

Course Name- B.A.L.L.B. IVth Sem.

Subject- Political Science

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Topic Public Opinion

Public Opinion

Meaning of Public Opinion:

In simple terms public opinion means opinions held by the people at a certain time on a certain issue. In a narrow sense it may mean a non-contiguous and transitory mass of individuals with a common or general interest. Here, the public may not be held together by face to face or shoulder to shoulder contact.

A number of people may scatter in different places, react to a common stimulus provided by indirect and mechanistic means of communication like newspapers, magazines, radios, TVs, motion pictures, posters and pamphlets etc. The public in this connection refers to a group of people who are confronted with an issue, divided in their ideas, engage in a discussion over the issue and reach at a decision.

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 non-contiguous but psychological group where there is no face to face or shoulder to shoulder contact.

Though the people react to a common stimulus, they are scattered spatially may be all over the world.

Public opinion on woman liberation, gender prejudice, role of women in politics and decision-making, public opinion on economic reforms, winning of political parties in ensuing elections are some of the brilliant examples of how public opinion may scatter throughout the world and may spread without any direct personal and face to face, shoulder to shoulder contact.

But the reaction is made to a particular common issue. Means of communication play paramount role in the building up and spread of public opinion. In public opinion, there is agreement on certain views and disagreement on others. Group feeling or we feeling helps

in the formation and stability of a public opinion which is based on a general issue.

In order to be effective, a public opinion must concern the community as a whole, the problem of public opinion would be a problem for most of the members of the community or society. Otherwise it will not spread and sustain. A community where poverty is not the issue or problem and everyone is much above the poverty line, any issue on poverty will not touch their mind as they are quite well settled economically.

But in a conservative society where women are not allowed to go out and work, where there is lot of objection against providing minimum liberty to women like the liberty to get education, to strive for economic independence, and of course the liberty not to tolerate injustice and oppression, in such a male dominated, male chauhanistic society, the real problem of women is to get freedom of speech and action and right to work.

At this juncture, any effort to spread public opinion on women liberation will be fruitful among women and such public opinion will spread as it relates to their immediate problem.

Definition of Public Opinion:

According to Kimball Young (1946) public opinion consists of opinions held by a public at a certain time.

Cooley holds that public opinion should be regarded as an organised process and not merely as a state of agreement about some questions of the day. Public opinion is not disorganized like a crowd behaviour. Rather it is organized like a group behaviour.

According to Allport (1937), “the term public opinion is given its meaning with reference to a much individual situation in which individuals are expressing themselves or can be called upon to express themselves as favouring or supporting disfavouring and opposing some definite condition, person or proposal of widespread importance in such a proportion, number, intensity and constancy

to give rise to the probability of affecting action, directly or indirectly towards the object concerned.”

Though unclear, this definition points out the nature and function of public opinion in general.

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.

Individual opinions are, thus, assimilated in public opinion concerning various problems along with ideas, notions and judgements. In public opinion, everybody should not have identical view, but the majority must reach a consensus to call it a public opinion. Thus, public opinion represents the views of the majority and powerful group.

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.

(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.

(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. But this assumption is not always correct. Public opinion may not always be formed around true, good and ideal things. Sometimes the majority opinion may not be rational and based on facts.

But public opinion based on such facts may not last longer and here is an occasion when it changes in favour of the correct, just and right.

Approaches to Public Opinion:

Public opinion may be approached in the following line:

(1) Public opinion as a static or composite of beliefs and views which are not necessarily in entire agreement with each other.

(2) The interactional growth and opinions among the members of the public. This approach considers the process of opinion formation.

Public opinion should be considered as an organic process and not merely a state of agreement about some questions and issues of the day. There may not be complete consensus in public opinion. The formation of public opinion is the consequence of interaction between individuals in the group. The minority opinion may also emerge as a public opinion, when it is able to influence the majority.

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.

Since public opinion is not a static concept and is liable to continuous change from time to time on a particular problems it continues as a process.

Public opinion has greater role in a democracy than elsewhere. Here, the citizens have to play a responsible role for the upliftment 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.

Thus, opinion may swing from time to time depending upon the majority view which is also determined by several other factors. One popular example may be public opinion for a particular political party is changed after 2-3 years in favour of another party if people are not satisfied with the functioning and performance of the former party. The process of public opinion is complex and continuous.

Though public opinion is most powerful in a democracy, from times immemorial, we find that it is very strong in villages. Even before independence we find the opinion of village people playing a very strong role in various social and emotional issues.

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. They discuss it thoroughly in a common forum trying for a solution. The problem may be related to illiteracy, agriculture, health, family planning or panchayat raj, drug abuse or alcohol.

Thus, in 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.

The interested groups try to arouse the emotion of the people and thereby make efforts to get their support. On the second stage, an identified problem is discussed in great detail for bringing some solution.

It is found that many tribal people of India take recourse to country wine which is a major cause of their backward socio economic condition. Some social workers or non-Govt. voluntary organisations after identifying this problem standing on the way of the development of tribal people started discussing how to stop excessive drinking habit of the tribals.

Thus, 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.

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.

People opposing prohibition among tribal people may try to give opposite statements, slogans, may make several propagandas and may spread rumour and thereby try to create conflict when the public opinion has not been fully formed and is still in a fluid state and only in the process of formation. Thus, in the third stage, both rational and irrational considerations enter into the opinion formation in democratic societies.

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:

Public opinion is formed through a dynamic and gradual process. It is not formed overnight or instantly. Factors like basic needs, prejudices, motivations, propaganda through various means and role of the leader influence public opinion.

They are discussed here briefly:

Basic needs:

Deep rooted basic needs determine to a great extent public opinion. Particularly when it is found that public opinions are not entirely based on rational facts, the role of emotional and sentimental needs play an upper hand. That is why, for formation of a new public opinion references are made to fundamentalism, communalism, national integration, stability, traditional and religious values, conscience and morality, honesty, truthfulness etc. to tap the public. In a society where women are tortured and misbehaved, public opinion may be formed against the persons who are involved in this.

(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.

Certain basic issues and opinions of a particular society are more often than not based on values and traditions of the society passed through cultural conditioning. The public opinion towards females, towards scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other disadvantaged people in the society are determined by socio-cultural conditioning.

(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 fulfil such needs there is an inner desire or drive to form some public opinion. The fulfil 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.

Abolition of zamindari system in many states of India, is a glaring example of how motive helps in the formation of public opinion. In India the lands were centralized with the zamindars and they were the sole authorities. The poor landless persons only worked in their fields and got very nominal wages. Thus, a public opinion to abolish zamindari system started in the form of a revolution.

The public opinion would not have been so strong and effective if all the people in the villages had sufficient lands in their occupation. It is, therefore, needless to say that in the formation of public opinion strong motives are involved. If someone is not concerned for a

particular problem or issue, he will not usually bother if it goes to hail.

Behind any public opinion, the operation of strong human motives are always found. The chance of a particular problem becoming a public opinion lays on the existing demands, needs and instructions of people. According to Cantril, **“verbal statements and outlines of courses of action have maximum importance when opinion is unstructured, when people are suggestible and seek some interpretation from a reliable source.”**

(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.

Sometimes a clear line of demarcation is seen in the public opinion of rural and urban people because of the influence of education. Some say that usually the public opinion of the rural people is dogmatic and systematized and it is more progressive in the urban area.

Education makes one rational and explorative. Curiosity, inquisitiveness etc. are elevated because of education. As urban people are, by and large, more educated than the rural people, they do not easily form a public opinion unless convinced themselves.

(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.

No welfare programme can be successful unless it is accepted by people and for this acceptance formation of publication is imperative. In each and every state, therefore, there are Information and Public Relations Departments who mobilize public opinion in addition to other works.

(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.

Of course, due to increase in educational status of people and impact of civilisation and other nations, this feeling is gradually disintegrating. But these age long feelings are still deep rooted and can be uprooted through intercaste and interreligion marriages, and education.

Kimball Young has described the following factors influencing public opinion:

- (1) Specific economic phenomena
- (2) Other specific incidents
- (3) Incidents influencing the international situation

(4) Changes of the individual's direction of action by specific incidents

(5) Social phenomena related to the intellectual view point.

(6) Delusive phenomena related to rationalization

(7) Phenomena introducing stability.

These phenomena may influence public opinion formation independently or combinedly.

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

Press:

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.

The radio and TV are Govt, medias and are, therefore, considered as reliable and valid. Many systematic and scientific studies of propaganda have been made through the Radio and TV on consumer goods and general election, popularity of a leader, scope of winning of a party etc. to study its effects on public opinion.

Recently during the 11th Lok Sabha Election many private organisations and newspaper authorities made surveys and exist polls as to which party will get how many members in which state etc. and these were broadcast and telecast.

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.

Just like the small screen i.e. TV, motion pictures reflect ideas, attitudes and values of people which help in the formation and change of public opinion. Various fashion shows are telecast in TV

to establish favourable attitude towards certain types of dress designs.

Once majority of the public like the appreciate such dresses a public opinion is formed in favour of these designs. A negative public opinion may also emerge if most people do not like the various designs.

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:

The techniques of polling came into wide use in 1936 when the American Institute of Public Opinion's prediction that Roosevelt would win in the American Presidential election came out true. The purpose of public opinion poll is to give reports of public thinking on the various problems confronting the society.

By knowing public opinion trends, Govt, can take steps and decisions in consonance with public opinion. Broadly the methods used to measure public opinion can be divided into two such as Qualitative Method and Quantitative Method.

(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.

One may compare the public opinion that existed towards the British in 1947 with the public opinion at 1996 and evaluate the changes therein. Similarly, the opinion of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes towards the Govt., twenty years back and now can also be verified.

Many major facts relating to public opinion came to the surface through this method. The public opinion regarding customs, traditions, dogmas, rituals, can be measured by the qualitative method. The public opinion on certain related issues can also be measured before and after a riot or before and after a civil war.

(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.

The public opinion towards working women or middle class women going outside for work has undergone a major change within the last 50-60 years.

Similar is the case with women education. Because of change in attitude and public opinion towards women education we find the percentage of literacy of women is rising in every census and more and more women are allowed to work outside leaving the home front. Opinion towards communal and religious groups can also be measured by this method.

In spite of the usefulness of qualitative methods to measure public opinion, they have been criticised on the ground of lack of objectivity, reliability and validity. In view of the limitations and deficiency of the qualitative method there was the need to develop some quantitative method to measure public opinion.

(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.

Before the 1996 Parliamentary election several opinion polls were made through various ballot papers, questionnaires and interviews to find out which party would get majority to form the Govt, whether there is a possibility of '**Hung**' parliament or a coalition Government at centre, what will be people's verdict towards minor political parties or new parties who have disintegrated from old ones and so on.

A sample is first decided keeping in mind sex, education, occupation, income, area of residence i.e., rural-urban background, religion and caste etc. Only when the sample is truly representative of the proportions of these variables result will be close to actual behaviour.

These variables are to be balanced to get an accurate opinion. In other words, depending upon the percentage of rural and urban population in the universe, their sex, age, education, religion and caste the sample is to be selected.

If only the view of rural or urban population is polled, the public opinion of the entire people of a country will not accurately come to picture. Further, the size of the sample should be sufficiently high to make the poll reliable and valid. The polls conducted in the first quarter of twentieth century indicated 12 to 20 per cent errors.

This technique subsequently developed into market research. The manufacturers of various consumer goods use polling technique on a large scale to know the opinion of people about their products so that they can make necessary desired changes in their products from the consumer's point of view.

Western countries, Doordarshan in India, BBC and other private TV companies use this technique today as it is a simple and easy procedure of opinion poll and data can be collected from a large number of people within a very short span of time.

But errors in the sampling technique and formulation of questions, bias, and subjective element in the interview technique and errors in the treatment of data increase the percentage of errors in polls.

The sample must be so selected to represent the population. If the sample is not representative of the population judgement errors are but inevitable. For preparation of satisfactory standard questions, there should be several pilot studies or pre testings. The questions are to be modified and standardized as per the results of the pretests or pilot studies.

Opinion polls can be made on linguistic issues, gender problems, prohibition, dowry, uniform civil code, love and arranged marriage, reservation of socially and economically disadvantaged etc.

(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. Meier's study is noteworthy in this regard.

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.

It is seen that the various methods or guides to public opinion have pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages. Public opinion research shows that more of these methods are perfect on themselves. But the public opinion poll technique is a quite satisfactory method. Public opinion polls have speeded up the process of democracy by providing accurate and quick reports.

Public opinion polls have shown that common people do make good decisions. Public opinion polls have also helped to focus attention on major problems of the day. Fundamental weaknesses of various systems have been highlighted through public opinion.

Polls and ignorances in many areas have been brought forward. Public opinion polls have helped administrators to take wise decisions since any problem planned to influence the public opinion must be based upon accurate knowledge of the opinion, beliefs and attitude of people.

Forecasting the outcome of an election is a far more difficult task than it is ordinarily recognised. Random procedures produce more adequate samples. Each person in the population must be given an equal and known chance to take part in the opinion poll.

If the purpose is to predict an election, the sample should consist all the eligible voters, selected at random and interviews are also to be made on this sample. Area of sampling eliminates sources of bias present in the quota control samples.