Module 4 Socialization and Social Control

Lecture 21
Social Control

The term, ‘social control’, is widely used in sociology to refer to the social processes by which the behaviour of individuals or groups is regulated. Since all societies have norms and values governing conduct (a society without some such norms and values is inconceivable), all equally have some mechanisms for ensuring conformity to those norms and for dealing with deviance. Social control is consequently a pervasive feature of society, of interest to a broad range of sociologists having differing theoretical persuasions and substantive interests, and not just to sociologists of deviance.

The sociological issue is not the existence of social control, but determining its precise nature and identifying the mechanisms at work in specific social contexts. The sociologically significant questions include:

- Who exercises control?
- What techniques of control are employed?
- How far can and do individuals or groups resist processes of social control?
- In whose interest does control operate?

The answers to such questions vary greatly. Normative functionalists tend to suggest that social control is of value to society as a whole, since it is essential to the maintenance of social order; others point to the sectional interests that are served in the process of social control, emphasizing the lack of normative consensus, the differences in power that are involved and the close linkage between power and control.

Analyses of the forms of social control differ. A common distinction is between repressive or coercive forms of control – so-called hard techniques, including direct physical constraint – and the softer ideological forms that operate through the shaping of ideas, values and attitudes. On the one hand, the techniques of repressive or coercive social control are particularly characteristic of institutions such as the police and the military. On the contrary, the techniques of softer ideological forms refer to institutions such as the mass media.
Means of Social Control

Sociologists usually classify the mechanisms of social control into two types:

1. Informal means of social control, and
2. Formal means of social control

1. Informal Means of Social Control

In primary groups, the relationships are close, direct and intimate. Social control is often maintained by informal mechanisms such as customs, traditions, folkways, mores and religion. These are adopted means of informal groups. Informal means of social control include established and accepted institutions relating to socialization, education, family, marriage, religion, etc.

(a) Folkways: Folkways are norms to which individuals conform. It is customary to do so. Conformity to folkways is not enforced by law or any other agency of the society. It is the informal acceptance of established practices in each group or society. Folkways are manifested in matters of dress, food habits, observance of rituals, forms of worship and methods of greeting, etc. For instance, food habits in north and south India are different and these habits often persist even when the person has moved to a different location away from her / his earlier surroundings.

(b) Mores: Mores refer to moral conduct as distinct from the customary practice of folkways. They influence the value system of a society and are in the form of social regulations which aim to maintain social order. Mores seek to regulate the relationship between individuals in defined situations, viz. between wife and husband, parents and children, student and teacher, etc. They may also refer to general social relationships in terms of honesty, truthfulness, hard work, discipline, etc. Since mores are consciously designed and created with a view to preserve them, violations of these often entail penalties. They are perhaps the strongest mechanisms of informal social control.

(c) Customs: Customs are the long established practices of people, which occur spontaneously but gradually. Along with regulating social life, they also bind them together. In primitive societies, customs were powerful means of social control, but in modern times, they have weakened due to a rise in the forces of rationality and diversity.

(d) Religion: Religion exercises a powerful, albeit unscientific, influence on its adherents. Emile Durkheim defines religion as the unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things. Those who have common beliefs and practices are united into one single moral community through religion.
2. **Formal Means of Social Control**

The formal means of social control come from institutions such as the state, law, education and those which have legitimate power. They apply coercive measures in the case of deviance.

(a) **Law:** In primitive societies, the groups followed similar occupations and individuals shared a direct, personal and intimate relation among themselves. These folkways, mores and customs sufficed in controlling the individual behaviour. There was almost unquestioned compliance with the informal mechanism of social control.

In contrast, modern societies are characterized by immense diversity, individualism, division of labour and differentiation in terms of work, ethics and lifestyle. Urbanization and accelerated movement of people striving for a better and dignified life has changed the worldview of social groups. Relationships have become formal. Customs and folkways seem inadequate to control diverse population groups. Simultaneously, the State has grown stronger and more specialized in nature. It is now necessary and possible to regulate individual behaviour by formulating a set of common laws which are backed by the legal, administrative and political machinery of the State. Laws and enforcement agencies are replaced by customs and mores as the regulators of behaviour and ensure social order and control.

Law has been defined in two ways: (i) ideal behavioural norms and (ii) rules that are promulgated by the State which are binding in nature.

Individuals abide by laws due to two primary reasons:

(i) Fear of punishment: Punishment by the State results in curtailment of essential freedoms of individuals and hence acts as a deterrent.

(ii) Rule conforming habit: Many individuals believe that adherence to laws is necessary for their own well being and prosperity as also for social stability and progress. This is called the ‘rule conforming habit’. The family, educational institutions and religious preachers all play a role in inculcating and sustaining this behaviour.

Laws have their origins in customs, traditions, religions and judicial decisions. As such, they very often have a moral dimension too. This moral dimension and the fact that laws are supported by legal and institutional arrangements enable them to bring about a degree of conformity in human behaviour. Laws that have both customary and legislative support are readily accepted.

In modern states, laws are promulgated by legislative organs and enforced by the state through governments. The government, in this context, includes all official agencies and functionaries through which the State achieves its ends. Laws thus regulate and control social behaviour by ensuring uniformity and conformity.
However, laws are different from customs in the following ways:

(i) Law has a coercive character. Therefore, it compels people to act in a particular way. Customs are respected and practised out of fear because of the obscurantist nature of traditions and social approval associated with them.

(ii) Customs are specific to groups and clans while laws have a more general and universal nature.

(iii) Breach of law entails punishment by the State while disregard of customs is frowned upon by the society and only in an extreme case may result in ostracism.

(iv) Laws are a more recent phenomenon associated with the growth of the State and its institutions, while customs existed in one form or another at all times and in all societies.

With the emergence of modern nation-states, an establishment of relationships among political, trading, military and international laws has become necessary to maintain world order. Just as national laws are meant for establishing order and control within domestic boundaries, international laws seek to establish orderly behaviour on the part of nations.

(b) Education: Along with laws, education has been an important agency of social control. It prepares the child for social living and teaches her / him the values of discipline, cooperation, tolerance and integration. Educational institutions at all levels (i.e. school, college, university, etc.) impart knowledge as well as ethics through formal structured courses and behavioural inputs.

The different pace of the educational system in different societies depends on changing social mores, level of development and social needs. Thus, in ancient Indian society, the emphasis was on religious scriptures, philosophy and metaphysics. However, with the ushering in of the Industrial Revolution, the focus shifted as social development has resulted in an increased demand for knowledge in other creative areas and managerial skills. At schools, the ideas of democracy, secularism, equality and national goals are communicated to students in addition to the emphasis on our shared history, culture, heritage, norms and values.

(c) State: State has a vital role in administering social control. Sociologists have defined the State as “an association designed primarily to maintain order and security, exercising universal jurisdiction within territorial boundaries, by means of law backed by force and recognized as having sovereign authority”.

State functions through the government. Modern nation-states strive to be welfare states, i.e. they seek to provide to the citizens a wide range of social services like education, medical care, old age pension and unemployment allowance. These are achieved by means of the cooperation of individuals and through collective efforts of the media, civil society and other social institutions. For example, the pulse polio
programmes of the government are extensively supported by the use of television, posters, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and so on, all of which try to educate the public on the advantages of the government measures. In a context such as this, the State acts as an informal agency of social control.

However, certain functions such as maintenance of law and order, defence, international relations, currency, etc. require the State to intervene in a formal and sometimes coercive manner.

India has a federal polity and government manifests itself at various levels, viz. village, block, district, state as well as at the national level. At all these levels, its functionaries can enforce rules and laws. In modern societies, State has become increasingly important as an agent of social control.

**Agencies of Social Control**

Broadly, there are three agencies of social control, viz.

1. **Family**
2. **Neighbourhood**
3. **Public opinion**

1. **Family:** Family is one of the most important agencies of social control. Every child learns from her / his immediate environment, which is first provided by the family. Etiquettes, habits and attitudes are first learnt from the immediate role models (e.g. parents, siblings, kin groups, etc.). The family socializes the child into the norms, values, traditions and customs of the group. Thus, family has predominant role in the shaping of the personality of the child.

   In villages, an individual gets her / his status from her / his family. The elders have a dominant role in the shaping of the personality of the child. This is manifested in the individual’s attitudes, interests, lifestyles, etc. Marriages are mostly arranged by the elders and seen as an alliance between families rather than two individuals.

   In cities, the family continues to play a predominant role in the shaping of an individual’s personality. However, industrialization, paucity of income and space have contributed to the prevalence of nuclear family. This is very different from what is encountered in villages. Hence, families tend to focus upon themselves. This results in an increased accent on individualism as opposed to collectivism common in villages. The function of socialization that a family carries out is complemented by other secondary institutions such as the classroom, playground, peer group and the media. Unlike in rural surrounding, the individual derives her / his social status partly from her / his family but more importantly from her / his personal achievements. Parents and elders still largely arrange marriages in cities. However, the consent of the girl and the boy is sought. Marriages outside caste and religion are also on rise. Thus, we see that individual choice is becoming increasingly important. However, owing to the absence of the strong family support on both sides, individual
disagreements are more likely to lead to separation and divorce as opposed to the rural setting where the family network provides a readily available conflict resolution mechanism.

2. **Neighbourhood**: Neighbourhood in villages comprises people normally belonging to the same kin group or caste. Hence, relationships that exist are intimate and informal. Beyond the immediate neighbourhood, the bonds are strong.

In contrast, relationships between neighbours in the urban environment are characterized formally. They are marked by intermittent interactions and hence are far weaker than what is seen in the rural environment. In big cities, the ties of neighbourhood are almost relegated to the backseat. There is hardly any interaction between neighbours.

Thus, the village neighbourhood is an enthusiastic participant in many daily activities of a family. It thereby fulfils its role as a medium of social control. It ensures uniformity and conformity and corrects deviant behaviour. In cities, while not controlling individual behaviour as closely, individual actions that affect community at times are monitored by the neighbours.

3. **Public opinion**: Public opinion is commonly used to describe the aggregate views that individuals hold regarding matters that affect the interests of a particular community.

Newspapers, radio, television, motion pictures, legislations, pamphlets, etc. mould public opinion.

Remote village communities, which do not have access to television and newspapers, rely on “gossip” for information about the happenings around them and to express their opinion on various subjects. However, radio and televisions have increasingly become an important source to obtain news about events in distant places. There are group readings of newspapers too. In India, the introduction of adult franchise, Panchayati Raj institutions and planned development processes, albeit their lacunae, have contributed towards bringing villages in the mainstream of Indian economy and polity.

In cities, the print and visual media play a dominant role in the shaping of public opinion.
Reference


Questions

1. What is meant by social control?
2. What are the informal means of social control?
3. Explain the formal means of social control.
4. What are the main agencies of social control?