

PUBLIC OPINION

DEFINITION OF PUBLIC

- A public is a scattered group of people who share an interest in a particular topic. -Horton and Hunt.
- Public is a substantial number of people with a shared interest in some issues on which there are differing opinions- Ian Robbertson

NATURE OF PUBLIC

- . A dispersed group.
- A deliberate group.
- Definite issue.
- Lack of organization.
- Disagreement.
- Self awareness.
- Other points on nature of public:
 - 1) A public has core members and fringe members.
 - 2) The composition of members changes.
 - 3) Individual can be members of many public at same time.
 - 4) Social changes is decided upon within democracy.

Difference between crowd & public

- 1. A crowd is transient and impulsive whereas the public does not exhibit emotional intensity and impulsiveness.
- 2. In the crowd there are expectancy, enthusiasm and excitement; in the public there is an absence of excitement and tension.
- 3. Public is a scattered group of people whereas the members of a crowd collect at one place—a scene of incident or accident

Difference....

- 4. Public is a critical group whereas in a crowd no critical discussion is possible. In the public, discussion is essential which is generally free and unimpassioned.
- 5. The members of a public have common interests but are not like-minded as in crowd. They show differences of opinion over common issues.
- 6. In the crowd, the contact between its members is personal and face-to-face while in the public the contact is through communication by means of press, TV, radio, etc. Public is not necessarily a face-to-face group.

Definition of Public Opinion

- In simple terms public opinion means opinions held by the people at a certain time on a certain issue
- According to Kupuswamy, the term public signifies the general body of persons belonging to a particular community whether it is a small group or a national group or people of the world as a whole.
- The term public, therefore, implies a noncontiguous but psychological group where there is no face to face or shoulder to shoulder contact

Definition..

- According to Kimball Young (1946) public opinion consists of opinions held by a public at a certain time
- V.V. Akolkar remarks that public opinion refers to that mass of ideas which people have or express on a given issue.
- According to Kupuswamy, public opinion consists of opinions held by people of a smaller or a larger community about a particular problem at a certain time.

Characteristics of Public Opinion

- **(1) Any opinion which is acceptable to all or at least to most of persons, can be called public opinion.**
- **(2) Public opinion indicates assimilation and combination of opinions of the majority of the group.**
- **(3) In public opinion, the chief characteristics is common acceptance of the group.**
- **(4) In public opinion, the problem or issue around which the opinion is formed must be a problem of the majority of the community.**

Characteristics..

- **(5) A public opinion is based on social and cultural unity of the community.**
- **(6) A public opinion is not transitory and disorganised like a crowd. It is organised like a group, can continue for a certain period. But it is also liable to change.**
- **(7) For the formation of public opinion direct and indirect means of communications are essential.**
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- **(8) Public opinion can be developed without any spatial or shoulder to shoulder or face to face contact.**
- **(9) Indirect means of communication play a tremendous role in the formation of public opinion.**
- **(10) Public opinion may grow on different problems like political, economic, social and religious issues.**

- (11) Public opinions become effective chiefly because of related institutions and groups which furnish direct contact and which have, by the large, formal organisations, codes and purposes like political parties, press, Radio, TV etc.
- (12) Some are under the impression that public opinion is always guided and determined by rational group judgements.

Public Opinion as a Process

- Public opinion is a collective and dynamic process. It changes from time to time.
- Change in public opinion can be introduced by responsible adult citizens for the welfare of the country.
- Out of discussion when some uniformity or consensus arises it paves the ways for the formation of public opinion.
- Thus, uniformity in views arising out of mutual discussion may form the basis of public opinion.

- Public opinion has greater role in a democracy than elsewhere. Here, the citizens have to play a responsible role for the up liftment of their state or nation.
- Democracy makes every citizen duty bound to discuss the various problems and issues concerning the welfare of the society or community. From the consensus rising out of such discussion, public opinion emerges.
- Even though a few people who are called the minority may not agree with this view they have to go by the majority opinion.
- Again after some time or lapse of a certain period of time, the opinion adopted by the minority is accepted by a majority people and it becomes the public opinion.

Basic Steps of Public Opinion Formation

- The process of public opinion formation, starts when some responsible citizens after identifying certain problems bring it to the notice of others, may be formally or informally.
- the first **step of public opinion the problem of issue is defined and identified by some people.** Various interest groups in the public contest different views. They try to get the support from the rest of the people who initially do not show any interest on the issue.

2ND STAGE

- . On the second stage, an identified problem is **discussed in great detail for bringing some solution.**
- the possible ways of dealing with the problem are worked out. All the positive and negative aspects of the issue are discussed and deliberated and whether it is possible to reach the goal is also explored.
- **In sum, in the second stage the problem is studied in detail and possible solutions are worked out to raise the public opinion like giving the news to various medias to publish or broadcast for the awareness of the public.**

3RD STAGE

- In the third stage, **alternative proposals for the solution of the problem are put forward.**
- After knowing about the issue from the press or electronic media, people from other groups and other villages will come and participate in the discussion, give slogans.
- Sometimes a crowd like situation may emerge and the rational aspect of the issue may be lost in a Hood of stereotyped slogans and emotional appeals,
- In the third stage, both rational and irrational considerations enter into the opinion formation in democratic societies.

4th stage

- In the fourth and final stage of opinion formation from all the speeches, slogans, conversations and discussions, **the majority of the members reach at a final decision regarding a particular issue. Thus, a conclusion is derived from a comparative analysis of opinions so expressed.**
- This becomes the public opinion. For instance, after lots of deliberations they finally reached at the decision that prohibition is essential for the upliftment of tribal people and active efforts are to be made to make prohibition effective

- This may not be the opinion of all, but if it is the opinion of the majority or most people, it becomes the public opinion as democracy chiefly operates by majority votes.
- In public opinion, there is difference of opinion, there is controversy but finally the view of the majority emerges as public opinion.
- The quality and effectiveness of a public opinion depends upon how effectively the public has been involved in the discussion.
- The various mass and electronic medias, group discussions and public meetings also necessarily determine the quality of public opinion

Factors Influencing Public Opinion:

- **(i) Socio-cultural Conditioning:**
- In the formation of public opinion socio-cultural conditioning plays a role when people without finding any reason, accept a particular opinion or issue because of the social norms and values.
- Early socialisation process which plays a role in the formation of attitude, stereotype, beliefs and prejudices always determine public opinion.

- **(ii) Prejudice:**
- The role of prejudice in the determination of public opinion is also equally important. Attitude towards disadvantaged sections of the society colour one's public opinion and beliefs.

- **(iii) Leader:**
- The role of a leader is crucial in determining public opinion and giving it definition and final shape just as it happens in a group or a crowd.
- The leader of the group is the centre around which the different ends of the discussion crystallize to a single unified point.
- The leader not only gives direction and stability to the public opinion it also helps in eliminating the opposite forces who stand on the way of formation of a particular public opinion.
- The leader makes an assessment on the general mood of people, before mobilizing public opinion in a particular direction.
- The leader may not be able to create a situation for public opinion, but he can take advantage of the existing situation and manipulate it to his advantage or to the advantage of people.

- **(iv) Motivation:**
- When the person is in need of something and desires to fulfill such needs there is an inner desire or drive to form some public opinion.
- To fulfill the motive, people become more active and goal oriented and this force of reaching the goal which has been frustrated helps in determining public opinion.

- **(v) Education and Imitation:**
- In the formation of public opinion, education and imitation have their respective roles to play.
- Because of difference in educational qualification of the rural and urban people, there is a great deal of difference in the public opinion of rural and urban people.
- We can have glaring examples of this during the time of election either Grampanchayat or Assembly or Parliament.

- **(vi) Imitation:**
- It is a common human psychology to go with the majority which is called “**band wagon effect,**” when some people who do not have any definite opinion on the issue and are still confused find that majority people are accepting or holding a particular opinion, they also join them thinking that since majority people are holding it, it must be the right and just opinion.

- **(vii) Role of Government:**
- For developing awareness and public opinion, in favour of various welfare works undertaken by the Govt., like literacy, economic security, health, family planning, saving and investment, child care Govt, through various means of propaganda try to create public opinion so that people can readily accept and take proper advantage of such welfare programmes

- **(viii) Religion and Caste:**
- Religion and caste in India and Black and White feeling in South Africa are some of the examples of how religion and caste feeling play significant role in the determination of public opinion towards various issues.
- Though India is often talked as a secular democratic republic because of the constitutional provisions in practice, caste influences our social life and religious considerations systematically influence our public opinion.

Role of Press and Electronic Media in the Formation of Public Opinion

- Newspapers and Magazines are the most popular medium used for the formation of public opinion. Since it is not possible on the part of people of different parts of a state, country or nation to come in direct contact with each other, newspapers play a very strong role in the formation of public opinion.
- Many people only by knowing various issues from the newspapers and how others are supporting them develop public opinion. The band wagon effect is well carried through newspapers. Views of Government and various leaders are transmitted to the mass through the newspapers which are well known as mass media.
- Newspapers play a determining role in the formation, maintenance and change of public opinion, sometimes facts are twisted to suit the purpose and motive of vested interest of newspapers and, thus, public opinion is formed on misleading information's.
- This is called yellow journalism. Such newspapers should be kept under close watch. But newspapers, nevertheless, give proper guidance to the public in formation of public opinion.

- **Radio and TV:**
- Radio is more effective than newspapers in influencing public opinion. Both Radio and TV function under Govt, control. So people usually consider it as reliable and valid. Electronic medias, therefore, not only help in the formation of a large percentage of public opinion they also play effective role in changing public opinion.
- Many surveys are being conducted on public opinion sponsored by Radio and TV authorities to measure public opinion relating to various issues.
- Several scientific studies of propaganda have also been made through Radio and TV to study its effect on public. Very recently just before 1996 Parliamentary Election in India opinion polls on various political parties getting votes were made. It was found that this had also tremendous impact on public opinion.

- TV is more effective than Radio in forming public opinion as it is an audiovisual aid, while radio has only auditory stimulation, **TV has the extra advantage of visual stimulation. When** people see things in their own eyes through several characters, they believe and strengthen the already existing public opinion or change the old ones.
- Newspapers have usually bigger coverage than Radio and TV. They are also less costly, easily available everywhere and an economically disadvantaged person can afford to buy a newspaper. Though radio and TV are costly and are not easily affordable, however they play effective role in the formation and change of public opinion because of greater motivation and audiovisual effects

- **Emphasising the role of radio in public opinion formation, Allport and Cantril have suggested that while using radio as a means of influencing public opinion care should be taken on the following points:**
- (1) Females should make the majority of broadcasts as their voices are quite pleasant, soothing and liked by the audience.
- (2) While talking on the radio, the speaker must stress on the very purpose and should be more reality oriented.
- (3) Pronunciations should be as clear as possible.
- (4) The same ideas should not be repeated over and over again. Hence repetition should be avoided to overcome boredom.
- (5) The sentences should not be very lengthy and should not be spoken speedily.
- (6) On the average a performance should not be more than 15 minutes.

Methods of Measuring Public Opinion

- **(i) Qualitative Method:**
- (i) The historical method of measuring public opinion attempts to study the change of public opinion through the last several years, because of several political, economic, social and historical occurrences

- (ii) Public opinion is also measured qualitatively by the case study method. By means of group interviews, the change in public opinion of a particular group can be assessed.
- During face to face interview one can know how, why and when a particular public opinion was formed.

(ii) Quantitative Methods

- **Polling Method:**
- This is a quite novel technique of measuring public opinion.
- Polling method is very much in use in various democratic countries particularly at the time of election.
- In India and USA this method is extensively used to measure public opinion.

(iii) Quasi Experimental Method

- By this method steps have been taken to observe and assess the influence of editorials published in newspapers on the opinion of people.
- Similarly, documentary films are also produced and screened from time to time by the central Govt, and State governments to influence the opinion of people on community development projects and on measures taken by Govt, for the welfare of poor, socially, economically disadvantaged minority groups and SC, ST people.
- **In this method, people are given some controlled stimuli and their views are obtained. Parsons and Thurstone used this method to find out the opinion of the public on attitude towards cinema. Meier and Annis using the Quasi Experimental Method found that in the people the more active values are the effective ones rather than the national values.**

(iv) Analysis of Letters to Editors and Legislators

- By going through the letters of the public to editors of daily newspapers and magazines one can have some idea about the public opinion.
- If daily large number of letters are written against the functioning of a Govt., it is to be taken for granted that public opinion is unfavourable towards the Govt, and the treasury bench. If the reverse is the case, public opinion appears to be favourable towards the government.
- But it is a fact that merely on the basis of letters to editors or MLAs and Ministers, public opinion cannot be judged accurately. So one should be very careful and cautious while measuring public opinion through this method.

- **(v) Questionnaire Method:**
- For measuring public opinion questionnaire method is also used. The questionnaire on the issue should not be lengthy, but should be short and precise.
- It should be standardized on the basis of pilot studies. The language should be simple and should express meaning clearly.
- Those questions which cannot be asked in the interview can be asked through questionnaires

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