Giddens 2004:667). But the metaphor is misleading if applied too strictly: social structures are made of human actions and relationships, and what gives them their patterning is repetition across time and space; thus social reproduction and social structure are closely linked (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 2).
  - Schools and families illustrate this — admission procedures, codes of conduct, annual functions, daily assemblies, school anthems, marriage practices, and notions of relationships, duties and expectations are set, repeated and reproduced even as members come and go (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 2).
  - **Emile Durkheim** argued that societies exert **social constraint** over the actions of their members; society has primacy over the individual person, and society is far more than the sum of individual acts — it has a 'firmness' or 'solidity' comparable to structures in the material environment (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 4).
  - The room-with-many-doors analogy is useful: the placement of walls and doors defines the routes of exit and entry, and social structure similarly constrains our activities in a parallel way, setting limits on what we can do as individuals; it is 'external' to us just as the walls of the room are (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 4).
  - **Karl Marx** stresses both constraint **and** human creativity/agency — human beings make history, but not as they wish or in conditions of their choice; they make it within the constraints and possibilities of the historical-structural situation they are in (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 4).
  - **Social stratification** = the existence of structured inequalities between groups in society in terms of access to material or symbolic rewards (Jayaram 1987:22). All societies involve some form of stratification, but modern societies are often marked by wide differences in wealth and power. Class is the most evident form, but race, caste, region, community, tribe and gender continue to matter as bases of stratification (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 5).
  - Inequality is not randomly distributed between individuals — it is systematically linked to membership in different kinds of social groups; members of a given group share features in common, and if they are in a superior position they usually ensure that their privileged position is passed on to their children. Stratification thus refers to a patterned structure of unequal groups that tends to persist across generations (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 5).
  - Three basic forms of advantage privileged groups may enjoy: (i) **Life Chances** — material advantages improving the quality of life (wealth, income, health, job security, recreation); (ii) **Social Status** — prestige or high standing in the eyes of other

- members of society; (iii) **Political Influence** — the ability of one group to dominate others, or to have preponderant influence over decision-making, or to benefit advantageously from decisions (NCERT §Social Structure and Stratification, p. 6).
- Sociology rejects naturalist/psychological explanations of social processes — it would not rest content with "it is human nature" arguments, and it explains cooperation, competition and conflict in terms of the actual social structure of society (NCERT §Two Ways of Understanding Social Processes, p. 6).
- **Conflict perspective** (Marx): in simple societies where no surplus was produced, cooperation occurred without class, caste or race divisions; in societies where surplus is produced — whether feudal or capitalist — the dominant class appropriates the surplus, and cooperation always involves potential conflict and competition. Factory owner and factory worker do cooperate in everyday work, but a fundamental conflict of interests defines their relationship (NCERT §Two Ways..., p. 8).
- **Functionalist perspective** (Durkheim): mainly concerned with the 'system requirements' of society — (i) socialisation of new members, (ii) a shared system of communication, (iii) methods of assigning individuals to roles. Cooperation, competition and conflict are seen as universal features of all societies, which usually get resolved without too much distress and may even help society in various ways (NCERT §Two Ways..., p. 8).
- Functionalists use the term **accommodation** to explain situations like women refusing to claim natal property rights to preserve sibling relationships — an effort to compromise and co-exist despite conflict (NCERT §Two Ways..., p. 10).
- Durkheim argued against the view that primitive humanity was driven only by hunger and thirst; he held that wherever there are societies, there is altruism because there is solidarity. Solidarity, the moral force of society, is fundamental for understanding cooperation, and division of labour is at the same time a law of nature and a moral rule of human conduct (NCERT §Cooperation and Division of Labour, p. 10).
- **Mechanical solidarity** — cohesion based on sameness; characterises pre-industrial societies with little specialisation beyond that associated with age and sex; members feel bonded by shared beliefs, sentiments, common conscience and consciousness (NCERT §Cooperation and Division of Labour, pp. 10–11).
- **Organic solidarity** — cohesion based on division of labour and the resulting interdependence of members; characterises complex industrial societies. Specialised workers in a garment or car-manufacturing factory cannot survive without a host of other specialised workers supplying their basic needs (NCERT §Cooperation and Division of Labour, p. 11).
- Marx distinguishes humans from animals by **consciousness** — "they themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence" (Marx 1972:37). Humans not only adjust and accommodate

to cooperate but also alter society in that process (NCERT §Cooperation and Division of Labour, p. 11).

- **Alienation** (Marx) — the loss of control on the part of workers over the concrete content of labour and over the products of their labour; workers lose control over how to organise their own work, and over the fruits of their labour. Contrast the fulfilment of a weaver or potter with the worker who only pulls a lever or presses a button; cooperation in such a situation is **enforced**, not voluntary (NCERT §Cooperation and Division of Labour, p. 12).
- **Competition** is not natural/universal — it has to be understood as a social entity that emerges and becomes dominant at a particular historical point of time. The African schoolteacher anecdote (children expressing distaste for a game where there would be 'winners' and 'losers', preferring a necessarily cooperative collective experience) shows competition is not innate (NCERT §Competition as an Idea and Practice, p. 12).
- Classical sociological thinkers like Durkheim and Marx noted the growth of individualism and competition respectively in modern societies. Underlying assumptions of capitalism: (i) expansion of trade, (ii) division of labour, (iii) specialisation, (iv) hence rising productivity. The central theme is rational individuals in free competition in the marketplace, each striving to maximise profits (NCERT §Competition..., pp. 12–13).
- **J.S. Mill** felt that effects of competition were generally harmful, but recognised that economic competition is "the fight of all against all, but at the same time it is the fight for all"; competition is described as directed toward maximum output at minimum cost (NCERT box, p. 13).
- The ideology of competition assumes individuals compete on an equal basis, but stratification places them differentially — if the greater number of children in India do not go to school or drop out sooner rather than later, then they remain out of the competition entirely (NCERT §Competition..., p. 14).
- **Conflict** implies clash of interests; scarcity of resources produces conflict as groups struggle to gain access to and control over those resources. Bases of conflict include class, caste, tribe, gender, ethnicity, religious community (NCERT §Conflict and Cooperation, p. 14).
- **M.N. Srinivas**: the old order was not conflict-free and perpetrated inhuman cruelties on vast sections of the population; a theoretical approach that regards conflict as abnormal, or that invests equilibrium with special value in the name of science, can be a handicap in studying developing societies (NCERT box, p. 15).
- Conflict appears as discord or overt clash only when openly expressed; the absence of a peasant movement does not imply absence of conflict — covert conflict and overt cooperation are common (NCERT §Conflict and Cooperation, p. 15).
- **Amartya Sen** noted the possibility of enforced cooperation in family organisation — substantial conflicts of interest may be involved, but family organisation requires

that these be moulded in a general format of cooperation, with conflicts treated as aberrations or deviant behaviour (Sen 1990:147) (NCERT §Conflict and Cooperation, p. 15).

- Subordinate sections (women in households, peasants in agrarian societies) develop covert strategies — biased "maternal altruism" toward sons (women's response to patriarchal risk), use of trusted allies to conduct small businesses, secret lending and borrowing of money, clandestine negotiations around the meaning of **pardah** and motherhood (Abdullah and Zeidenstein 1982; White 1992; Kabeer 1996:129) (NCERT §Conflict and Cooperation, pp. 15–16).
- T.K. Oommen's Bhoodan-Gramdan study illustrates how power and access to resources shape land conflicts (the Harbaksh–Nathu–Ganpat case) and how the level of technology determines the need for cooperation: a **Charas** (indigenous well-irrigation device) needs 2 pairs of bullocks and four men — forcing borrowing and cooperation among kin and neighbours; once replaced by a **Rehat** (Persian wheel) which calls for heavier capital investment, only one pair of bullocks and one person is required, reducing the necessity of cooperation (Oommen 1972) (NCERT box, pp. 16–17).

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Altruism	The principle of acting to benefit others without any selfishness or self-interest.	18
Alienation	Marx's term for the loss of control on the part of workers over the nature of the labour task and over the products of their labour.	18
Anomie	For Durkheim, a social condition where the norms guiding conduct break down — a situation of normlessness.	18
Capitalism	An economic system in which the means of production are privately owned and organised to accumulate profits within a market framework, in which labour is provided by waged workers.	18
Division of Labour	The specialisation of work tasks by means of which different occupations are combined within a production system.	18
Dominant Ideology	Shared ideas or beliefs that serve to justify the interests of dominant groups.	18
Individualism	Doctrines or ways of thinking that focus on the autonomous individual rather than on the group.	18
Laissez-faire Liberalism	A political and economic approach based on non-interference in the economy by government and freedom for markets and property owners.	18

Term	Definition	Page
Mechanical Solidarity	Durkheim's term for the cohesion of traditional cultures with a low division of labour, where members are bound by common experience and shared beliefs.	18
Modernity	A term encapsulating the distinctiveness, complexity and dynamism of social processes unleashed during the 18th and 19th centuries.	18
Organic Solidarity	Durkheim's term for the cohesion of societies held together by people's economic interdependence and recognition of others' contributions.	18–19
Social Constraint	The conditioning influence groups and societies exert on our behaviour; regarded by Durkheim as a distinctive property of social facts.	19
Structures	Constructed frameworks and patterns of organisation that constrain or direct human behaviour.	19
Social Stratification	The existence of structured inequalities between groups in society in terms of access to material or symbolic rewards.	5
Life Chances	All material advantages that improve the quality of life of the recipient — wealth, income, health, job security and recreation.	6
Social Status	Prestige or high standing in the eyes of other members of the society.	6
Political Influence	The ability of one group to dominate others or have preponderant influence over decision-making and to benefit advantageously from decisions.	6
Accommodation	Functionalist term describing efforts to compromise and co-exist despite underlying conflict, as in women refusing natal property to preserve sibling ties.	10
Sociological Imagination	C. Wright Mills's term for the capacity to unfold the interplay between an individual's biography and society's history.	1
Social Reproduction	The process by which patterned ways of behaving are repeated across time and space, sustaining social structure.	2
Enforced Cooperation	Cooperation that occurs because subordinate groups lack viable alternatives, as in Marx's class society or Sen's family organisation.	12, 15
Covert Conflict	Conflict that is not openly expressed but exists below the surface of apparent cooperation.	15
Surplus	The product over and above immediate subsistence needs, the appropriation of which by a dominant class produces conflict (Marx).	8
		11

Term	Definition	Page
Common Conscience	Durkheim's term for the shared beliefs and sentiments that bind members of mechanically solidary societies.	
Maternal Altruism	Women's investment in sons as allies and insurance against patriarchal risk; appears selfless but is a covert strategy (Kabeer 1996).	16

### 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

- Photograph spread "Different types of buildings in rural and urban areas" (p. 3) — visual support for the structure-as-building metaphor; rural hut, semi-pucca coastal house, urban high-rises depict how structural form varies while the abstract concept of 'structure' remains constant.
- Photograph spread "Different types of processes" (p. 7) — illustrations of cooperation (assemblies, sit-ins), competition (sport) and conflict (protests against price hike and privatisation of NALCO and major ports); a visual prompt to classify everyday scenes.
- Photograph "Bride leaving for groom's house in a 'Doli'" (p. 9) — illustrates the natal-property example used to demonstrate enforced cooperation; the doli is a folk symbol of the gendered exit from the natal home that the property-refusal study (41.7 per cent of women) refers to.
- **Three forms of advantage list** — Life Chances (material) / Social Status (prestige) / Political Influence (decision-making) (p. 6) — easy to convert into a match-the-following.
- **Mechanical vs Organic Solidarity contrast** (pp. 10–11) — classic NTA comparison table material: sameness vs interdependence, pre-industrial vs industrial, common conscience vs economic reciprocity.
- **Charas vs Rehat (Persian wheel) technology comparison** (Oommen box, p. 17) — Charas requires 2 pairs of bullocks + 4 men, forcing cooperation; Rehat requires only 1 pair + 1 person but heavier capital — technology substitutes capital for cooperation.
- **System requirements triad** (p. 8) — (i) socialisation of new members, (ii) shared system of communication, (iii) methods of assigning individuals to roles — Durkheimian/functionalist exam staple.
- **Capitalism's four assumptions** (p. 12) — expansion of trade, division of labour, specialisation, rising productivity — a frequently asked statement-matching item.

### 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- **Mechanical vs Organic solidarity:** mechanical = sameness/pre-industrial; organic = interdependence/industrial. Students often reverse them because "organic" intuitively sounds traditional and "mechanical" sounds modern.

- **Durkheim vs Marx on cooperation:** Durkheim emphasises altruism/solidarity (functionalist, moral force of society); Marx emphasises consciousness and notes cooperation under class society is **enforced**, not voluntary.
- **Three forms of advantage:** Life Chances are **material** (wealth, health, recreation) — not prestige. Social Status is **prestige**. Political Influence is **decision-making power**. NTA often swaps Life Chances and Social Status.
- **Alienation vs Anomie:** Alienation is Marx (loss of control over labour and products). Anomie is Durkheim (normlessness, breakdown of norms). Mixing these is the most common single-mark trap.
- **Competition as natural:** A common trap — the NCERT explicitly says competition is NOT natural/universal; it is a social entity that grew with capitalism. Sociology rejects naturalist explanations.
- **Conflict = visible conflict:** Wrong — absence of overt conflict (e.g., no peasant movement) does not mean absence of conflict; covert conflict with overt cooperation is common (Sen, Kabeer).
- **Mill on competition:** Mill is sometimes painted as a cheerleader for competition. In fact he felt its effects were generally harmful, even though he conceded it is also a "fight for all" directed at maximum output at minimum cost.
- **Giddens's building analogy:** The NCERT warns the metaphor is misleading if applied too strictly — structures are made of human actions and relationships, not bricks. NTA may ask which thinker offered the analogy (Giddens) AND whether the textbook endorses it strictly (no).
- **Maternal altruism:** Sounds positive but is described as women's **covert response** to patriarchal risk — a strategy, not selflessness. Kabeer 1996 is the citation.
- **Charas vs Rehat:** Charas (more labour, less capital, more cooperation needed); Rehat/Persian wheel (more capital, less labour, less cooperation needed). NTA may invert the cooperation conclusion.
- **Accommodation vs Cooperation:** Accommodation is a functionalist term for compromise **despite conflict**, not for harmonious cooperation; the women-and-natal-property case is the textbook illustration.
- **Sociological imagination attribution:** It is C. Wright **Mills** (American), not J.S. **Mill** (British liberal). Both appear, and NTA exploits the near-homonymy.

## 2.5 Thinkers & theories

Name	Concept	Key Idea	NCERT page
C. Wright Mills	Sociological imagination	Unfolds the interplay between individual biography and society's history.	1
Anthony Giddens	Building metaphor of social structure	Structural characteristics of societies resemble a building's walls, floor, roof —	2

Name	Concept	Key Idea	NCERT page
		but the metaphor must not be applied too strictly.	
Emile Durkheim	Social constraint, primacy of society	Society exerts constraint on members; has firmness/solidity comparable to material structures.	4
Karl Marx	Structure + agency	Humans make history, but not as they wish — within constraints of historical-structural situations.	4
N. Jayaram	Definition of stratification	Stratification = structured inequalities between groups in access to material or symbolic rewards.	5
Emile Durkheim	Mechanical vs Organic solidarity	Pre-industrial cohesion based on sameness vs industrial cohesion based on division of labour and interdependence.	10–11
Karl Marx	Alienation and consciousness	Workers lose control over labour and product; humans distinguish themselves from animals by producing their means of subsistence.	11–12
J.S. Mill	Competition as fight of/for all	Economic competition directed toward maximum output at minimum cost; generally harmful effects.	13
Bottomore	Critique of competition	No exact correlation between extent of competition and rate of economic growth; competition has less-welcome effects.	13
M.N. Srinivas	Critique of conflict-as-abnormal	Old order was not conflict-free; treating equilibrium as natural is a handicap in studying developing societies.	15
Amartya Sen	Enforced cooperation	Family organisation moulds substantial conflicts into a cooperative format, treating conflicts as aberrations.	15
Naila Kabeer	Maternal altruism	Women's son-preference is a covert response to patriarchal risk; subversion of male decision-making is covert.	16
Abdullah & Zeidenstein / White	Covert resistance strategies	<b>Purdah</b> , motherhood and clandestine negotiations as forms of subaltern resistance.	16
T.K. Oommen	Bhoodan-Gramdan & technology	Power shapes land conflicts; Charas vs Rehat shows technology level determines need for cooperation.	16–17
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Name	Concept	Key Idea	NCERT page
Yogendra Singh (References)	Modernisation of Indian Tradition	Cited in references for modernisation framework relevant to structure and stratification.	

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

This chapter is a high-yield CUET source — definitions from the glossary (alienation, anomie, mechanical/organic solidarity, capitalism, altruism), thinker attributions (Durkheim vs Marx, Mill, Sen, Srinivas, Giddens, Mills, Oommen), and the three forms of advantage are repeatedly tested. CUET 2023–25 papers have favoured assertion-reason and statement-matching formats on the Durkheim–Marx contrast and on enforced vs voluntary cooperation, so students should rote-memorise the glossary terms, the solidarity-type contrast, and the Charas-vs-Rehat technology illustration.

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