
UNIT 30 SOCIAL CONTROL

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30.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to :

- define social control and describe its nature along with some concepts related to it;
- list the goals of social control;
- identify and illustrate the consequences of social control as it affects the individuals as well as the society; and
- describe the important factors that set a limit to the effectiveness of social control.

30.1 INTRODUCTION

In sociology, the study of social control occupies a place of central importance. The existence and persistence of organised social life is not possible without some minimum degree of control over its members. Social control is needed for maintaining social order. What do we mean by “social order”? A social order refers to a system of people, relationships and customs, all these together operating smoothly to accomplish

the work of a society (Horton and Hunt 1981). No society can function effectively unless behaviour can be predicted. Orderliness depends on a network of roles. The network of reciprocal rights and duties is kept in force through social control.

In this unit we shall first focus on the meaning and nature of social control with the help of some definitions, including an examination of a few concepts which are closely related to social control. The discussion will be followed by a look at the goals and methods of social control. Then, we will describe the various types of mechanisms, means and consequences of social control. Finally, we will also discuss the factors which limit the effectiveness of social control.

30.2 MEANING AND NATURE

The terms 'social control' is broadly concerned with the maintenance of order and stability in society. It may be used in the limited sense of denoting the various specialised means employed to maintain order such as codes, courts, and constables. It is also used to categorise social institutions and their inter-relations insofar as they contribute specifically to social stability e.g. legal, religious, political institutions etc. Social control is one of the most fundamental subjects of sociological discussion. It arises in all discussions about the nature and causes of both stability and change.

30.2.1 Definitions

Let us look at certain definitions of social control in order to know what is contained in the concept.

Some definitions focus on the "order" aspect of social control. For instance Maclver and Page (1985) define social control as the way in which the whole social order becomes consistently interlinked and maintains itself. Some others look at social control as the means by which society establishes and maintains order.

Another set of definition emphasises the aspect of conformity to norms and expectations of the group as the most important element in social control. The emphasis is on all those means and processes whereby a group or a society secures conformity of its member to its expectations. In other words, social control refers to those ways used by a society to bring its way ward members back into line. When we use the term social control we are essentially referring to the processes and means which limit deviations from social norms (Horton and Hunt 1981; Berger 1963; Ogburn and Nimcoff 1978).

The main points that emerge from all these definitions about the meaning of social controls are :

- i) The term refers essentially to means and processes whereby certain goals are to be achieved.
- ii) The two most important goals sought to be achieved by social control are :
 - a) Conformity to norms and expectations of the group;
 - b) Maintenance of order in society.
- iii) There is an element of influence, persuasion or compulsion in control. The individual or a group is directed to act in a particular way. Conformity is expected or imposed irrespective of whether one likes it or not.
- iv) The scope of social control is vast. It may operate at different levels. One group may seek to control another group; a group may control its own members or an individual may seek to control another individual. The scope of control ranges from the management of deviants to social planning.

30.2.2 Related Concepts

Here we discuss some concepts which are closely related to social control.

i) **The concept of self-control**

Self-control implies that imposition of external control, is not required to compel the individual to do the right thing in a given situation. In this sense, self-control supplements the mechanisms of social control in producing conformity. But, it should also be remembered that self-control itself, originates in social control. For it is the processes of social control which instil a sense of inner control in the individual. The relation between self-control and social control can be understood in the following manner: the group applies some sanctions (punishment etc.) on an individual for indulging in deviant behaviour. But many persons are capable of visualising the consequences of their action in advance, and restrain themselves. In this sense, self-control is also a form of social control. From this point of view we can also maintain that both self-control and social control are closely related to yet another process—socialisation, to which we now turn.

ii) **Socialisation**

Socialisation is the process by which an individual, from childhood, learns and acquires the cultural characteristics of one’s group. He is thus able to participate as a member of the group of society. In childhood, one’s parents, for instance, enforce their expectations on the child by a system of reward, punishment and discipline. One also acquires many traits by observing the behaviour of others, and by anticipating the consequences of and reaction to, one’s own conduct in different situations. In this way, one develops self-control, a sense of right and wrong. Through the learning process we begin largely to conform to group expectation, very often without any conscious attempt being made on our part to do so. You can cite several examples from your daily life in which you perform many minor and major activities which you are ‘supposed’ to do, without even being aware of why you are doing so. Thus, socialisation contributes significantly to bringing about effective social control in society. It is only when the process of socialisation fails that the individual may begin to act against the expectations of the group. In that case, imposition of sanctions become necessary.

Social control also helps in the process of socialisation. Insofar as socialisation involves learning process, a system of reward and punishment is required in accomplishing it. Thus, social control and socialisation are mutually related, supplementing each other towards the ultimate objective of ensuring conformity to group norms, and maintenance of social order.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What are the important goals sought to be achieved by social control? Use about three lines for your answer.

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2) What are the major elements of social control? Use about two lines.

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30.3 GOALS OF SOCIAL CONTROL

From many of the definitions of social control, which we have reviewed earlier, it becomes clear that social control is supposed to achieve several important goals. Some of these goals are:

i) **Conformity**

One of the aims of social control is to bring about conformity in society. Social control mechanisms are employed to control, check or prevent deviant behaviour. As we shall see in Unit 31, deviant behaviour is dysfunctional to society in several ways. The objective of social control, is to safeguard the group against such dysfunctional consequences of deviant behaviour.

ii) **Uniformity**

A related objective of social control is to produce uniformity of behaviour. This does not mean that all the members have to behave alike. It only implies that there should be some co-ordinations, among the several interrelated activities performed by different people. For example, movement of traffic on a road will be impossible if some traffic rules (keeping to the left etc.) are not followed by all road users. A game cannot be played if uniform rules are not followed by all teams and its members. In every sphere of social life some uniformity of behaviour is not only expected, but is also essential.

iii) **Solidarity**

This is a very important objective of social control. As Maclver and Page (1985) have noted, social control ensures order and solidarity in society. Society is constituted of several parts and units. These different parts have to maintain an equilibrium with each other, and with the whole to ensure social solidarity and stability. The mechanisms of social control are directed at maintaining this equilibrium among the parts, and between the parts and the whole.

iv) **Continuity**

Social control is also necessary to maintain and preserve the accumulated culture of the group. By compelling or inducing individuals to conform to the prevailing norms and values, continuity of these cultural characteristics is ensured. For example, when parents insist on their children following family customs or practices, their continuity over generations is sought to be assured.

v) **Social Change**

Social control is employed not only to conserve the existing patterns, but also sometimes to induce desired social changes. In our country, many methods of persuasion, inducement, and compulsion are used to bring about desired changes in some social customs, attitudes and behaviour. Prescribing the age of marriage.

‘Two child’ family norm, removal of untouchability, dowry etc. are some of the examples of attempts to bring about social change through various means of social control.

30.4 METHODS OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Methods of social control can be broken into two types: (i) informal, and (ii) formal. The informal type of control is casual, unwritten. It lacks regulation, scheduling and organisation. The informal types consists of casual praise, ridicule, gossip and ostracism. The formal type is codified, scheduled organised, or regulated in some way, as in promotion, demotion, satire, monetary payment, mass-media etc. (see Horton and Hunt 1981). We now discuss each method in detail.

30.4.1 Informal Social Control

This is also known as primary social control, as it is more effective in what sociologists call primary groups. The primary groups are relatively more homogeneous, small, compact and intimate groups. Members are tied to each other, and to the group by feelings of personal loyalty. A family, playgroups, neighbourhood, rural community, and a simple primitive society are some examples of such compact social groupings. In such societies every individual, is constantly surrounded by very potent and subtle mechanisms of social control. Within a family the individual is under the control of his or her parents and other family members. Family, in turn, is under the control of neighbourhood or kinship groups, and these, in turn, are under the watchful control of the whole society. Thus, no individual or group can be free from social control.

We may say that in such social settings, social control exists like a set of concentric circles surrounding individuals and groups. The important characteristics of this type of control are that it is informal, spontaneous, and unplanned. Usually the group shows its disapproval to the deviating member by ridicule gossip, opprobrium, criticism, ostracism and sometimes application of physical force and coercion. Since the group is compact, ties are strong, members are personally known and the individual has little choice of an alternative groups membership. He cannot afford to ignore the disapproval of his groups and so he has to conform to his group’s expectations. Such methods of control are effective not only in primitive societies in which primary groups and relations abound, but are also effective in modern complex societies such as ours, particularly within secondary groups (such as voluntary associations, clubs and trade unions etc.) where such informal controls are effective to achieve the goals of the organisation.

Activity 1

Have you ever experienced social ostracism in your own or in the life of someone whom you know. Write an essay on the event(s) and relate in to the notion of “social control in my society” in about two pages. Share your essay with those of other students at your study centre.

30.4.2 Formal Social Control

This is also known as secondary social control as it is usually found in larger, secondary social groups. Modern complex societies such as ours, are good examples of such social groupings. In such societies we find a large number of groups, which are characterised by impersonal relations, and are oriented to certain specific objectives. A political party, trade union, factory, office, students association, may be some examples. In these secondary groupings, relations among members are more formal

and less intimate. Their relationships mean that informal controls such as ridicule, criticism or 'gossip' do not operate here. It is a well known fact in sociology, that informal groups do develop within such formal organisations. In a university or a college, certain cliques informal controls are more effective. The point is that such informal groups which develop within formal organisations, may either inhibit or facilitate formal secondary controls and affect the performance of the organisation.

Generally speaking, in secondary groupings informal controls take their place. Both positive sanctions in the form of reward, honour, and negative sanctions by way of punishments, expulsion etc. are used in this form of control. In the larger society, such controls are exemplified by law, police, courts, prisons and other agencies of law enforcement. Apart from these more visible forms, formal control mechanisms also include well organised propaganda through mass media, to 'engineer' social control in society. In large secondary groupings informal controls are weakened due to growing anonymity, mobility, and conflicting norms and values. Intimacy declines and members do not have personal or emotional feelings towards each other. They frequently move from one place to another, or from one group to another. Thus, they can easily escape from the controls of some particular group. Moreover, in a complex society, there is always a conflict of norms and values of different groups. One group may approve a conduct which may be disapproved by some other group. Under such circumstances, recourse is ultimately taken to the formal agencies of social control.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

- 1) List the five major objectives of social control. Use one line for your answer.
.....
- 2) Describe the informal objectives of social control. Use one line for your answer.
.....
- 3) Promotion and demotion in the bureaucracy are the example of informal social control. Tick the correct box. Yes No

30.5 MECHANISMS, MEANS AND CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Every society has devised various mechanisms to exercise control. Social control mechanisms are viewed by sociologists as all those social arrangements that (i) prevent such strains as may develop from the individual's place in the social structure and (ii) prevent the strains from leading to deviance (see Brearley 1947:65). Every society has certain means to exercise social control, and there are clear consequences of exercising social control for promoting stability and conformity in societies.

30.5.1 Types of Mechanisms

Mechanisms of social control can be classified into the following four categories:

- i) **Preventive mechanisms :** These mechanisms are designed to prevent such situations from developing, that might lead to deviance Socialisation, social pressures, establishment of role priorities, force are some of the mechanisms

through which conformity is promoted or the occurrence of deviance is prevented.

- ii) **Mechanisms to manage tensions :** Institutionalised safety valves like humour, games and sports, leisure, religious rituals are regarded as outlets for the tensions generated by social restraints, and cultural inconsistencies within a society.
- iii) **Mechanisms to check or change deviant behaviour :** Sanctions are used by every society to bring about conformity, and check or change deviant behaviour. Sanctions have been classified into :
 - a) **Psychological sanctions :** Negative sanctions are reproof, ridicule non-acceptance, ostracism etc. Positive sanctions include acceptance in the group, praise, invitation to inner circle events, verbal or physical pat on the back gifts etc.
 - b) **Physical sanctions :** These are mostly negative. The most important forms of physical sanctions are expulsion, physical punishment and extermination.



Village Ex-Communicates one of their member

EX-COMMUNICATION : A MECHANISM OF SOCIAL CONTROL

- c) **Economic sanctions :** These include positive rewards like promotion of a loyal sincere worker, grant of tenders to civic minded businessmen etc., or negative sanctions like threat of loss or reduction in one's income

(e.g. threat of discharge by employer may prevent the employee from continuing his strike), economic boycott etc.

- iv) **Propaganda Mechanisms** : Another important mechanism that can bring about change in the desired direction, is propaganda or moulding public opinion. Propaganda is a deliberate attempt to control the behaviour and interrelationships of members in order to change the feelings, attitudes and values. For example, the efforts of the government to control population growth through family planning propaganda (see Horton and Hunt 1981).

30.5.2 Means of Social Control

As mentioned earlier in this unit (sub-section 30.2.1), social control may denote the various specialised means employed by a society, to maintain order. It may also be used to categorise institutions insofar as they contribute specifically to order and stability. Let us examine some of these in detail.

i) Custom

Social codes found in every society provide standardised ways of doing things. These ways, known as customs, have come to be accepted in the group or society. Some degree of pressure is always exerted on the individual to make one conform to customs. In case, they are violated the group applies some sanctions or penalties of varying degrees of severity. The severity would depend on the importance attached to the particular customary regulation.

Custom is sustained by common acceptance. Informal social pressures are brought to bear, in the case of violation of customs. Violation of mores, on the other hand, inspire intense reaction and the punishment may involve expulsion from the group, harsh ridicule, imprisonment or in some cases even death. To function effectively in a culture it is imperative that one learns the appropriate folkways (customs and conventions) and mores of that culture. Let us now see the role of law as a means of social control.

ii) Law

Certain norms become laws when a society feels strongly, about them, Laws are formal standardised expressions of norms, enacted by legislative bodies to regulate certain types of behaviour. Laws not merely state what behaviours are permitted and not permitted, but they also state the punishment for violating the law.

As we shift from simple societies to the modern ones, the role of law as a mechanism of social control assumes greater significance. In modern, complex societies the more informal types of social control are weakened. Though law may itself be based on custom, it has three distinct characteristics which separate it from custom: first, **it has politicality** as it is upheld by the political authority of the state. Second, **it has uniformity**, as it is applicable throughout the jurisdiction of the state on all groups or parts of society. Third, **it has penal sanction**, as each law is enforced on the strength of penalty imposed by the State (Courts) in case of violation. There are distinct agencies such as police, courts, prisons etc. to enforce the law. However, when a law does not reflect folkways and mores, its enforcement is likely to be ignored or given low priority. For example, even though the minimum age at marriage for girls and boys in India is fixed by law, many communities ignore these prescriptions. When there is a conflict between custom and law, it becomes difficult to impose the law. We will now turn to the role of religion.

Activity 2

Scan the newspapers of a week for any news item which describes how the customs of a community clash with the legal edict such as, practice of dowry, or sati. Write a page on the event and its sociological implications. Compare your note with those of other students at your study centre.

iii) Religion

Sociologists are interested in studying how religion is organised, and what impact it has on the members of a society in terms of controlling their behaviour. They are also interested in the kinds of belief system developed by people, in different situations and circumstances, and how religious beliefs change over time as external situations and circumstances change. All religions are seen to have the following elements: (a) things considered sacred (b) a set of believers (c) a set of rituals and ceremonies (d) a system of beliefs such as a creed, doctrine or a holy book (e) a certain form of organisation.

Religion contributes to stability and order in society in that it reinforces social norms, providing sanctions for violation of norms and reinforcing basic values. Today, with the explosion of scientific knowledge, some customs, religious and moral interpretations of behaviour are no longer considered binding or accepted. The sacred books of most of religions include rules for ordering social relationships. It is especially explicit about matters pertaining to the family, marriage, divorce and inheritance. Though laws are challenging some of the practices upheld by religious teachings, beliefs and experiences associated with religion are still seen to be essential for both personal identity, and social cohesion. Education too is an important means of social control. Let us see how this is so.

iv) Education

The institution of education helps to control human behaviour through socialisation of the young and adult members of society. The different levels of formal education transmit the culture of society, to individuals within the society. In discharging their socialisation function, schools and colleges transmit many of the society's values. The individuals learn to conform to rules, be honest, be diligent and to co-operate with others etc. Another value of education is that it prepares students for their adult occupational roles. Education is further valued for the understanding it imparts, about the social and physical environment. However, the fact that education tries to impart such values, is no indication that everyone who goes to school and college learns and accepts these values. Were the educational system and educators and other socialisers always successful, there would be no deviance and no social conflict. This brings us to the topic of family.

v) Family

Across the world, the institution of family performs certain important functions. These include socialisation, imparting of affection and emotional support, regulation of sex and reproduction. Family is not only an important agency of socialisation but of social control as well. It is in the family that an individual normally has his most intimate, and important social relation. Some of human beings' most basic needs, both physical and psychological are fulfilled within the family. Though the more formal and more coercive measures of social control are generally absent in the family, other informal means such as ridicule, criticism, disapproval, loss of prestige, withdrawal of rewards etc. are very potent means of control. In fact, an individual

always seeks emotional support of his or her near and dear ones in the family in times of stress and tension. The mere threat of withdrawal of this support, is sufficient to bring the recalcitrant member back into line. Every family has its own set of moral values and customs. These are enforced upon its members, particularly the younger ones through disciplinary measures and a system of rewards and punishments. We now turn to leadership.

vi) **Leadership**

It can play a very important role in social control. It develops out of the process of interaction itself. Leaders have guided the destinies of groups, communities, and nations. If the leader enjoys group support, his or her suggestions and directions lead the members towards some common values and goals, and may help to promote order and stability in society. In this process mass media can play a very important role.

vii) **Mass Media**

In traditional smaller societies face to face contact was the only means of communication. In modern technological societies the media of mass communication, such as newspapers, radio and television, are a means of not only communication but also of social control. Much of the public opinion and propaganda, for example, (and other social and cultural groups) make use of these means to mould public opinion, and to change or control attitudes and behaviour of the vast mass of population. New values and life styles, fashions, wants, ideas etc. are thrust upon the public with a view to redirect and control their behaviour in a particular way. We will now consider the role of force in social control.

viii) **Force**

Though some sociologists have neglected or under emphasised the element of force or physical coercion in social relationships, the role of force in social control cannot be underestimated. In some types of societies, such as the totalitarian states and colonial regimes, physical force and violence are used as significant instruments of control. In fact, it can be asserted that physical violence is the oldest and ultimate means of social control. Even modern, liberal democratic societies maintain police and armed forces. This signifies the fact that the resort to force and violence is the ultimate answer to many issues, when other means have failed. On the other hand, communal and caste violence, are examples of how force is used by interested groups to control and coerce each other though it is not legally sanctioned.

30.5.3 Consequences of Social Control

Though social control is seen as necessary for promoting continuing stability and conformity in societies, it can become dysfunctional at times. The following are some of the dysfunctional aspects of social control.

i) **Exploitation**

Social control may sometimes become a subtle means of exploitation. Some of the dominant groups or individuals may simply use it to fulfil their own vested interests. These interests may be political, economic or social. In such cases, the real motivations are hidden under the cover of some laudable objectives. A ruling party may try to perpetuate its rule, or a business firm may try to sell its substandard goods by means of utilising the techniques of social control.

ii) **Inhibiting Reform and Change**

Social control may have limiting consequences in that it may sometimes inhibit creativity, and obstruct attempts at constructive reforms and social changes.

iii) Psychological Pressures

Social control may also exert enormous amount of emotional and psychological pressures on some individuals. The best example is that of the institutions such as the prisons and mental hospitals. The strict regime and oppressive atmosphere sometimes create mental tensions and even illnesses among them. Similarly, where parents have very strict standards of discipline, their children's personalities do not develop in a normal way. In repressive police-states, many individuals, likewise, suffer from stress and tension. Thus, the individual has to pay a price for social control in psychological terms.

iv) Social Tensions

Social control may also lead to social tensions, particularly in a large, complex society. Here, there may be different groups with their distinctive interests, norms, and values which may conflict with each other. When attempts are made by one or more groups to impose their own standards on others, conflict and struggle become inevitable.

30.6 LIMITS ON SOCIAL CONTROL

Effectiveness of social control is limited due to the following factors :

- i) Each group is organised around norms and values. Social control is intended to check deviation from these standards. Yet, it is not possible to contain deviation completely. Some deviation from prescribed norms will always be there. Each group or society has to determine the limit of tolerance of deviant conduct and thus set a realistic limit on social control.
- ii) The effectiveness of social control is also limited by the degree of consistency in the cultural directives. If the cultural prescriptions are uncertain and inconsistent, then social control cannot operate successfully. This is why in a rapidly changing society, in which normative standards become inconsistent, mechanisms of social control are generally weak. Individuals may not know what is expected of them in a particular situation.
- iii) In a complex society, it is not generally possible to impose social control uniformly on all groups which are divided on the basis of class, caste, religion, race etc. Sometimes the uniform application of law also encounters numerous difficulties. In our country, despite the constitutional directive to have a uniform civil code, it has not been possible to evolve one so far.
- iv) Social control implies huge economic costs to the society. The control of deviance requires a disproportionate share of societal attention and resources. Huge expenditure has to be incurred on the establishment of social control agencies such as the police, prisons, mental hospitals, etc. There is a limit beyond which a poor country such as ours cannot afford to deploy such resources at the cost of other development programmes.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space given below for your answer.

- b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

- 1) What are the four major mechanisms to check deviant behaviour? Use two lines for your answer.
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- 2) Name five major means of social control. Use one line for your answer.
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- 3) In traditional society, mass media is the only source of social control. Tick the correct box.

Yes	No
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- 4) Mention three dysfunctional aspects of social control. Use three lines for your answer.
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30.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have focused on the nature, approaches, mechanisms and consequences of social control. We discussed that social control is a pervasive feature of social life. Social control means that every society has some rules which have to be obeyed, and some standards of conduct which have to be followed. This is so because no society can exist without social control. The twin goals of social control are:

- i) to establish and maintain order in society; and
- ii) to check deviant tendencies and behaviour.

You also learnt that different societies have different methods to exercise control. The two types discussed here are the formal and informal. Some of the important mechanisms discussed in this unit are custom, law, religion, education, family, leadership, mass media, force etc. Then, we also looked at some of the consequences of social control from the point of view of both the society and the individual. Finally, we pointed out some of the factors that limit the effectiveness of social control.

30.8 KEY WORDS

- Dysfunctional consequences** : Certain results which are not recognised by the social norms.
- Social category** : Analytical tool used to categorise people having some characteristics in common viz., occupation class, middle class etc.
- Social restraints** : Collective opposition against non-conformity to social norms and institutions.
- Social sanction** : Punishment given for the non-conformity to social norms.

30.9 FURTHER READINGS

Brearely, H.C. 1965. "The Nature of Social Control", In Joseph S. Roucek et. al. (Ed) *Social Control*, Affiliated East West Press: New Delhi.

Ogburn, William F. and M. Nimcoff, 1979. *A Handbook of Sociology*, Eurasia Publishing House: New Delhi (Chapter VIII).

30.10 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress I

- 1) There are two important goals sought to be achieved by social control. These are (i) conformity to norms and expectations of the group; (ii) maintenance of order in society.
- 2) The major elements of social control are influence, persuasion and compulsion.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1)
 - a) conformity,
 - b) uniformity.
 - c) solidarity,
 - d) continuity, and
 - e) social change.
- 2) The informal type of social control is casual, unwritten and it lacks regulation, scheduling and organisation. The informal type consists of casual praise, ridicule, gossip and ostracism.
- 3) No.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1)
 - a) psychological sanctions,
 - c) physical sanctions,
 - d) economic sanctions, and
 - e) propaganda or moulding public opinion.
- 2)
 - a) customs,
 - b) law,
 - c) religion,
 - d) education, and
 - e) family
- 3) No.
- 4)
 - a) It may lead to exploitation of the weaker section by the dominant one.
 - b) It may cause psychological pressure.
 - c) It may cause social tension.