

Means of Social Control: Informal and Formal Means of Social Control

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Means of Social Control: Informal and Formal Means of Social Control!

The means by which individuals are induced or compelled to conform to the usages and life values of the group are so numerous and varied that a classification is not possible, E.A. Toss has described a number of means that have been employed by social groups throughout the human history to keep individuals under control.

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The important among them are public opinion, law, custom, religion, morality, social suggestion, personality, folkways and mores. E. C. Hayes, another American sociologist, distinguished between control by sanctions and control by suggestion and imitation. By control by sanctions he meant a system of rewards and punishments.

According to him, education is the most effective means of control and the family is the most significant agency. Karl Mannheim distinguished between direct means of social control and indirect means of social control. Kimball Young classified the means of social control into positive and negative means. Reward is a positive means while punishment is a negative means.

F.E. Lumley classified the means of social control into two major categories: those based upon force and those founded on symbols. According to him, though physical force is indispensable in social control, yet it is not merely the force that can manage the individuals. Human societies have to rely upon symbolic devices which are more effective than force.

Lumley put symbolic methods into two classes. In the first he included means like rewards, praise, flattery, education and persuasion which are designed to direct the individual's behaviour along certain desirable ends. In the second category he put means such as gossip, satire, criticism, ridicule, threats, name calling, propaganda, commands and punishments which aim at restraint and repression.

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Luther L. Bernard distinguished between unconscious and conscious means of control. The most important among the unconscious means of control are custom, tradition and convention. The conscious means of control are those which have been consciously

developed and employed by leaders of all types.

According to him conscious means of control are more effective than unconscious ones though the influence of the latter also is quite marked. Bernard also distinguished between exploitative and constructive methods of social control. Exploitative means are such as punishment, reprisals, intimidation, censorship and repression.

Among the constructive methods are included revolution, custom, law, education, social reform, non-violent coercion and belief in supernatural forces. He also divided the means of social control into negative and positive classes.

In the former class fall those means which aim at restraining the individuals: while in the latter category devices utilizing promises and rewards are included. The positive type of control is said to be more effective as well as more desirable because human nature responds more easily to promises than to threats, to peaceful means than to physical coercion.

Some sociologists have classified the social control into informal means or formal means.

Sympathy, sociability, resentment, the sense of justice, public opinion, folkways and mores are some of the informal means of social control. They are very powerful in primary social groups where interaction is on a personal basis. The effectiveness of the informal devices of control, though somewhat lessened in modern large communities wherein contacts tend to be impersonal, may still be observed in small villages.

Ross cites instances of such informal social control in "frontier" societies, where order is effectively preserved without the help of constituted authority. In modern times the informal methods have given place to formal ones such as laws, education, coercion and codes.

Informal Means:

The informal means of social control grow themselves in society. No special agency is required to create them. The Brahmins do not take meat. They take meals only after bath. The Jains do not take curd. They take their dinner before sunset. The Hindu women do not smoke. One can marry only in one's caste. The children should respect their parents. All this is due to informal social control.

It is exercised through customs, traditions, folkways, mores, religion, ridicule etc. Informal control prevails over all the aspects of man's life. Though it is said that people are not afraid of informal social control, yet informal means of social control are very powerful particularly in primary groups.

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No man wants to suffer loss of prestige. He does not want to become the target of ridicule. He does not want to be laughed at by the people. He does not want to be socially boycotted. On the other hand, he wants praise, appreciation, honour and recognition by the society.

Thus informal means like praise, ridicule, boycott etc. effectively control his behaviour. Moreover, the child through the process of socialization learns to conform to the norms of the group. A person with socialised attitudes would not do any work which is socially harmful. Thus socialisation also exercises an influence over him.

Now we may describe briefly the important means of informal control:

(i) Belief:

Belief is a conviction that a particular thing is true. It is primarily of five kinds:

- (a) The belief in the existence of an unseen power;
- (b) The belief in the theory of re-incarnation,
- (c) The belief in Nemesis, the Goddess of vengeance,
- (d) The belief in existence of hell and heaven and,
- (e) The belief in the immortality of soul.

All these different beliefs influence man's behaviour in society. The first belief in the existence of an unseen power leads a man to right action because he believes that his actions are being watched by an unseen power. The second belief in the theory of reincarnation keeps the man away from wrongful acts because he believes that in order to have a good birth in next life he must do good acts in this life.

The third belief in the Goddess of vengeance also regulates man's behaviour because he believes that he will be punished by the goddess of vengeance for his sins. A sinner is punished here and now. The fourth belief in the existence of hell and heaven influences a man to virtuous acts and avoid sins in order to go to heaven or avoid going to hell after death.

Heaven is a place full of luxuries, fairies and romance. Hell is a place of terror, miseries and tortures. The fifth belief in the immortality of soul leads man to avoid such actions as will cause pain to the souls of the deceased ancestors.

In this way beliefs are powerful influences on human actions. They are vital for human relations. They define the purposes and interests for the individual and control his choice of means so that the purposes of the groups may be advanced or at least not hindered.

No aspect of social relationship escapes them. Beliefs may be true or false. They may be founded on factual or faulty evidence. But the question of their validity does not necessarily determine their effectiveness as social controls. We act with as much determination from false beliefs as from factually sound ones.

(ii) Social Suggestions:

Social suggestions also are powerful means of social control. Suggestion is the indirect communication of ideas, feeling and other mental states. Such communication may be made through various methods. The first method is putting the life examples of great men. We celebrate the anniversaries of Mahatma Gandhi and Lai Bahadur Shastri. We build monuments in the memory of great men.

We place their life ideals before the people and exhort them to follow these ideals. The second method of making suggestion is through literature. Books, journals, newspapers etc. may inspire people to heroic deeds and develop in them national feelings. The literature may also make people narrow minded, communal, conservative and superstitious.

The type of literature one reads will indirectly influence his mind and consequently his behaviour. The third method is through education. The educational curriculum may communicate certain ideas to the students and make them disciplined citizens. The fourth method is through advertisements.

Many magazines carry beautiful advertisement depicting the advantages of visiting certain places and suggesting the prestige attached to travelling to these places. The advertisements from the Doordarshan may attract the people to a particular tooth paste. Many of our business enterprises employ advertising to influence attitudes and, therefore, action. Suggestions may be conscious or unconscious. It may also be intentional or unintentional.

(iii) Ideologies:

Ideology is a theory of social life which interprets social realities from the point of view of ideals to prove the correctness of the analysis and to justify these ideals. It is the projection of a certain ideal. Leninism, Gandhism and Fascism are ideologies which have analysed social realities and laid down an ideal before the people. Ideologies influence social life to a very great extent.

Leninism has influenced the social life of Russians. Hider's theory of socialism influenced the Germans to the extent that they began to regard themselves as the supreme race of the world. Gandhism has influenced social life in India. In the world we today find a conflict of ideologies. The conflict between U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. is a conflict of capitalism and communism.

The history of man has been one of struggle among conflicting ideology, ideologies are powerful dynamic forces of contemporary social life. They satisfy needs of all men to believe in a system of thought that is rigorous. They express the vital interests of social groups and satisfy their desire for a scheme of social betterment.

They stimulate action. They provide a set of values. They are motivators of social action. They make life meaningful. The success of any ideology, as an effective means of social control depends on many factors. Some of these factors are its completeness and coherence, its vision of the future, its ability to hold men's imaginations, its consistency and its ability to meet criticism.

(iv) Folkways:

Folkways are the recognized modes of behaviour which arise automatically within a group. They are the behaviour patterns of everyday life which arise spontaneously and unconsciously in a group. They are in general the habits of the individuals and are common to a group. They are socially approved. They have some degree of traditional sanction. It is not easy for the members of a group to violate the folkways.

They are the foundation of group culture. If an individual does not follow them he may be socially boycotted by his group. A particular dress must be worn at a particular function. The Brahmins shall not take meat. The Jains should not take curd. The Hindu women should not smoke. Since folkways become a matter of habit, therefore, these are followed unconsciously and exercise powerful influence over man's behaviour in society.

(v) Mores:

Mores are those folkways which are considered by the group to be of great significance, rather indispensable to its welfare. The mores relate to the fundamental needs of society more directly than do the folkways. They express the group sense of what is right and conducive to social welfare.

They imply a value judgment about the folkways. Mores are always moulding human behaviour. They restrain an individual from doing acts considered as wrong by his group. They are the instruments of control. In society there are innumerable mores like monogamy, prohibition, endogamy, anti-slavery etc. Conformity to mores is regarded necessary.

It is essential for the members of the group to conform to them. Behaviour contrary to them is not permitted by society. Certain mores may even be harmful for the physical well being of an individual, yet these must be obeyed. Thus, mores control man's behaviour in society to a very great extent.

(vi) Customs:

Customs are the long established habits and usages of the people. They are those folkways and mores which have persisted for a very long time and have passed down from one generation to another. They arise spontaneously and gradually. There is no constituted authority to declare them, to apply them or to safeguard them. They are accepted by society. They are followed because they have been followed in the past.

The importance of customs as a means of social control cannot be minimised. They are so powerful that no one can escape their range. They regulate social life to a great extent. They bind men together. They control the purely selfish impulses. They compel the individual to conform to the accepted standards. They are held so sacred that any violation of them is regarded not only a crime but also a sacrilege. In primitive societies customs were powerful means of social control but in modern times their force has loosened.

(vii) Religion:

Religion also exercises a powerful influence upon man's behaviour in society. The term religion has numerous definitions. Religion is an attitude towards superhuman powers. It is a belief in powers superior to man. It expresses itself in several forms like superstition, animism, totemism, magic, ritualism and fetishism. Religion pervades practically in all the societies, though there may be different forms of religious beliefs and practices.

The Hindu religion assigns great importance to ceremonies. At the time of birth, marriage and death a number of ceremonies are performed. 'Mantras' are recited even if one does not understand their meaning. Religion is a powerful agency in society.

It influences man's behaviour. Children should obey their parents, should not tell a lie or cheat, women should be faithful to men, people should be honest and virtuous, one should limit one's desires, man should renounce unsocial activities, are some of the teachings of religion which influence man's behaviour. Men should do good acts is a common teaching of all the religions. Religion makes people benevolent, charitable, forbearing and truthful.

It may also be noted that religion may easily be distorted into superstition and dogmatism. Instead of being an incentive to brotherhood, social justice and ethical idealism, religion may be used as a tool to make people content with their lot, obedient to their rulers and defenders of status quo. It may deny freedom of thought. It may favour poverty, exploitation and idleness and encourage practices like cannibalism, slavery, untouchability, communalism and even incest.

(viii) Art and Literature:

Art in its narrow sense includes painting, sculpture, architecture, music and dance. Literature includes poetry, drama and fiction. Both art and literature influence the imagination and exert control on human behaviour. The martial music of the military band arouses feelings of determination and strength.

A classical dance creates in us an appreciation of our culture. The statute of Mahatma Gandhi teaches us the virtue of simple living and high thinking. A painting may arouse in us a feeling of sympathy, affection and hatred. There is always a close relationship between the art of a period and the national life. The civilization of any specified time can be judged by an examination of its art. The Ajanta and Ellora caves give a vivid account of the ancient Hindu culture. An artist has been called an agent of civilization.

Literature also influences human behaviour in society. We have 'good' literature and 'bad' literature. A good literature possesses an indefinable quality which makes it live through the ages. Ramayana, Bhagvadgita and Mahabharat are classical works of great social value. On the other hand, detective literature may have its effect on crime.

Romantic literature may make the readers passionate while religious literature may make them virtuous or superstitious. Rousseau in France hastened the French Revolution. Dickens changed the entire school system in Britain by writing David Copperfield and his other books. In this way both art and literature exert control through their influence on the imagination.

(ix) Humour and Satire:

Humour is also a means of social control. It assumes various forms, depending upon the situation and purpose. It often serves to relieve a tense situation. Sometimes it is used with a bad intention to deflate others without a reason. It is also used to gain a favourable response. Humour controls by supporting the sanctioned values of the society. Through cartoons, comics and repartees it can support the values of the society in a form that is light in spirit but effective in control.

Satire employs wit and scorn as indirect criticism of actions felt to be vicious and socially harmful. It exposes by ridicule the falsity and danger of behaviour. Thereby it causes the people to give up their vicious and harmful action. The Flop Show of Mr. Jaspal Bhatti .televised by Doordarshan was a great satire on corruption in Indian society and may perhaps lead one to search within one's soul.

(x) Public Opinion:

The influence of public opinion as a means of social control is greater in simple societies. In a village the people are known to one another personally. It is difficult for a villager to act contrary to the public opinion of the village. Public opinion greatly influences our actions. For fear of public ridicule and criticism we do not indulge in immoral or anti-social activities.

Every individual wants to win public praise and avoid public ridicule or criticism. The desire for recognition is a natural desire. We want to count for something in the eyes of our fellowmen. Human praise is the sweetest music. The greatest efforts of the human race are made to win public recognition or at least to avoid public ridicule. Thus, public opinion is one of the strongest forces influencing the behaviour of people.

Formal Means:

Among the formal means of social control the important ones are law, education and coercion.

A brief explanation of these means follows:

(i) Law:

Law is the most important formal means of social control. Early societies depended upon informal means of social control but when societies grew in size and complexity they were compelled to formulate rules and regulations which define the required types of behaviour and specify the penalties to be imposed upon those who violate them. Law is a body of rules enacted by legally authorised bodies and enforced by authorized agencies.

It defines clearly rights, duties as well as the punishments for their violation. The modern societies are large in size. Their structure is complex consisting of a number of groups, organisations, institutions and vested interests. Informal means of social control are no longer sufficient to maintain social order and harmony. Perforce modern societies had to resort to formal means of social control.

In modern society relationships are of a secondary nature. Security of life and property, as well as the systematic ordering of relationships make formalization of rules necessary. Law prescribes uniform norms and penalties throughout a social system. The body of law in every state is being increased. What was in mores and customs earlier has now been formalized into a body of law.

The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 has laid down the rules regulating the marriage among Hindus. It has recognised the right of a Hindu woman to divorce her husband. A number of laws have been enacted governing food handling, fire protection, sewage disposal, traffic, sex regulation, entertainment and education etc. Law prohibits certain actions, for example, Anti-untouchability Act prohibits untouchability in any form and a person practising untouchability is liable to punishment.

Prohibition Act forbids drinking at public places. Smoking in cinema halls is prohibited under law. A uniform civil code if and when enacted may remove the social barriers in the Indian society. In this way, law exercises a powerful influence upon the behaviour of people in modern societies. Today law takes an ever larger part in total social control.

(ii) Education:

Along with law, the importance of education as a means of social control is being growingly realized. Education is a process of socialization. It prepares the child for social living. It reforms the attitudes wrongly formed by the children already. Thus, a family may make the child superstitious education will correct his beliefs and remove his prejudices.

It teaches him value of discipline, social cooperation, tolerance and sacrifice. It instills in him the qualities of honesty, fair play and a sense of right and wrong. The importance of education for creating right social attitudes among the youth cannot be minimised. It is sad to note that education in India has miserably failed to create right social attitudes among the youth of the country and act as an effective means of social control.

(iii) Coercion:

Coercion is the use of force to achieve a desired end. It may be physical or non-violent. It is the ultimate means of social control when all other means fail. Physical coercion may take the form of bodily injury, imprisonment and death penalty. Physical coercion is without doubt the lowest form of social control.

Societies would least desire to use it. It may have immediate effects upon the offender but it does not have enduring effects. If a society has to depend on external force, it shows its weakness rather than strength in social control. Society's best protection lies in the development of 'fit' citizens.

Non-violent coercion consists of the strike, the boycott and non-cooperation. A person who threatens to withdraw his support from a friend if he does not give up smoking, is using non-violent coercion to change his action. The students may go on strike to force the Principal to ensure them adequate library facilities.

Boycott is the withholding of social or economic intercourse with others to express disapproval and to force acceptance of demands. A student who teases the girls may be socially boycotted by the other students of the college. Non-cooperation is refusal to cooperate.

The teachers may refuse to cooperate with the Principal for his insulting behaviour. Non-violent coercion can be a successful way of effecting social control. Mahatma Gandhi used it to force the British Government to grant political independence to India.

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