



A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC VALUES IN SOCIETY

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Abstract: Public values are foundational to the functioning and integrity of any society. They encompass shared norms, moral standards, and principles that collectively guide individual behaviour and shape institutional frameworks. Rooted in cultural traditions, historical experiences, and social interactions, public values form the moral compass of communities and nations. This research delves into the sociological dimensions of public values, examining their origin, evolution, and relevance in contemporary Indian society. Employing a qualitative research design, the study utilizes content analysis of media, educational texts, and policy documents, alongside semi-structured interviews with individuals from diverse social backgrounds. The analysis highlights how key social institutions namely family, education, religion, and media play crucial roles in shaping and transmitting public values across generations. The study further explores the influence of globalization, digital communication, and increased socio-political awareness in reshaping traditional value systems. Participants reported both the persistence of long-held values, such as respect, responsibility, and communal harmony, and the emergence of modern ideals, including individual autonomy, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. These developments indicate an ongoing negotiation between continuity and change, influenced by factors such as urbanization, migration, and technological integration. The findings reveal that public values are not static; rather, they are fluid, contested, and context-dependent, varying according to socio-economic status, age, and cultural exposure. By offering a nuanced understanding of how values are formed, challenged, and transformed, this study contributes to the broader sociological discourse on morality, identity, and social change in pluralistic societies like India.

IndexTerms - Public Values, Sociology, Social Institutions, Globalization, Value Formation, Indian Society

INTRODUCTION

Public values constitute the shared ethical standards, principles, and beliefs that define what is considered important, desirable, and appropriate within a society. These values serve as a collective moral compass that guides individual behaviour, institutional practices, and public discourse. They are foundational to the identity and coherence of any social order, shaping how individuals relate to one another and to the institutions that structure their lives. In essence, public values embody the normative commitments of a society ideals such as justice, freedom, equality, honesty, respect, and social responsibility. These values not only reflect societal expectations but also influence decision-making at both personal and policy levels.

From a sociological standpoint, public values are not inherent or universal; they are socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically contingent. They evolve through interactions among individuals, social groups, and institutions such as the family, education system, religion, government, and media. These institutions play a central role in inculcating and perpetuating values across generations. Yet, values are not merely transmitted; they are also contested, reinterpreted, and transformed in response to changing social, political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Emile Durkheim emphasized the role of collective consciousness and moral regulation in maintaining social solidarity. Max Weber highlighted the role of value orientations in guiding social action. In the functionalist tradition, Talcott Parsons identified values as essential components of the social system that promote integration and stability. More recent sociological perspectives, particularly those informed by postmodernism and critical theory, argue that public values are increasingly fragmented and pluralistic, reflecting the complexity and heterogeneity of contemporary societies.

In India, public values are deeply embedded in the country's rich civilizational heritage, influenced by religious teachings, philosophical traditions, and historical movements. Values such as tolerance, non-violence, familial duty, and community service

have long been considered integral to the Indian ethos. However, in the face of rapid globalization, urbanization, and technological advancement, Indian society is experiencing profound transformations in its value system. The exposure to global media, transnational economic flows, migration, and digital communication has introduced new value orientations such as individualism, consumerism, environmental consciousness, and gender equality which often coexist uneasily with traditional norms and expectations.

This tension between continuity and change presents a fertile ground for sociological inquiry. Individuals and communities continually engage in a complex process of negotiation as they navigate the space between inherited traditions and the influence of emerging global norms. In this dynamic context, collective values often come into conflict such as when the ideals of equality challenge entrenched hierarchies, or when the emphasis on personal freedom intersects with expectations of social responsibility. Institutional actors, including schools, religious organizations, and media, play a significant role in both reinforcing and reshaping public values, acting as vehicles through which norms are communicated, challenged, or legitimized. Furthermore, the perception and practice of public values are deeply shaped by socio-economic factors such as class, caste, educational attainment, and regional diversity. These variables influence not only how values are interpreted but also how they are enacted in everyday life, revealing the layered and often contested nature of moral frameworks within society.

This study seeks to explore these questions by analyzing the sociological construction, transmission, and transformation of public values in India, with particular attention to their contemporary relevance. In doing so, it aims to unpack the mechanisms through which values are embedded in institutional structures, articulated in public discourse, and internalized or resisted by individuals. The study adopts a qualitative methodological framework, including content analysis and semi-structured interviews, to capture both institutional narratives and lived experiences of values.

Content analysis will focus on educational curricula, public policy documents, and mainstream media narratives, which serve as repositories and transmitters of dominant value systems. Semi-structured interviews with individuals from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and generational backgrounds will offer insights into how people interpret, internalize, or challenge prevailing values. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of value formation that transcends simplistic binaries of tradition versus modernity.

One of the key premises of this study is that public values in India are increasingly shaped by the dynamics of globalization. Globalization has facilitated the movement of people, ideas, goods, and cultural practices across borders, thereby creating new opportunities for value exchange and transformation. At the same time, it has also generated anxieties about cultural erosion, identity loss, and moral decline. These ambivalences are reflected in contemporary debates over issues such as gender roles, marriage, sexuality, freedom of expression, secularism, and environmental responsibility. For instance, while gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are gaining ground, they are also met with resistance from conservative social forces. Similarly, environmental values such as sustainability and conservation are promoted in school curricula and policy frameworks, but often clash with developmental imperatives and consumerist aspirations.

By examining how public values are formed, transmitted, and transformed in this context, the study aims to contribute to the broader sociological discourse on moral order, cultural change, and social integration. It argues that public values in India are not merely inherited legacies or external impositions, but are actively constructed through dialogue, contestation, and negotiation within and across different sections of society.

In conclusion, this research underscores the importance of studying public values not as abstract ideals but as lived realities embedded in institutional practices and everyday interactions. In an era marked by increasing complexity, pluralism, and uncertainty, understanding the sociological dynamics of public values is crucial for fostering inclusive, equitable, and cohesive societies. This study seeks to illuminate these dynamics within the Indian context, offering both empirical insights and theoretical reflections on the evolving nature of public values in the 21st century.

II REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The sociological study of public values has a deep-rooted theoretical foundation, beginning with the classical sociologists who emphasized the role of shared norms and values in maintaining social order. Emile Durkheim (1912), in his seminal work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, highlighted the concept of collective consciousness, arguing that public values are integral to the moral regulation of society and to the cohesion of social groups. According to Durkheim, these shared beliefs and sentiments serve to bind individuals together, ensuring solidarity and stability.

Max Weber (1905), in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, emphasized the interplay between value orientations and social action, particularly in how religious values influenced the development of capitalist economies. For Weber, values are not only normative principles but also motivators of action that shape the trajectory of societies. His concept of value rationality underscored the role of deeply held ethical commitments in guiding behaviour, distinct from instrumental reasoning.

Talcott Parsons (1951) further developed the functionalist perspective by placing values at the core of the social system. In his *Social System* theory, values function as integrative mechanisms that provide direction for role expectations and institutional functioning. According to Parsons, a stable social system relies on the internalization of common values through processes of socialization, especially in primary institutions such as the family and education.

Moving into more contemporary perspectives, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel (2005), in their World Values Survey, identified a global shift from traditional survival values to self-expression values, influenced by processes of economic development, education, and democratization. Their theory of cultural modernization suggests that values evolve in predictable patterns as societies progress, moving from religious conformity and authority toward secularism, individual autonomy, and participatory engagement.

Anthony Giddens (1991) contributed to this discourse by discussing how reflexive modernity influences individual identity and moral choices. In late modern societies, individuals are increasingly confronted with diverse value systems and must continuously construct their identities through self-reflection and negotiation of norms. This leads to what Giddens terms “value pluralism” and “ontological insecurity,” underscoring the complexity of value formation in contemporary contexts.

Zygmunt Bauman (2000) addressed the implications of liquid modernity, suggesting that in globalized and rapidly changing societies, traditional value frameworks become unstable. Public values are no longer transmitted in linear, predictable ways but are subject to fragmentation and reconfiguration due to digital media, migration, and consumer culture.

In the Indian context, several scholars have explored how modernization, urbanization, and globalization have transformed traditional value systems. Ashis Nandy (2007) emphasized the ambivalence of modern values in postcolonial societies, critiquing the uncritical adoption of Western norms and advocating for a recognition of indigenous ethical systems. He pointed out the intersections of tradition and modernity, where old and new values coexist in tension.

Satish Deshpande (2011) examined the changing landscape of caste, class, and education in shaping public attitudes and moral beliefs in India. He argued that neoliberal reforms and economic liberalization have introduced new value regimes centered around consumerism, meritocracy, and individualism, challenging older communitarian values.

Yogendra Singh (1973, 2000) addressed value change through his theory of modernization of Indian tradition, proposing that traditional institutions undergo transformation without being entirely dismantled. His work highlights the adaptive nature of Indian social structures in accommodating new values while retaining core cultural symbols.

Rajni Kothari (1989) critiqued the erosion of public values in the face of political corruption and institutional decay, calling for a revival of ethical public life through civil society engagement and participatory democracy. His concerns remain relevant in the context of increasing alienation from political processes and growing distrust in governance.

Leela Dube (1997) and Veena Das (2006) explored how gendered norms influence the articulation and negotiation of public values within familial and institutional spaces. Their work emphasizes how values related to gender, honor, and respectability are embedded in everyday interactions and serve as sites of both conformity and resistance.

Although this rich body of literature provides robust theoretical insights, there remains a notable gap in empirical studies focusing on how public values are negotiated in everyday life in the Indian context, particularly in light of recent phenomena such as digitalization, increased social mobility, and the rise of identity-based movements. Most existing research tends to focus either on macro-level analyses or abstract theorization, with limited exploration of micro-level, lived experiences across diverse social groups.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how individuals and institutions construct, transmit, and transform public values in contemporary India. Through qualitative methodologies, the research aims to capture both the institutional discourses and individual narratives that shape value systems, offering a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in a rapidly changing society.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 3.1 To explore the sociological foundations of public values in Indian society.
- 3.2 To examine the role of social institutions in shaping and transmitting these values.
- 3.3 To analyse the impact of globalization and digital communication on public value systems.
- 3.4 To understand the public's perception and negotiation of values in contemporary contexts.

IV RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the sociological construction, transmission, and transformation of public values in Indian society, with a specific focus on the state of Kerala. The qualitative approach was chosen due to its ability to provide in-depth, context-specific insights into how individuals and institutions perceive and negotiate values in everyday life. Given the complexity and fluidity of public values, a qualitative design was best suited to capture the nuanced interpretations, lived experiences, and socio-cultural dynamics associated with the subject.

4.1 Data Collection Methods

Two primary qualitative methods were utilized for data collection: content analysis and semi-structured interviews.

4.1.1 Content Analysis:

A purposive selection of educational syllabi (particularly from higher secondary and undergraduate curricula), public policy documents, and mainstream media content (including print and digital news articles, opinion columns, and advertisements) was undertaken. These materials were examined to identify the dominant value narratives being promoted or contested in institutional discourses. The objective was to trace how public values such as justice, equality, honesty, responsibility, and respect are embedded in institutional texts and how this shape or reflect societal norms.

4.1.2 Semi-Structured Interviews:

To capture individual perceptions and experiences, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents from diverse social backgrounds. Participants included individuals from various age groups (ranging from 18 to 65 years), occupational categories (students, teachers, government employees, homemakers, entrepreneurs, and retirees), and socio-economic strata. The interviews aimed to elicit responses regarding participants' understanding of public values, how they were socialized into these values, and how they perceive changes in value systems over time, particularly in the context of globalization and technological advancement.

4.2 Sampling Technique

The study adopted a purposive sampling technique to ensure diversity and relevance in the selection of participants. Respondents were chosen based on criteria such as age, gender, occupation, and geographical location (urban and rural regions within Kerala) to capture a wide range of perspectives. This non-probability sampling method allowed for the inclusion of participants who were likely to provide rich, insightful data pertinent to the research objectives.

4.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. The transcripts of the interviews and coded documents were systematically reviewed to extract recurring themes related to value construction, intergenerational shifts, institutional influences, and tensions between tradition and modernity.

NVivo software was used to assist in the organization and coding of qualitative data, ensuring accuracy and transparency in the analytical process.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

All ethical protocols were rigorously followed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose, scope, and confidentiality of the study. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that the data collected would be used solely for academic purposes. The research adhered to ethical standards concerning privacy, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any point.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the major findings derived from qualitative interviews and content analysis. The data reveal a dynamic and complex interplay between tradition and modernity in the construction and negotiation of public values. Four major thematic areas emerged: institutional influences, media and digital landscapes, the impact of globalization, and the nature of value conflicts. Each theme is discussed below in detail, drawing from participants' narratives and supporting literature.

5.1 Institutional Role in Value Formation

The family emerged as the foundational institution in the inculcation of public values. Respondents across age groups consistently identified the family as the first and most influential setting where values such as respect for elders, honesty, responsibility, humility, and discipline were imparted. These values were often embedded in daily practices, storytelling, religious rituals, and interpersonal interactions. Older respondents emphasized the role of oral traditions, proverbs, and community observances in transmitting values to younger generations.

Educational institutions, particularly schools and colleges, played a reinforcing and formalizing role in value formation. Curricular content often introduced students to constitutional values such as secularism, democracy, equality, and justice. Moreover, co-curricular activities like National Service Scheme (NSS), debates, and environmental clubs promoted civic responsibility, environmental consciousness, and patriotism. However, some participants also criticized the rote-oriented nature of the education system, which, according to them, limited critical thinking and ethical deliberation.

Religious institutions were perceived to play a dual role. On one hand, they provided moral anchoring and a sense of ethical purpose by reinforcing values such as compassion, selflessness, discipline, and truth. On the other hand, some respondents expressed concern about value conservatism in certain religious teachings, especially those that reinforced gender hierarchies or discouraged interfaith interaction. This dual nature reflects a broader sociological debate on the role of religion in contemporary society—as both a source of social integration and a potential site of exclusion.

5.2 Media and Digital Influences

The role of media—particularly digital and social media—was identified as both transformative and paradoxical. Respondents acknowledged that mainstream media, including television, films, and print journalism, have historically played a significant role in shaping societal norms, promoting national integration, and debating moral questions. However, in recent decades, with the rise of commercialization, mainstream media has increasingly emphasized consumerism, celebrity culture, and sensationalism, which some participants felt led to a dilution of core public values.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp were seen as critical spaces for value negotiation, expression, and confrontation. For younger respondents, social media provided an opportunity to explore and advocate for values such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, mental health awareness, and environmental activism. At the same time, older participants expressed concern over value erosion, misinformation, and the influence of individualism and digital anonymity in shaping uncivil behaviors online.

Importantly, the interactive nature of digital platforms enabled a form of bottom-up value production, allowing marginalized voices to participate in shaping public discourse. The emergence of digital influencers, online petitions, and hashtag campaigns was seen as indicative of how digital spaces are becoming arenas of value contestation and political engagement.

5.3 Globalization and Cultural Transition

One of the most significant findings relates to the shifting value orientations due to globalization. Younger respondents, especially those from urban or semi-urban backgrounds, reflected a marked shift towards values emphasizing individual autonomy, gender equity, sustainability, meritocracy, and global citizenship. These respondents cited exposure to global education systems, international media, and intercultural interactions as factors that broadened their ethical perspectives.

However, this value shift also resulted in generational tensions. Parents and elders were often perceived to hold on to values rooted in collectivism, obedience, and hierarchical respect, particularly in matters related to marriage, gender roles, and intergenerational responsibilities. Respondents reported conflicts between pursuing personal aspirations and adhering to familial or societal expectations, especially among women and youth.

This generational divide underscores the hybrid nature of Indian society—where traditional values are not entirely discarded, but are reinterpreted or negotiated in the face of modern exigencies. It also highlights the role of cultural ambivalence, where individuals simultaneously internalize global norms while seeking to maintain cultural continuity.

5.4 Public Value Conflicts

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of the study was the emergence of recurrent value conflicts, reflective of broader socio-political tensions. Respondents across demographics identified ongoing struggles between:

- Individual freedom vs. collective responsibility: While younger individuals valued personal choice and autonomy, older generations emphasized duties toward family and community.

- Traditional authority vs. modern egalitarianism: There was a visible tension between respect for hierarchical structures (elders, teachers, religious leaders) and the emerging emphasis on egalitarian dialogue and participatory decision-making.
- Cultural identity vs. cosmopolitanism: Urban youth, particularly those exposed to global cultural flows, expressed a sense of dual identity—rooted in regional language and customs while embracing cosmopolitan ideals.

These conflicts were not merely abstract or ideological but manifested in everyday decision-making—in career choices, dress codes, religious observance, political participation, and interpersonal relationships. Participants emphasized that these tensions were not necessarily destructive; rather, they represented the fluid and contested nature of public values in a pluralistic and democratic society.

The findings resonate with sociological theories on value pluralism and normative fragmentation, particularly in rapidly modernizing contexts like India. They also affirm that public values are not static ideals, but rather dynamic and evolving constructs, continuously redefined through interaction, conflict, and compromise.

VI CONCLUSION

This study underscores the sociological significance of public values as both a mirror and a motor of societal transformation. Public values—encompassing norms such as justice, responsibility, equality, and respect—are not merely abstract ethical ideals, but lived realities that shape and are shaped by everyday interactions, institutional influences, and socio-cultural environments. In the context of Indian society, where diversity in caste, class, religion, language, and region plays a central role, public values emerge as complex, fluid, and often contested constructs.

The research highlights how traditional institutions such as the family, education system, and religious organizations continue to play a pivotal role in the inculcation of core values. Simultaneously, the influence of digital media, globalization, and new socio-economic realities has introduced alternate value systems—emphasizing autonomy, gender parity, environmental sustainability, and digital expression. These forces are not operating in isolation but interact in multiple, sometimes conflicting, ways.

One of the most notable findings is the generational divergence in value orientation. Younger individuals increasingly align with global democratic ideals and individual freedoms, while older generations uphold collectivist, duty-bound frameworks. This generational gap, however, is not absolute; many respondents engage in ongoing negotiation, synthesis, and reinterpretation of values, leading to the formation of a hybrid, evolving cultural ethos.

These insights carry important implications. For policy-makers, understanding value transformations can inform culturally sensitive governance and education reforms. For educators, the integration of critical thinking and value education can equip students to navigate complex ethical dilemmas. For civil society, fostering inclusive platforms for dialogue can help bridge gaps between differing value systems.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms the centrality of public values in shaping the social fabric. As India continues to evolve within a globalized, digitally interconnected world, interdisciplinary and longitudinal studies will be essential to further understand how values are being redefined in response to emerging social realities.

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