

# **SOCIAL ETHICS**

**COURSE CODE: SGB24PH101MD**

**Multi-Disciplinary Course**

**For FYUG Programmes**

**Self Learning Material**



## **SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY**

The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala



## **Vision**

*To increase access of potential learners of all categories to higher education, research and training, and ensure equity through delivery of high quality processes and outcomes fostering inclusive educational empowerment for social advancement.*

## **Mission**

To be benchmarked as a model for conservation and dissemination of knowledge and skill on blended and virtual mode in education, training and research for normal, continuing, and adult learners.

## **Pathway**

Access and Quality define Equity.



# **Social Ethics**

Course Code: SGB24PH101MD  
Semester - III

**Multi Disciplinary Course  
For FYUG Programmes (Honours)  
Self Learning Material  
(With Model Question Paper Sets)**



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# Message from Vice Chancellor

Dear Learner,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the Four Year UG Programme offered by Sreenarayananaguru Open University.

Established in September 2020, our university aims to provide high-quality higher education through open and distance learning. Our guiding principle, 'access and quality define equity', shapes our approach to education. We are committed to maintaining the highest standards in our academic offerings.

Our university proudly bears the name of Sreenarayananaguru, a prominent Renaissance thinker of modern India. His philosophy of social reform and educational empowerment serves as a constant reminder of our dedication to excellence in all our academic pursuits.

The University is committed to providing forward-thinking and value-based learning experiences that nurture responsible, reflective, and socially conscious individuals. As part of the FYUG programme, the Multidisciplinary Course "Social Ethics" introduces learners to the moral foundations and ethical principles that shape human behaviour and social interactions. It explores key concepts such as justice, equality, rights, responsibility, and sustainability, helping you understand how ethical reasoning influences decision-making in personal, professional, and public life. The course connects philosophical ideas with real-world issues ranging from environmental concerns and digital ethics to social justice and civic responsibility encouraging you to think critically about the moral dimensions of contemporary society. By exploring related disciplines, you gain a more comprehensive education, preparing you for diverse career opportunities and fostering well-rounded intellectual growth throughout your academic journey.

Our teaching methodology combines three key elements: Self Learning Material, Classroom Counselling, and Virtual modes. This blended approach aims to provide a rich and engaging learning experience, overcoming the limitations often associated with distance education. We are confident that this programme will enhance your understanding of statistical methods in business contexts, preparing you for various career paths and further academic pursuits.

Our learner support services are always available to address any concerns you may have during your time with us. We encourage you to reach out with any questions or feedback regarding the programme.

We wish you success in your academic journey with Sreenarayananaguru Open University.

Best regards,



Dr. Jagathy Raj V.P.  
Vice Chancellor

01-09-2025

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**BLOCK**

# Foundations of Ethics





# Introduction to Ethics

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the meaning and importance of ethics in daily life
- ◆ understand how values, culture, and upbringing shape moral decisions
- ◆ differentiate between personal ethics and social ethics with relevant examples
- ◆ identify the historical development of ethical thinking from ancient to modern times
- ◆ understand the role of professional and environmental ethics in promoting social and ecological well-being

### Prerequisites

A person is travelling on a bus when another passenger accidentally drops their wallet. The person notices it and picks it up, leading to a moment of decision about whether to return the wallet or keep it. While this may seem like a small situation, it raises deeper questions about one's values, upbringing, and sense of right and wrong. Such choices are part of daily life. A student may decide between copying in an exam or being honest; a friend may need support; or someone may witness unfair treatment and must choose whether to remain silent or speak out. These are not just practical matters; they are ethical in nature. Ethics helps us understand the difference between what we can do and what we ought to do. It involves not only personal reflection but also shared social values, such as how people treat others from different backgrounds, how natural resources are used, and how fairness is ensured in workplaces and schools. Ethics addresses both individual and collective concerns and encourages people to ask important questions: Why is something considered wrong? What values are at stake? How do actions affect others? By helping us think, reflect, and act with care, ethics becomes an essential part of responsible living.

# Keywords

Moral Philosophy, Virtue, Justice, Normative Science, Personal Ethics, Social Ethics, Professional Ethics, Environmental Ethics

## Discussion

### 1.1.1 Introduction

Ethics is the study of how we understand and decide what is right and wrong in our actions. Every day, people face choices that have moral meaning, whether they realise it or not. These choices are shaped by the moral environment we live in, which includes the values, customs, and ideas passed on through family, religion, education, and culture. This environment influences how we feel and respond to situations. For example, when someone lies and feels guilty afterwards, or when someone helps a stranger and feels proud, these emotions are shaped by ethical understanding. Our ideas of right and wrong also affect how we view ourselves and others. For instance, if a student copies in an exam and later feels ashamed, it shows how ethical thinking impacts one's sense of identity and self-respect. In the same way, when someone is praised for standing up against injustice, they gain respect not only from others but also from themselves. Ethics helps us reflect on such moments. It encourages us to ask why certain actions matter and how our decisions affect others. People do not act only by habit or rule, but also by thinking about what they value. Ethics, therefore, is not just a subject to study; it is a part of how we live, make decisions, and relate to others.

Ethics helps us move beyond just doing what we are told to thinking for ourselves about what is truly worth doing and why. Ethical thinking also helps us deal with larger social problems. For example, we may wonder how resources should be shared, how to treat people from different backgrounds, or what fairness means in a changing world. Ethics gives us a way to ask and explore these questions. It is not always easy, and there are no perfect answers. But ethics encourages careful thinking and discussion. By reflecting on our choices and learning to respect others, ethics becomes a practical guide that supports peaceful and fair living. Even when people disagree, ethical thinking allows us to understand each other better and work together for the common good.

### 1.1.2 Understanding Ethics

The word 'ethics' comes from the Greek word *ethos*, which means character, habit, or custom. Similarly, the word 'moral' comes from the Latin word *mores*, which also means custom or way of behaviour. Ethics, therefore, is the study of human actions based on whether they are right or wrong. It looks at how people behave and why they choose to do certain things, especially in situations where they must decide between right and wrong. Ethics tries to understand what is good and what is bad, and it guides people in choosing good actions and avoiding bad ones. In philosophy, ethics is often called 'moral philosophy' because it reflects on moral ideas, problems, and values. Ethics is not simply following traditions or customs; it goes deeper and questions why certain

behaviours are accepted or rejected. It also seeks to find the basic reasons why human beings ought to act in certain ways to reach happiness or a good life. In this way, ethics becomes both a way of understanding values and a method for improving one's actions.

Ethics is both a theoretical and a practical subject. It is theoretical because it explains the reasons behind our moral decisions. It helps us understand why we say something is right or wrong. Ethical theories provide a framework for thinking about questions such as whether telling the truth is always necessary or when helping others becomes a duty. In this way, ethics gives meaning to our moral judgments. At the same time, ethics is also practical because it is concerned with how people should live their daily lives. It provides guidance on how to act in different situations, how to treat others, and how to make good decisions. Ethics helps individuals move toward the goal of a meaningful human life by encouraging them to act with honesty, responsibility, and concern for others. It is not just about rules; it is about building a life based on thoughtful and purposeful actions.

Ethics is also considered a science, but in a special way. It is not like physical sciences that deal with matter or energy. Instead, ethics is a normative science. This means it does not just describe how people behave but sets standards for how people ought to behave. It studies human actions that are done voluntarily or performed with full awareness and intention. Actions like walking or sleeping are not studied in ethics unless they are part of a chosen action, like walking to help someone in need. Ethics looks at the purpose behind an action and whether it was done with moral awareness. For example, donating money with the aim of helping the poor is an ethical action because it is done voluntarily with a clear purpose. Ethics uses reason to understand human freedom and decision-making. This sets it apart from subjects like psychology or biology, which explain behaviour based on natural processes or habits without focusing on moral intention. Ethics focuses on the 'why' of our actions and helps us choose what is good and right.

### 1.1.3 How Ethics Developed Over Time

Although the everyday practice of right and wrong has always been part of life, ethics as a structured subject began when people started reflecting on why certain actions were considered right or wrong. Ethics became a part of philosophy when people tried to understand human behaviour using reason. This study has continued through history, changing along with the growth of society. Different periods in history have added new ideas to ethics, and people have always asked how they should live and how society should be organised fairly. Thus, ethics has grown gradually, shaped by human experiences and the need to think deeply about how to live well with others.

The history of Western ethics can be traced to ancient Greece, where philosophers like Socrates began questioning accepted ways of life. Socrates asked people to give reasons for their moral beliefs and encouraged them to think critically about justice, truth, and goodness. His student Plato introduced the idea that moral values are part of a higher reality and aimed to guide people toward an understanding of the Good. Aristotle, another great thinker, focused on how people should develop good habits (virtues) through practice and reason. His writings formed the foundation for later ethical studies. During the medieval period, Christian thinkers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas combined religious teachings with Greek philosophy. Augustine connected ethics with preparation for eternal life, while Aquinas tried to show how human reason and religious belief could

work together. He brought Aristotle's ideas into Christian thought and formed a complete picture of God, human life, and moral responsibility. Ethics in this period was closely linked with religion and focused on guiding human actions through both faith and reason.

With the beginning of the modern period, ethical thinking underwent significant changes. These changes were influenced by new developments in science, politics, and society. Earlier, ethical ideas were mostly linked with religion or fixed traditions. However, modern thinkers began to ask how human reason, nature, and experience could guide moral decisions. René Descartes focused on the power of reason and the importance of doubt and independent thinking. Thomas Hobbes believed that human beings are naturally self-interested and that moral rules are needed to avoid conflict and maintain peace. John Locke, on the other hand, argued that people have natural rights such as life, liberty, and property, which form the basis of moral and political life. Immanuel Kant provided a new direction by stating that actions should be based on duty and universal moral laws. For Kant, an action is moral not because of its result, but because it is done out of a sense of duty and respect for moral rules that apply to everyone. This shift in ethical thinking marked a move away from authority-based ethics towards more individual and rational approaches.

At the same time, other thinkers offered different views on ethics. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill developed utilitarianism, which posits that the right action is the one that produces the most happiness for the greatest number of people. They believed that moral decisions should be based on the outcomes of actions. This view focuses on results and the overall well-being of individuals. Later, philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx challenged earlier moral ideas. Nietzsche questioned traditional values and introduced the notion that moral rules are shaped by power and culture. Marx saw ethics as connected to economic systems and social class. In the 20th century, ethical discussions expanded into new areas. G.E. Moore explored how language and logic relate to moral statements.

Just as Western philosophy developed its own approaches to questions of right and wrong, Indian thought also produced rich traditions of ethical reflection. In India, ethical ideas were closely linked with spiritual teachings, social duties, and the search for harmony in life. From the teachings of the Buddha to the political wisdom of Kautilya, and later to the moral visions of Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda, Indian ethics presents a variety of perspectives that combine spiritual insight with practical guidance for human life.

The Buddha, for example, explained that the basic cause of human suffering lies in desire, attachment, and ignorance, and he demonstrated that freedom from suffering requires self-discipline and right understanding. To make this practical, he taught the Eightfold Path, which includes right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Each of these paths illustrates how human beings should live in harmony with themselves and with others. For instance, right speech means avoiding lies, gossip, and harsh words, while right livelihood means choosing an occupation that does not harm others. By reducing harmful actions and promoting compassion, one moves closer to peace and liberation. Thus, Buddhist ethics emphasises responsibility, compassion, and mindfulness in everyday life.

Alongside this spiritual view, Indian thought also placed importance on political and social ethics. Kautilya, in his treatise *Arthashastra*, explained that the ruler must always act with the welfare of the people in mind. He believed that a king who acts selfishly or without concern for justice will bring disorder and suffering to society. For Kautilya, good governance was not only about power but also about duty, responsibility, and the protection of the community. This combination of personal morality in Buddhism and social ethics in Kautilya's political thought illustrates the diversity and depth of Indian ethical traditions.

In the modern period, Indian thinkers continued to reflect on the nature of ethics, but their focus included not only individual conduct but also broader social and political issues. Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most important figures in this context. His philosophy of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, was not limited to avoiding physical harm but included respect for truth, justice, and dignity in all human relationships. Gandhi argued that violence, whether physical, verbal, or structural, destroys trust and creates divisions, while non-violence builds unity and understanding. His practice of *satyagraha* demonstrated how moral principles can be used to combat injustice without resorting to hatred or destruction. This approach gave ethics a central role in India's freedom movement and showed how personal values could influence collective struggles. For Gandhi, non-violence was not just a political strategy but a way of life that applied to family, society, and the world. His ideas illustrated that ethics is not only about private morality but also about shaping the character of communities and nations. By connecting non-violence, truth, and social justice, Gandhi presented an ethical system that continues to inspire movements for peace and human rights across the world.

Another important figure in modern Indian thought was Swami Vivekananda. His reflections on ethics were based on the idea that all human beings are interconnected and that the divine is present in every individual. For Vivekananda, this meant that true ethical living requires recognition of the dignity and worth of every person. He emphasised the importance of selfless service (*seva*) as the highest form of moral life. According to him, when one serves others without expecting a reward, one expresses the deeper truth of human unity. Vivekananda also taught that education should develop not only the intellect but also moral strength and character. This vision of ethics included both spiritual and social dimensions: spiritual, because it called for self-realisation and awareness of the divine; social, because it called for action in service of humanity. He also stressed courage, discipline, and self-confidence as necessary virtues for building a responsible individual and a just society.

Today, ethics has expanded to cover many new areas of human life because society, science, and technology continue to change. One important area is human rights, which deals with the basic freedoms and protections that every person is entitled to, such as the right to life, equality, and freedom of expression. Ethical discussions in this field ask how these rights can be respected and protected in different societies. Another important area is environmental ethics, which examines how human beings should treat nature, animals, and the planet as a whole. Questions about pollution, climate change, and the use of natural resources are considered ethical issues because they involve responsibility toward present and future generations. Medical ethics is another field that has become central in modern times. Advances in medicine and biotechnology raise

complex questions about organ transplants, genetic engineering, end-of-life care, and access to health services. Ethical reflection helps people make decisions that respect both human dignity and scientific progress. Global justice is also a key concern, as people today are connected through trade, communication, and migration. Ethical discussions here ask how wealth, opportunities, and responsibilities should be shared fairly across nations and cultures. These developments show that ethics is not fixed but continues to grow with new situations. Still, the goal remains the same: to help people think about their actions and live responsibly with others.

### 1.1.4 Nature and Scope of Ethics

The scope of ethics is broad because it deals with questions of right and wrong in many areas of life. Ethics helps people think clearly about their actions and decisions. It provides guidance not only for individuals but also for society as a whole. As society changes, new problems and questions arise, and ethics develops to address them. For example, modern technologies, changes in the environment, and social issues create new moral questions. Ethics provides a system to think critically and reason morally in such situations. It is not only about following customs but about examining and understanding the values behind actions. Every subject in science and the humanities has its own area of study, and ethics focuses on human conduct, responsibility, and values. Ethics is concerned with the standards and ideals that guide behaviour. These standards help people understand what they ought to do, rather than just describe what they actually do. Ethics is applied in everyday life, and no institution, such as family, school, workplace, or government, can function properly without moral values. Therefore, ethics is necessary for the development and progress of human life and society.

Ethics is closely connected with many other fields of study, such as psychology, biology, sociology, and political science. Each of these disciplines helps us understand different aspects of human life, and ethics adds value by examining what people ought to do, not just what they do. Psychology studies the mind and behaviour, explaining how people make decisions, how emotions influence actions, and how mental processes like motivation and willpower work. Ethics utilises this knowledge to understand the reasons behind human actions. For example, if psychology tells us that anger can lead to violence, ethics helps us decide whether it is right to act on that anger. While psychology is a descriptive or positive science that tells us 'what is,' ethics is a normative science that tells us 'what ought to be.' Similarly, ethics is also related to biology, as human beings have a physical body, and biological needs and conditions often influence behaviour. However, ethics does not stop at biology; it also employs reason and will to determine what is right or wrong. For instance, while hunger is a biological need, stealing food may not be morally acceptable, even if one is hungry. In this way, ethics combines knowledge from other sciences with moral reasoning.

Sociology, which studies society, is another field closely connected to ethics. Human beings are social by nature, and they learn right and wrong from the society in which they live. Customs, traditions, and values shape our moral thinking. For example, in some societies, sharing resources is encouraged, while in others, competition is seen as normal. Ethics helps evaluate these customs to see if they promote justice, equality, and human dignity. Just because a custom is widely accepted does not mean it is morally

right. For instance, certain practices may persist in a society even though they are unfair to some groups. Ethics questions such practices and helps to bring about change by demonstrating why they are wrong. This connection between sociology and ethics is useful in understanding how individuals and groups coexist and how they can build a fairer society.

Ethics is also linked to political science, which studies government, law, and the organisation of society. Politics involves creating rules and systems that maintain order and promote public welfare. Ethics supports this process by providing the moral foundation on which laws and policies should be built. For example, the principle that all people are equal is an ethical idea that underpins democratic systems. While politics focuses on the structure and function of power, ethics reminds us that power should be used responsibly. A political decision may be legal, but not always moral. Ethics helps evaluate whether political actions are just and whether laws protect the rights and dignity of all citizens. It also guides the duties of individuals toward the state and one another. A morally responsible citizen follows laws, participates in civic duties, and treats others with fairness. Ethical values such as honesty, integrity, and respect are essential for the proper functioning of any government. Ethics and politics, therefore, work together to build a system that is both lawful and just.

### 1.1.5 Personal Ethics vs. Social Ethics

Personal ethics refers to the moral principles that guide an individual's actions and decisions in their daily life. These principles, shaped by upbringing, culture, and personal experiences, help individuals decide what is right or wrong for them. For example, a person might choose to always tell the truth because they value honesty, even if it leads to difficult situations. Personal ethics influence choices like helping a friend, keeping promises, or deciding whether to cheat on a test. Simon Blackburn's 'Ethics: A Very Short Introduction' emphasises that personal ethics stem from an individual's sense of responsibility and their understanding of how their actions affect others. However, personal ethics can vary widely, as one person's values might prioritise kindness, while another's might focus on ambition. This variation can lead to conflicts when personal choices impact others, such as deciding whether to share limited resources. By reflecting on their values, individuals can align their actions with their beliefs, fostering integrity.

Social ethics, in contrast, studies how people should behave within a society and what kind of life is good for both individuals and communities. Unlike individual ethics, which focuses on personal decisions in specific situations, social ethics examines how people live together and how their actions affect others. It asks questions such as: what is just? How should people treat one another in everyday life? It goes beyond personal choices and considers the responsibilities we all share as members of society. Social ethics is based on the idea that human life is deeply interconnected. No person lives alone or makes decisions that affect only themselves. For example, when someone decides to follow traffic rules, they are not just protecting themselves but also making the road safer for everyone. Similarly, when people speak out against unfair treatment, they are helping to create a society that respects others. One of the main goals of social ethics is to understand what kind of life is meaningful not only for individuals but for the whole community. It seeks to find ways to improve life by promoting values like cooperation, respect, fairness, and justice.

Traditionally, ethical thinking has centred on individual actions and personal responsibility, mainly asking whether a particular act is right or wrong. However, social ethics points out that this focus on individuals is insufficient to understand or solve broader social problems such as poverty, discrimination, inequality, or environmental damage. These issues are not solely the result of one person's actions but are linked to how society is organised and how decisions are made by groups and institutions. Social ethics prompts us to consider how schools, businesses, governments, and other institutions affect people's lives. It also helps us understand that we have moral responsibilities not only as individuals but also as members of families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and nations. For instance, protecting the environment is not just about what one person does, but also about how society manages its natural resources. Social ethics illustrates how personal actions are connected to larger social systems, encouraging individuals to reflect on how rules are made, how power is used, and how wealth and opportunities are shared. This approach teaches that ethical living includes caring about others, questioning injustice, and working together to improve society.

The tension between personal and social ethics arises when individual values clash with societal expectations. Blackburn highlights that resolving such conflicts requires reasoning and dialogue to find a balance. Personal ethics might compel someone to act according to their conscience, but social ethics demands consideration of how those actions affect the group. For example, someone may strongly believe in the right to free speech and feel that they should be allowed to express whatever they think. However, society may impose limits on speech if it causes harm, such as hate speech that targets certain groups. In such cases, the challenge is to respect personal freedom while also protecting the well-being of others. Finding a balance between individual rights and social responsibilities is an important goal of ethical thinking.

### 1.1.6 Professional Ethics and Environmental Ethics

A profession is more than a way to earn a living; it is a meaningful way of participating in society and contributing to the well-being of others and the environment. Every profession involves certain skills, knowledge, and responsibilities. Through professional education, individuals acquire these abilities, which allow them to engage in activities that help maintain a balanced and harmonious society. For example, farming, teaching, engineering, medicine, and managing public services are all professional activities that support the overall system of human life and nature. However, for a profession to truly contribute to the larger order, it must be carried out with ethical understanding and intention. Professional ethics means using one's skills not just for personal gain, but for the welfare of all. A competent professional is expected to work with understanding, care, and responsibility. They must be aware that their work affects not only themselves and their families but also society and nature. For example, a doctor must be honest with patients, and an engineer must ensure the safety of their designs. An organisation or company must also adhere to ethical values to ensure its work benefits the public and respects all individuals involved. Professionals are expected to uphold these values not only to perform their jobs well but also to protect the image and integrity of their profession. Ethical behaviour in the workplace helps to build strong relationships between professionals and those who depend on them, such as clients, patients, or the public.

Professional ethics can be better understood through real-life dilemmas that professionals often face. For instance, a counsellor may be pressured by parents to reveal private information about their child. Even in such situations, the counsellor is bound by ethics to maintain confidentiality and protect the trust of the client. Another example is that of a doctor who may be offered gifts or incentives from pharmaceutical companies. Accepting such benefits can influence decisions about treatment, but professional ethics requires the doctor to refuse such offers and make decisions solely for the well-being of patients. These examples show that ethics in professions is not only about performing tasks correctly but also about making fair and responsible choices in challenging situations.

Just as professional ethics guides behaviour within a career, environmental ethics extends the idea of responsibility to the way human beings relate to the natural world. It studies the moral principles that shape this relationship and raises important questions about whether it is acceptable to harm nature for economic gain or short-term benefits. There are different approaches in environmental ethics. Some focus only on humans; a human-centred ethic says that decisions should be made based on how they affect people's happiness, safety, or health. Others support an animal-centred ethic, which argues that animals can feel pain and should be treated with care. If pollution harms animals directly, that is morally wrong, even if humans are not harmed. Some believe in a life-centred ethic, which includes all living things, such as plants, animals, and even whole ecosystems, as morally important. Life-centred ethics ask us to consider the impact of human actions on every living thing. Others go further and include non-living things, like rocks or rivers, if they are part of natural systems that deserve respect. A view called ecological holism values entire systems, such as the biosphere or ecosystems. According to this view, even individual plants and animals matter mainly because they help to maintain the balance of the whole environment.

In the present world, environmental ethics has become important for addressing global issues such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and the overuse of natural resources. Human activities like burning fossil fuels, deforestation, and industrial waste are changing the climate and harming ecosystems, which in turn affect human health and livelihoods. Environmental ethics helps people think about these problems not only as scientific or economic challenges but also as moral responsibilities. It asks whether current generations have the right to use resources in a way that leaves future generations with fewer choices. This connects with the idea of sustainability, which means using resources wisely so that both present and future generations can meet their needs. International frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also emphasise ethical responsibilities toward people, the planet, and prosperity. Goals such as clean energy, climate action, responsible consumption, and protection of life on land and below water directly reflect concerns of environmental ethics. By linking moral reasoning to these global efforts, environmental ethics shows how values and choices play a central role in solving urgent environmental problems and creating a fair relationship between humans and nature.

## Recap

- ◆ Ethics is the study of right and wrong in human actions.
- ◆ Moral choices are shaped by family, culture, religion, and education.
- ◆ Ethics affects how people feel after doing right or wrong.
- ◆ It helps individuals reflect on their decisions and values.
- ◆ Ethics is both theoretical and practical in nature.
- ◆ It is a normative science that guides how people ought to behave.
- ◆ Ethics focuses on voluntary human actions with purpose and awareness.
- ◆ It is different from psychology and biology.
- ◆ Sociology and ethics work together to understand social customs and values.
- ◆ Ethics evaluates customs to see if they promote justice and equality.
- ◆ Ethics and political science both deal with fairness in society.
- ◆ Ethical thinking supports democracy and responsible use of power.
- ◆ Personal ethics guide individual behaviour in everyday situations.
- ◆ Social ethics focuses on justice and fairness in communities.
- ◆ Social ethics considers group decisions and responsibilities.
- ◆ Personal and social ethics sometimes conflict and require balance.
- ◆ Ethical reflection helps resolve tension between personal beliefs and social good.
- ◆ A profession is a way to contribute to society, not just to earn a living.
- ◆ Professional ethics requires responsibility, care, and honesty.
- ◆ A professional must consider the impact of their work on others and nature.
- ◆ Ethical workplaces build trust and public confidence.
- ◆ Environmental ethics studies our moral duties toward nature.
- ◆ It includes different views such as human-centred, animal-centred, life-centred, and system-centred.

## Objective Questions

1. What is the main subject of study in ethics?
2. From which Greek word is the term ‘ethics’ derived?
3. Which Latin word is the root of the word ‘moral’?
4. What kind of science is ethics considered?
5. What does normative science deal with?
6. Who believed that moral values belong to a higher reality called the Good?
7. Who said that morality is based on duty and universal moral laws?
8. What ethical theory focuses on producing the greatest happiness for the greatest number?
9. Which philosopher connected ethics with economic systems and class struggles?
10. What is the main concern of social ethics?
11. What is the main cause of conflict between personal and social ethics?
12. What does environmental ethics help us decide?
13. Which view in environmental ethics gives value to entire ecosystems and natural systems?

## Answers

1. Right and wrong in human actions
2. Ethos
3. Mores
4. Normative science
5. What people ought to do
6. Plato
7. Immanuel Kant

8. Utilitarianism
9. Karl Marx
10. Justice and fairness in group life
11. Conflict between individual beliefs and social expectations
12. What is right or wrong in relation to nature
13. Ecological holism

## Assignments

1. Explain how ethics helps individuals make meaningful and responsible choices in daily life.
2. Describe the difference between personal ethics and social ethics with suitable examples.
3. Trace the historical development of ethical thinking from ancient Greece to modern times.
4. Discuss the scope of ethics in relation to psychology, sociology, biology, and political science.
5. Explain the various approaches within environmental ethics and their importance in today's world.

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SGOU



# Moral Reasoning and Major Ethical Theories

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the meaning of moral reasoning and its importance in ethical decision-making
- ◆ identify and explain key ethical principles such as beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice
- ◆ describe the major ethical theories: utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics
- ◆ compare cultural relativism and universal ethics in the context of global and local moral values
- ◆ appreciate the idea of ethical pluralism and apply it to address complex social issues

### Prerequisites

We must decide what is right and wrong, justice, obligation, and values as part of our daily lives. For instance, should I speak the truth even if it injures another person? Should I assist another person even at the cost of my own life? These are ethical issues, and to respond to them well, we require moral reasoning, which is essentially the capacity to critically consider our values and apply them to ordinary situations. Ethics provides us with the concepts and methods to help us do this. Throughout this unit, we will learn about the most significant ethical values governing human conduct, such as doing good, not harming others, honouring people's autonomy, and being fair. We will also explore a few ethical theories philosophers have formulated to respond to the question: What is right or wrong about an action? In today's multicultural world, where people come from different cultures and backgrounds, it is important to be aware of both universal values and cultural diversity in ethics. We will also learn how ethical pluralism helps us arrive at respectful resolutions for complex dilemmas.

## Keywords

Moral Reasoning, Beneficence, Utilitarianism, Deontology, Virtue Ethics, Cultural Relativism, Ethical Pluralism

## Discussion

### 1.2.1 Common Ethical Principles

Ethical principles are moral rules that guide our choices throughout life. Though they do not dictate what to do in every situation, they provide us with a steady basis on which to consider responsible and respectful behaviour. These virtues are generally invoked in professional practices like medicine, teaching, social work, and public service to make the right decisions in morally nuanced situations based on human dignity, trust, and social justice. Even at the interpersonal level, these virtues are vital for maintaining harmony, respect, and responsibility. These values are not only important for guiding action, but they are also crucial for providing a common vocabulary of ethics across institutions and cultures. An appreciation for their importance will foster thoughtful consideration of the ethical dimensions of our choices and strengthen the moral foundations of both individual and communal life.

#### 1.2.1.1 Beneficence

Beneficence is a fundamental aspect of morality that encourages individuals to do more than is necessary to improve the well-being of others. It encompasses positive actions aimed at enhancing the flourishing, happiness, and welfare of fellow human beings. It is not merely the absence of harm. Both at home and in the workplace, beneficence involves acts of kindness and care. It includes actions directed towards bettering the lives of others without expecting anything in return. For example, a teacher may notice a student lagging behind in studies and offer additional tutoring sessions or adjust their teaching methods according to the individual's learning capacity. This is done not merely out of a sense of duty but from a genuine desire to help another person grow and develop.

Beneficence also exists at a societal level, encouraging public service and community care. Humanitarian volunteers, social workers, and caregivers embody this concept as they strive daily to improve the lives of vulnerable or marginalised individuals. Small actions such as reaching out to an elderly neighbour, donating to a relief organisation, or assisting a stranger in distress exemplify how beneficence can be applied. The strength of this principle lies in its anticipation of moral responsibility. It requires us to think beyond our own individual interests and to ask ourselves what we can do to contribute positively to the lives of others. In the medical profession, beneficence is typically realised when a physician chooses a course of treatment not only to heal a disease but also to alleviate suffering and enhance a patient's quality of life. Such practices are motivated by genuine concern for others' welfare and form the foundation of the professional codes of conduct in most occupations. In this way, beneficence is not just a moral principle; it is a call to empathy, engagement, and human community.

### 1.2.1.2 Nonmaleficence

Nonmaleficence is the ethical obligation not to inflict harm upon others. According to the view that avoiding harm is as significant as doing good, this principle serves as an ethical safeguard in personal conduct and professional choices. The old medical aphorism “First, do no harm” encapsulates its philosophy, reminding us that ethical practice often begins with self-restraint. It acknowledges the potential consequences of our actions and requires a deliberate decision to abstain from causing harm, injury, or injustice. This principle is especially pertinent in professions where choices can have immediate and severe consequences. For instance, in business, a company may decide not to launch a product after discovering it is harmful to consumers, even at the cost of profits. This demonstrates respect for public interest over profit.

Nonmaleficence plays a significant role in day-to-day interactions. It involves refraining from passing on hurtful rumours, avoiding biting remarks made in anger, or stepping back from actions that could emotionally wound another person. All these actions reflect the principle. It requires sensitivity to the ripple effects of our actions—not just physical repercussions but also emotional, social, and psychological ones.

Importantly, nonmaleficence compels us to act with caution, thoughtfulness, and kindness, especially when others’ welfare is at stake. It recognises that, although we may not always be able to offer help, we can nearly always avoid causing harm. This guiding principle serves as an ethical compass in difficult decisions. A doctor, for example, may decline to perform a risky surgery if the potential for harm outweighs the possible benefit to the patient. In every case, the ethical choice is to avoid causing unnecessary harm, even in situations where interests may conflict. It serves as a reminder to pause, reflect, and act deliberately to ensure that one does not become a source of harm.

### 1.2.1.3 Autonomy

Autonomy is an ethical principle that respects the freedom of individuals to make choices regarding their own lives, based on their values, beliefs, and perceptions of what is best for them. Autonomy involves recognising the moral agency of each individual, which includes the power to think, choose, and act intentionally. Instead of imposing one’s own will or judgement on others, this principle encourages us to respect individuals’ autonomy to choose their own paths, provided that these choices do not harm others. This principle is particularly significant in medical, educational, and legal contexts. In medicine, for example, a patient may choose to accept or refuse treatment after being informed of the risks and benefits in clear and truthful terms. Even if a physician believes that a particular procedure is in the patient’s best interest, autonomy preserves the ultimate decision for the patient. The ethical obligation extends beyond merely informing; it involves listening and acknowledging the individual’s specific situation, fears, hopes, and values.

Autonomy exists in many forms in daily life. A father or mother can allow his or her adolescent child to decide their own career path instead of following a family legacy. In friendships and corporate ventures, autonomy is essential for building mutual respect. Respect for autonomy is not about abandoning care or withholding advice; it is about reconciling help with respect for independence. It is about accepting that others have different perspectives on the world and will make choices that differ from our own.

This is not always straightforward, especially when we are concerned about someone making a choice we do not want or do not understand. However, autonomy invites us to act humbly, to listen rather than to overpower, and to respect the dignity in everyone's freedom of choice. By respecting autonomy, we help create a more civil, more plural society in which people are trusted to sort things out for themselves and take care of themselves with reflective liberty.

#### **1.2.1.4 Justice**

Justice, as a moral ideal, is the human desire for fairness, equality, and respect. It requires that people be treated as equals, that benefits and burdens be shared fairly, and that institutions and systems maintain the rights of all, regardless of background, identity, or social status. It is important to note that justice is not just a question of legal rightness; it is a more profound ethical duty to ensure that everyone receives what they are entitled to, by merit, need, and general human dignity. Justice finds expression in institutional and individual choices. Take the case of a university offering scholarships based on merit and economic need. Such a policy demonstrates a commitment to fairness without advantaging any group. In law as well, justice demands neutral trials and equal treatment of everyone under the law. This reminds us that no one is above or below the rules that bind society.

Justice also plays out in the ordinary moments of life. In the workplace, it might inform equal hiring and compensation for equal work. In relationships, it manifests in how we divide responsibilities and acknowledge one another's efforts without bias. More generally, justice challenges us to confront structural inequalities and discriminatory patterns that are too often entrenched in economic, cultural, or institutional structures. It calls us to reflect on how privilege and disadvantage are produced and reproduced. Being just is not always convenient or easy; it frequently involves speaking out for change, challenging customary ways, and asserting the rights of those whose voices go unheard.

Justice reinforces the social fabric by promoting trust, belonging, and respect. Justice ensures individuals that they are equal in value, not just in the eyes of the law but also in daily relationships. Any society that desires to become moral, merciful, and genuinely democratic must maintain justice.

#### **1.2.2 Major Ethical Theories**

While the moral principles discussed above, such as justice, autonomy, and beneficence, give general moral guidance, moral theories provide more formal ways of explaining why specific actions are right or wrong. They offer answers to more fundamental questions regarding the nature of morality itself. What is it that makes an action good? The answer depends on the specific ethical theory we use to respond. Philosophers have developed varying theories, each highlighting a different factor in ethical decision-making. The following sections lay out three of the most significant ethical theories in the Western tradition: Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Virtue Ethics. Each offers its unique perspective through which we can view moral issues and make ethical judgments, and each has its strengths and weaknesses as well as pragmatic applications.

### 1.2.2.1 Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is one of the important ethical theories of modern moral philosophy. Its foundation is the principle that the goodness or badness of an action depends on its outcome. Utilitarianism holds that an action is right if it maximises pleasure or welfare for the largest number of people. This theory judges the moral value of an act by its outcomes instead of grounding judgment on intentions, obligations, or character. The main issue is to achieve maximum overall good and minimise evil.

The history of utilitarian philosophy is most commonly traced back to the work of two English thinkers of the 19th century, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Bentham famously introduced the idea that happiness and suffering are the measures of good and bad. He developed a kind of “moral calculus” to determine the value of the results of different actions. Mill expanded on Bentham’s ideas, placing emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of happiness. He advocated for the greater good of society over the long term.

Utilitarian insights are widely applied to public policy and ethical decision-making. For example, consider the following case: when the government is deciding whether to construct a luxury airport to accommodate foreign tourists or a public hospital to provide basic care to low-income citizens, a utilitarian would prioritise the hospital based on the belief that access to health is good for the greatest number. This would result in a greater aggregate level of well-being.

Utilitarianism is typically divided into two broad categories: Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism. Act Utilitarianism considers the isolated action itself and inquires whether that particular action will create maximum good in a situation. Rule Utilitarianism holds that we ought to abide by general moral rules. For example, rules like “tell the truth” and “don’t steal” must necessarily be followed, as these rules, if consistently adhered to, bring maximum good in the long run.

Utilitarianism is a compelling theory because it is concerned with the common good over our own self-interest. However, the theory invites criticism. If maximising the happiness of the majority reduces the happiness of some, then what do we do? How do we compare various sorts of happiness? How do we ensure equality in the distribution of good things in such a situation? Even in the face of such difficulties, utilitarianism remains a strong and insightful theory of morality, particularly in situations where moral judgments need to be made on a grand, societal level.

### 1.2.2.2 Deontology

Deontology is a theory of ethics that assesses the goodness or badness of an action based on whether it conforms to some duty, rule, or principle, “irrespective of the outcomes of that action.” The Greek word *deon* means “duty.” According to this view, there are specific actions that are required or morally prohibited because they are based on universal moral requirements that are applicable to all rational agents.

One of the most famous deontological ethicists is the 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. According to Kant, morality must be grounded in reason and in the capacity of human beings as rational agents to discern and act on moral demands. The

heart of Kant's moral theory is the Categorical Imperative, a fundamental principle that he formulated to determine whether an action is moral. Its best-known formulation is: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." Before acting, one should inquire: What would happen if everyone were to do this? If the action would result in contradiction or societal disintegration when combined as a collective rule, such as promise-breaking, cheating, or lying, then it could not be justified morally. A good example of deontological reasoning is telling the truth. If telling a lie could avoid trouble or steer clear of immediate harm, a utilitarian might consider lying acceptable in that case if it were preferable in general. But a deontologist would assert that telling the truth is morally obligatory and that lying is always wrong. This perspective reminds us that human beings are not mere instruments for achieving outcomes but ends in themselves who are worthy of respect and dignity.

Deontology has its challenges. For example, what should one do when there seems to be a clash of obligations? When the obligation to be honest conflicts with the obligation not to allow a person to be harmed? It raises the question of whether always adhering to rules leads to morally bad outcomes. Even in the face of such dilemmas, deontology remains a useful ethical theory. It deals with moral character, right action, and the understanding that goodness is being right in and of itself.

### 1.2.2.3 Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is a theory of morality that focuses on the moral agent's character rather than the rules obeyed or the outcomes of actions. Rather than inquiring whether an act is right or wrong *per se*, virtue ethics inquires whether the act is typical of the virtues in a good person. For Aristotle, this position holds that a good life is composed of habituating virtues such as honesty, courage, kindness, patience, and wisdom. Ultimately, all this should lead one to a state of *eudaimonia*, or flourishing as a human being.

Just as one develops ability as a musician by playing regularly, one develops justice, courage, or generosity by acting justly, courageously, or generously on a regular basis, according to Aristotle. It requires practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which is the ability to determine what to do in a given situation. The virtuous individual is able to act correctly under the conditions of the situation at hand. For instance, a student may not cheat on a test simply because honesty is his or her nature. A person may be patient when faced with a severe problem, not in anticipation of some external reward, but because he has come to see the value in remaining calm and prudent in his actions. These are manifestations of an individual's character.

Though virtue ethics itself never provides final answers to individual problems, its significance lies in its general understanding of ethical life. It informs us that ethics is not just a matter of isolated right actions, but a matter of being a certain kind of person who is constantly striving towards moral goodness.

### 1.2.3 Cultural Relativism vs. Universal Ethics

As the world becomes more interconnected, we are presented with a set of assumptions about morality, practices, and beliefs that stem from different histories, religions, and traditions. To one society, what is right—such as eating habits, gender roles, or punishment—may

be problematic or wrong to others. These distinctions pose a fundamental question in ethics: Are moral values universal, binding on all people everywhere in all cultures? Or are they relative, specified only by the norms of any given society? This section introduces two positions: Cultural Relativism and Universal Ethics, which answer this question differently.

### 1.2.3.1 Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is the assumption that moral standards and ethical values are constructed by the beliefs, customs, and social practices of the involved cultures. On this view, what is “right” in one culture will be “wrong” in another because moral “truth” takes its distinctive shape from culture. There is no single moral code that is objectively binding on all human beings anywhere; rather, each culture determines its own right and wrong.

This concept is evident when we examine particular instances. It is standard practice in some cultures to eat beef, but wrong in others, especially in those that have religious beliefs that revere cows. Similarly, wedding customs, fashion trends, gender roles, and expressions of respect also vary widely across cultures. Cultural relativism allows us to see the differences without having to judge them by our own cultural standards. It encourages individuals to develop an open-minded approach to foreign traditions instead of a judgmental attitude, helping to avoid ethnocentrism and cultural arrogance.

One of the primary criticisms against cultural relativism is that it may be used to justify or excuse harmful practices on the grounds that they are traditional. For example, practices such as child marriage, caste discrimination, or the subordination of women are deeply ingrained in several cultures. These are serious ethical concerns from the perspective of human rights and human dignity. If all moral values are relative to cultures, it is difficult to assert that any practice is repressive or brutal.

Cultural relativism is not a clear-cut method of dealing with disagreements over morals or of making a case for social change. If all cultural practices are considered equally valid, it becomes practically impossible to discuss justice, equality, or human welfare across cultural lines. However, cultural relativism instructs us to be respectful of cultures and reminds us that moral judgments tend to be situated within social and historical contexts.

### 1.2.3.2 Universal Ethics

Universal ethics is the view that there are certain values to which all human beings are bound, irrespective of their religion, social customs, or culture. Contrary to the relativistic point of view, which holds that morality differs across societies, universal ethics asserts that there are certain fundamental values such as justice, fairness, respect, and the preservation of human life. The principles of these values do not vary based on cultural contexts. This view has been applied in global human rights documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, reaffirming values such as the right to life, freedom from torture, equality before the law, and freedom of thought and expression. These are universal rights that all human beings share by virtue of their common humanity.

Proponents of universal ethics argue that it provides the foundation necessary for justice in the world as well as for human dignity. In an international context where

individuals, particularly minorities, women, and marginalised groups, can be abused or excluded in the name of cultural tradition, universal ethics offers a system of protection and responsibility. It insists that some norms must be upheld despite customary practices, especially when those practices violate basic human rights. Furthermore, universal ethics provides us with a global language for communication and cooperation. It strengthens the belief that, despite cultural diversity, we have a shared ethical framework that enables us to collaborate in finding solutions to common issues such as poverty, violence, inequality, and environmental degradation. It enhances solidarity and accountability towards one another in a global society.

This view is not without objections. Some critics believe that what has been offered as “universal” is often compromised by Western philosophical traditions and may lack the cultural and moral values of non-Western groups. A universal standard imposed upon others may be interpreted as cultural domination or moral imperialism, particularly when utilised as a basis for justifying intervention or censorship by some external authority. Other critics warn that universal ethics, if practised without addressing cultural specificities, can overlook the value of local traditions and group identities. The challenge lies in maintaining central moral values without sacrificing the richness of cultural diversity.

### 1.2.4 Ethical Pluralism

Ethical decision-making in real life is rarely straightforward. While textbook exercises indicate clear-cut rights and wrongs, we are usually faced with more complex situations. Ethical pluralism is the assumption that there exists no single moral theory or principle that can explain or settle all ethical issues. It assumes that multiple moral values are all viable and essential, even though they may at times conflict. Unlike moral absolutism, which holds that one principle must be applied to every instance, or moral relativism, which claims that all views are equal, ethical pluralism is more balanced. It posits that different ethical positions can offer valuable insights and that the moral landscape is too nuanced to be dictated by a single rule or method.

This view encourages us to exercise humility, flexibility, and thoughtful action when making ethical choices. However, when values are in tension—such as in situations where telling the truth would be hurtful, or where upholding individual rights threatens collective well-being—ethical pluralism does not provide an easy response. Instead, it calls us to consider the context and what is at stake, and to search for the possibility of open communication. Ethical pluralism guides us toward the most reasonable and justifiable response to a given situation.

#### 1.2.4.1 Why Ethical Pluralism Is Important?

In our interconnected, diverse, and ever-changing world, ethical choices are seldom simple. Ethical pluralism is important because it offers a reflective means of addressing such complexity. It promotes open-mindedness and respect for different perspectives, recognising that no single rule or ethical theory can resolve every moral issue. This approach is particularly relevant in applied domains such as medicine, where physicians must balance beneficence (doing good) against respecting patients’ preferences (autonomy); in politics, where justice and equity must be combined with freedoms such as freedom of speech; and in technology, where innovation must be weighed against privacy concerns, consent, and security.

An illustration of ethical pluralism can be found in public health policy. Suppose a government chooses to monitor mobile phone records to control an outbreak of disease. One perspective views this as a public good: it saves lives and halts the spread of disease. However, another perspective sees it as an intrusion on individual privacy and autonomy, as personal information can be accessed without consent. Ethical pluralism does not provide a straightforward answer but encourages us to seek a considered compromise. In such a situation, perhaps permitting data tracking with defined boundaries and robust privacy protections would be the solution. In this way, ethical pluralism encourages us to think through our options and select a course of action that respects multiple moral concerns.

## Recap

- ◆ Moral reasoning helps us decide what is right or wrong in real-life situations.
- ◆ Ethics is based on core principles that guide our actions and judgments.
- ◆ Beneficence means doing good and promoting the well-being of others.
- ◆ Nonmaleficence is the duty to avoid causing harm to people.
- ◆ Autonomy emphasises the importance of respecting individual choices.
- ◆ Justice refers to fairness, equality, and giving each person their due.
- ◆ Utilitarianism judges actions by the happiness or benefit they produce for the majority.
- ◆ Deontology focuses on following moral duties and rules regardless of outcomes.
- ◆ Virtue ethics highlights the role of character and moral habits in ethical living.
- ◆ Cultural relativism holds that moral values vary between societies and must be understood in context.
- ◆ Universal ethics argues that some moral principles apply to all humans everywhere.
- ◆ Ethical pluralism accepts that different moral values can be valid and seeks balance between them.

## Objective Questions

1. What is moral reasoning?
2. Name one principle that encourages doing good.
3. What principle states that we should not harm others?
4. Which principle defends personal choice?
5. What does the principle of justice focus on?
6. Which ethical theory is based on outcomes and happiness?
7. Who is a key thinker behind utilitarianism?
8. What ethical theory is based on duties and rules?
9. Who developed the idea of the categorical imperative?
10. What does virtue ethics emphasise?
11. Which thinker is most associated with virtue ethics?
12. What is cultural relativism?
13. What does universal ethics support?
14. What is ethical pluralism?

## Answers

1. Thinking carefully about what is right and wrong.
2. Beneficence.
3. Nonmaleficence.
4. Autonomy.
5. Fairness and equal treatment.
6. Utilitarianism.
7. Jeremy Bentham (or John Stuart Mill).
8. Deontology.
9. Immanuel Kant.

10. Good character and moral habits.
11. Aristotle.
12. The idea that morality depends on cultural beliefs.
13. The idea that some moral values apply to all humans.
14. The belief that more than one moral value can be valid.

## Assignments

1. Define ethical pluralism and explain how it helps in resolving conflicts between different moral values in society.
2. What is cultural relativism? How does it differ from universal ethics? Discuss with examples.
3. Compare and contrast the ethical theories of utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Which one do you find most relevant today, and why?
4. Explain the four common ethical principles: beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice, with suitable examples from daily life.

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SGOU



## Social Ethics

# UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

After completing this unit, the learners will be able to:

- ◆ gain knowledge about the role of social ethics in society
- ◆ identify ethical issues in social interactions
- ◆ learn how social ethics is a part of applied ethics that solves real-world problems using moral values

### Prerequisites

The concept of social ethics from applied philosophy explains how moral principles guide people's behaviour in public life. It examines how we decide right or wrong, not just as individuals, but also as members of a society, a nation, and the global community. The goal is to help students understand the moral values that shape everyday interactions, such as responsibility, fairness, justice, and dignity. The concept also introduces the ideas behind these values and shows how they are used in real-life situations, including government policies, poverty, inequality, and workplace justice. It encourages young learners to see ethical thinking not just as something found in textbooks or religious traditions, but as a practical tool for creating a fairer and more equal society for everyone.

### Keywords

Social Ethics, Applied Ethics, Theory, Practice, Social Interaction

## Discussion

### 1.3.1 Social Ethics: Theory and Practice

Social ethics is the study of how moral values guide the way people behave and interact in society. It includes both theories, the ideas of right and wrong, and the practice of how these ideas are applied in real life. Social ethics encourages us to think deeply about important values such as justice, fairness, human dignity, and the common good. It connects moral thinking with action by guiding how individuals, organisations, and communities should behave. Social ethics reflects the shared values, beliefs, and behaviours of a society or group. These common standards help people decide what is fair or unfair, right or wrong, in their interactions. Although moral values may differ across cultures, many, such as honesty, kindness, and justice, are respected worldwide. For example, most societies admire generosity, courage, and compassion, while condemning actions like murder, stealing, and lying. Some scholars believe that this shared sense of morality comes from the idea that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), which gives people an inner awareness of right and wrong.

Social ethics is a branch of applied ethics that deals with real-world moral issues. It focuses on practical concerns such as wealth distribution, human rights, animal welfare, abortion, euthanasia, discrimination, crime and punishment, and war and peace. Social ethicists aim to analyse these issues from a moral perspective and explore ethically sound ways to address them. Their goal is to promote justice and fairness for the common good. There are two main approaches to social ethics:

- 1. Institutional Approach:** Focuses on the moral principles that should guide society, especially the actions of large institutions like governments and corporations. It examines how systems and structures can be made more ethical.
- 2. Social Nature of Ethics:** Recognises that while many societies value honesty and compassion, their interpretations vary widely. For example, in liberal democracies, justice often emphasises individual rights, while in socialist or religious states, it may emphasise community welfare or divine law. This raises an important question: Are social ethics truly universal, or always filtered through cultural contexts?

#### 1.3.1.1 Social Ethics in Practice

Social ethics is crucial for addressing major issues that affect individuals and communities, such as poverty, inequality, corruption, violence, and injustice. These problems often prevent people from living dignified, secure, and fulfilling lives. Social ethics encourages us to view these challenges not only from political or practical perspectives but also from a moral perspective. It raises important questions such as: Is this law fair? Is this policy equitable for everyone? Are individuals treated with respect and dignity? For example, social ethics prompts governments to reflect on whether laws related to healthcare, education, or wages are fair to all citizens, or whether they exclude certain groups. It helps us examine who benefits and who suffers, and whether the outcomes are morally acceptable. In this way, social ethics goes beyond abstract theory and becomes a practical guide for ethical living and decision-making.

Social ethics also plays a vital role in professional life. People in positions of responsibility, such as teachers, doctors, police officers, business leaders, and social workers, often face difficult choices. They must balance moral values, professional goals, and institutional rules. Social ethics helps them make thoughtful decisions that uphold justice, compassion, and human dignity. Ultimately, it inspires citizens and leaders to build a society where equality, fairness, and justice are not just ideals but are actively practised in daily life.

### **1.3.1.2 The Theory Behind Social Ethics**

The theory of social ethics provides the foundation for resolving social issues and helps us understand the principles that govern human behaviour. These principles come from multiple sources, including religious teachings (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and others) and philosophical systems such as utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics. This ethical framework allows us to ask deeper questions, such as: What makes an action right or wrong? Why is justice essential? How can we balance individual freedom with the common good?

By critically analysing these questions, we gain the ability to challenge unjust systems, propose moral alternatives, and make responsible choices. Key moral values such as accountability, equality, and freedom have a direct impact on how we design institutions, create laws, and interact socially: a) Equality ensures that everyone has the same rights and opportunities. b) Freedom affirms each person's right to make their own life choices. c) Accountability reminds us to take responsibility for the consequences of our actions. These principles are not just theoretical; they shape real-world decision-making and social norms. The ultimate goal of social ethics theory is both to explain how society functions and to guide its development. It empowers individuals and groups to build a world that is more moral, just, and compassionate.

### **1.3.2 Social Ethics as Applied Ethics**

Social ethics is one of the most important subfields of applied ethics, which involves applying moral principles to practical issues. While general ethics may focus on personal behaviour (such as telling the truth or keeping promises), applied ethics extends those values to societal problems. Social ethics addresses moral issues that affect entire communities or organisations. Examples include the fair distribution of wealth and resources, access to healthcare and education, human rights and labour practices, environmental justice, and equality for underrepresented groups. These issues are often complex because they involve conflicting values and interests. Because of its practical focus, social ethics has a direct impact on public life, institutional reform, and policymaking. It guides legislators, educators, religious leaders, business professionals, and activists in making ethical, informed decisions.

For instance, when governments design social welfare programmes or tackle racial discrimination in the legal system, they can apply the principles of social ethics. In this way, social ethics acts as a bridge between moral theory and practical action. It provides a framework for analysing social problems and developing fair, compassionate, and reasonable solutions that benefit both individuals and society.

### 1.3.3 Ethical Considerations in Social Interactions

Ethical considerations in social interactions refer to how values such as trust, justice, respect, equality, collaboration, and accountability influence the behaviour of individuals, groups, and organisations. These principles are crucial in personal life, professional environments, inter-business relations, and in the management of shared resources.

- A. Collaboration and Equitable Distribution in Collective Work** In many settings, families, coalitions, partnerships, or political alliances, people work together to achieve shared goals. An ethical dilemma often arises in how rewards are distributed. If individuals focus only on maximising their own share, overall outcomes suffer. But when participants act with mutual respect and trust, everyone benefits more. Values like reciprocity, fairness, and concern for others' well-being lead to better results and longer-lasting cooperation.
- B. Employer–Employee Relations** The relationship between an employer and employee is more than a business contract; it is an ongoing interaction based on shared expectations. Employees' sense of fair treatment directly affects their motivation and performance. Fair compensation and safe, positive working conditions foster loyalty, trust, and productivity. In contrast, neglect, exploitation, or discrimination can result in dissatisfaction, low performance, or even sabotage. Therefore, values such as accountability, fairness, and dignity are essential for organisational success and employee satisfaction.
- C. Trust Among Employees** Employee relationships also require ethical behaviour. Mutual respect, trust, and non-discrimination are essential for teamwork and workplace harmony. This is especially important in diverse environments where people of different backgrounds work together. Unethical practices such as favouritism or discrimination damage collaboration and reduce efficiency. Promoting equality and inclusivity strengthens teamwork and builds a healthy work culture.
- D. Interactions Among Businesses** Businesses operating in the same sector or region can grow significantly by sharing knowledge and cooperating ethically. Many successful industrial zones have advanced through collaboration rooted in trust and honesty. On the other hand, rivalry and selfishness can block progress. By following principles such as transparency, fairness, and community spirit, businesses can create social capital and achieve mutual success.
- E. Ethical Management of Common Resources** Communities often depend on shared resources like fisheries, forests, grazing lands, and water bodies. When used selfishly, these resources are quickly depleted, a situation known as the "tragedy of the commons." Some suggest privatisation as a solution, but traditional communities have often protected resources through trust, accountability, and long-term cooperation. Imposing external ownership can disrupt these systems and create inefficiency or conflict. The most sustainable approach is ethical stewardship, where communities collectively take responsibility for preserving shared resources fairly and responsibly.

### 1.3.4 Case Studies of the Intersection of Ethics and Social Issues

When social ethics are applied to real-life situations affecting people's rights, dignity, and well-being, they gain meaningful significance. Although the original material does not include formal case studies, it provides practical examples of how moral reasoning applies to pressing social issues. Each example illustrates how ethical reflection guides fair and compassionate decision-making in society.

#### Case Study 1: Public Policy and Social Justice

Government policies in areas like healthcare, education, and minimum wages affect people's everyday lives. Social ethics helps us judge these policies not just by what is legal or profitable, but by asking: Are they fair? Do they respect the dignity of all people? Do they benefit everyone, especially the poor and marginalised? If a policy ignores these questions, it may create injustice. For example:

Healthcare: Imagine a government hospital that gives advanced treatment only in cities. People in villages may have to travel far or may not get treatment at all. This is unfair because health is a basic need for everyone, not only for city residents.

Education: Suppose good schools are available only for children from rich families, while poor children get low-quality education. This means equal opportunity is denied, since a child's future should not depend on their parents' income.

Minimum Wages: If workers are paid very low wages that do not meet basic living needs, it violates their dignity. Fair wages are necessary so that people can live with self-respect. Think of a tree. Its roots must give food and strength to all branches, not just one side. If only one side of the tree gets nourishment, the whole tree will become weak. Similarly, society is strong only when public policies support all groups of people, not just the privileged.

#### Case Study 2: Poverty and Inequality

Inequality and poverty are among the biggest moral problems in the world today, as millions of people still lack food, safe housing, medical care, and education. Social ethics asks us to see poverty not just as statistics, but as human suffering, raising questions about whether people's rights and dignity are respected and whether the economic system benefits everyone or mainly the powerful few. Poverty is not only about lack of money but also about society's failure to be fair and just, with causes rooted in structural injustice such as unfair land distribution, lack of education, gender discrimination, and systems that keep certain groups disadvantaged. However, some critics argue that poverty is also tied to individual responsibility, noting that welfare programmes, while necessary, can sometimes reduce motivation to work or create dependence. This debate highlights the challenge of designing policies that provide safety nets without discouraging effort and self-reliance. Social ethics calls for a balanced approach: tackling structural injustices through reforms like land redistribution, equal education, healthcare for all, and gender equality, while also empowering individuals with skills, job opportunities, and incentives to work. Thus, poverty and inequality are not just economic problems but moral failures,

and a just society must combine strong institutions with personal responsibility to ensure dignity, fairness, and equal opportunities for all.

### Case Study 3: Corruption and Violence

Anti-corruption laws exist in many countries, yet their enforcement is often weak due to entrenched interests that protect the powerful. This weakness allows corruption and violence to remain serious problems that harm communities, erode trust, and weaken institutions. Corruption undermines moral values by prioritising personal gain over the common good, whether in public services, business, or politics. Similarly, violence—whether structural, systemic, or physical—violates human rights and threatens peace and security. Social ethics requires that leaders and institutions be held accountable for their actions and questions whether current systems genuinely promote justice and transparency or merely shield those in power. To be an ethical leader means being honest, responsible, and committed to the welfare of all. Applying an ethical framework to fight corruption and violence involves building institutions that are not only legally sound and efficient but also morally upright and trustworthy. This includes implementing strong anti-corruption measures, promoting peaceful conflict resolution, and investing in civic education that fosters ethical behaviour and public responsibility.

### Case study 4: Workplace Ethics

The workplace is one of the most important settings where ethical dilemmas arise. In many modern businesses, the drive to maximise shareholder profit often takes priority over protecting worker dignity. This reveals a deep conflict between ethics and capitalism. For example, employers may focus on cutting costs rather than ensuring fair wages, safe working conditions, and respect for employee rights. Social ethics evaluates such workplace practices by asking key questions: Do employees receive fair compensation? Are their rights and dignity protected? Do they work in a safe and respectful environment? When workers are treated ethically, they feel valued, which fosters motivation, trust, and productivity. However, unethical practices—such as discrimination, exploitation, or unsafe environments—can lead to dissatisfaction, burnout, and even protests. This case highlights the need for businesses to move beyond profit-driven models and embrace social ethics by prioritising justice, compassion, and mutual respect. Creating inclusive and fair workplaces not only resolves the tension between profit and dignity but also benefits both employees and organisations in the long run.

## Recap

- ◆ Social ethics studies how moral values guide behaviour and connect thinking with real-life actions.
- ◆ Social ethics deals with moral issues and seeks fair solutions for the common good.
- ◆ Both personal actions and social institutions shape an ethical society.

- ◆ Social ethics guides us to solve problems by questioning fairness, justice, and dignity.
- ◆ Social ethics guides fair and compassionate decisions in daily life.
- ◆ Social ethics helps us understand moral values and solve social issues using ideas from religion and philosophy.
- ◆ Social ethics helps us fight injustice and build a fair, caring society based on equality, freedom, and responsibility.
- ◆ Social ethics focuses on moral issues that affect communities, like justice and equality.
- ◆ Social ethics helps solve social problems and create fair policies.
- ◆ Ethical values guide fair and cooperative social interactions.
- ◆ Trust and fairness in collaboration lead to better, lasting results.
- ◆ Fairness and respect at work build trust and boost performance.
- ◆ Respect and fairness among employees promote teamwork and harmony.
- ◆ Trust and honesty help businesses grow together.
- ◆ Shared resources thrive with ethical, community-based care.

## Objective Questions

1. What does social ethics mainly study?
2. Which is a universal value respected in most cultures?
3. What is the goal of social ethicists?
4. Which one is an example of a shared resource?
5. What does the “tragedy of the commons” mean?

## Answers

1. Moral values in society
2. Justice
3. To find moral ways to solve social problems

4. Grazing land
5. Overuse of shared resources by individuals.

## Assignments

1. What is meant by the term applied ethics?
2. Describe any three ethical values that influence social interactions.
3. Why is fairness important in cooperation?
4. How does social ethics help us evaluate laws or government policies?
5. Explain the concept of social ethics. How does it combine theory and practice to address real-life moral challenges?
6. Is social ethics different from applied ethics? Discuss with reasons and examples.
7. Discuss the ethical implications of poverty and inequality. How can social ethics guide the formulation of just and compassionate responses?
8. How does social ethics shape professional behaviour in the workplace? Use examples from employer-employee relations and co-worker interactions.

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## Suggested Reading

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SGOU



**BLOCK**

# Human Rights and Social Justice

SGOU



# Human Rights

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ trace the historical evolution of human rights across societies and civilisations
- ◆ define the concept of human rights and explain the right to life, liberty, and security
- ◆ critically evaluate the debate between universality and cultural relativism
- ◆ understand the ethical foundations for equal social, economic, and political rights

### Prerequisites

*“To deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.” - Nelson Mandela*

In 2003, deep within the forests of Muthanga in Kerala, a quiet protest rose from the voices of the forgotten. Hundreds of tribal families, who had lived close to the land for generations, were tired of waiting for the most basic right they had been promised: land to live and farm on. For years, the government had assured them that this land would come. But as the promises remained unfulfilled and poverty worsened, the families moved into the protected forest. They did not go there to rebel, but to reclaim their dignity and survival. They built makeshift homes, hoping to live peacefully on the land that was rightfully theirs.

What followed was a tragic turning point. Instead of opening a dialogue or addressing their demands with compassion, the state responded with force. Police stormed the area, burning down huts, arresting protesters, and firing live bullets. In the chaos, a tribal protester and a police officer lost their lives. Families fled in fear while children watched their homes and hopes go up in flames. Many who had stood

up for their rights were imprisoned, and even today, most of the families have still not received the land they were promised.

The Muthanga incident is more than just a moment of protest. It is a significant human rights concern that raises critical questions about the right to housing, the right to life and safety, the freedom to protest peacefully, and the right to be treated equally under the law. When governments fail to uphold these rights, the most vulnerable suffer the most. In studying human rights, Muthanga reminds us that rights are not just ideals written on paper; they are promises that must be honoured in people's daily lives. Justice requires not only laws but empathy, fairness, and accountability. The forest of Muthanga still echoes with a call for justice, a call that asks all of us to listen, reflect, and act.

## Keywords

Human Rights, Dignity, UDHR, Natural Rights, Cultural Relativism, Social Justice

## Discussion

What does it mean to live with dignity? What makes a society just or unjust? These are central questions in the study of social ethics, and they are deeply connected to the idea of *human rights*. Human rights represent the shared belief that every person deserves to be treated with fairness, respect, and compassion simply because they are human. These rights form the foundation of a just society, guiding how we care for one another and how institutions should protect individuals from harm and injustice.

Human rights are more than legal claims; they reflect ethical values like equality, responsibility, and the worth of every human life. Social ethics helps us explore why these rights matter, how they should be applied, and what happens when they are denied. As the world changes, new challenges—from inequality and discrimination to environmental harm and digital surveillance—remind us that human rights must constantly be re-examined and defended.

In this unit, we will explore how the concept of human rights has evolved through history, how it relates to moral principles and ethical reasoning, and why ensuring equal rights for all remains one of the most important goals for any society. By connecting ethical ideas with real-world struggles for justice, you will gain the tools to think critically, act responsibly, and imagine a more inclusive and humane world.

### 2.1.1 Human Rights

Human rights are the essential freedoms and protections that every person is entitled to simply because they are human. These include the right to life, education, and healthcare, freedom of thought and expression, and protection from unfair treatment or harm. They are meant to ensure that all people can live with dignity, equality, and security. Although

in the past such rights were often reserved for certain groups based on power, wealth, or status, the modern understanding of human rights is that they belong to everyone regardless of their caste, gender, religion, nationality, or background. While some believe that human rights should be adapted to fit local cultures and traditions, others argue that they are universal and must apply equally to all people, everywhere. In a deep sense, human rights reflect our shared ethical commitment to fairness, justice, and respect for human dignity.

## 2.1.2 Historical Evolution of Human Rights

The idea that all people should be treated fairly and with respect has existed in many forms throughout history. Even though we now use the term *human rights*, people in different cultures and religions have long spoken about justice, kindness, and the protection of the weak. Ancient civilisations developed laws that sought to regulate fairness, and religious traditions emphasised compassion and moral duty. These values shaped how societies thought about dignity and responsibility, and they became the foundation for later movements demanding rights. The modern understanding of human rights was strongly influenced by events such as the American and French Revolutions. These revolutions declared liberty and equality as the foundation of society, inspiring democratic ideals across the world. Yet, the reality was far more limited. Women, enslaved people, and colonised populations were excluded from these early promises of equality. In fact, many revolutions that spoke of universal rights also created or preserved new forms of inequality, showing that rights were often defined by power and privilege rather than true inclusiveness.

This contradiction was challenged by critical thinkers and reformers. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women's exclusion from equality was unjust and insisted that women deserved education and citizenship. Frantz Fanon exposed how colonialism denied colonised peoples their dignity and humanity, calling for liberation as an ethical act. In India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar highlighted how caste oppression and colonial rule together destroyed justice, and he demanded equality, education, and social reform as essential parts of freedom. These struggles show that the history of human rights is not a smooth or simple story but one shaped by resistance and by the expansion of dignity to all people without exception.

### 2.1.2.1 Ancient and Religious Origins

The idea of human rights, namely fairness, safety, and dignity for all people, has existed in different ways for thousands of years. Even in ancient times, people created rules to protect others, especially those who were weaker or poorer. One of the oldest examples comes from Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), where King Hammurabi made a set of laws around 1754 BCE. These laws, written on a tall stone pillar, helped ensure that justice was not just based on the king's wishes. While the punishments were not always equal for everyone, the code introduced important ideas like fairness, the need for proof in court, and rules for judges. It also included the principle of *lex talionis*, or "an eye for an eye," which meant that punishments should match the harm caused and not be too harsh or too lenient. This helped prevent personal revenge and made the law more fair and predictable. It helped replace unfair, random punishments with more organised and

written laws. Yet, these laws also reflected social hierarchies, with punishments differing for nobles, commoners, and slaves.

In ancient Persia, a ruler named Cyrus the Great created what many call the first human rights charter, known as the *Cyrus Cylinder*. After conquering new lands, he allowed people to keep their religions, speak their own languages, and return to their homelands. In India, Emperor Ashoka, after witnessing the suffering caused by the Kalinga War, chose to rule with kindness instead of violence. He followed Buddhist teachings and urged people to live with peace, tolerance, and respect. He also ensured the poor, servants, and even animals were treated with care. These early leaders demonstrated that ethical values like peace and fairness could shape how a society is governed. However, even such rulers operated within systems that accepted inequality, showing that justice was not equally shared by all.

Great thinkers from ancient times also helped shape our understanding of justice. In Greece and Rome, philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle discussed how laws should help people live good and meaningful lives. Roman thinkers introduced the idea of *natural law*, which refers to the rules of right and wrong that apply to everyone, everywhere. The Roman legal system also developed ideas like fair trials and equal treatment, which later became part of many modern legal systems. Still, both Greece and Rome excluded women, slaves, and the poor from these rights, reminding us that ideals of justice often coexisted with practices of exclusion.

Religions around the world have also taught people to treat others with kindness and respect. In Hinduism, the idea of *dharma* teaches people to live a life of truth, duty, and balance. Hindu texts like the Vedas and Upanishads promote the idea that all living beings are connected, and harming others goes against the natural order. The principle of *ahimsa* (non-violence), which originated in Hindu thought and later became central to Buddhism and Jainism, encourages people to avoid hurting others in any way. These values remind us that every life has worth and should be protected.

Other religions share similar values. In Judaism, the Bible instructs followers to care for the poor, the stranger, and those in need. In Christianity, Jesus taught that all people are equal in God's eyes and that we should forgive and care for one another. In Islam, the Qur'an speaks of justice, charity, and the value of each human life. One verse states, "*Whoever saves a life, it is as if they have saved all of humanity.*" These teachings from different parts of the world all agree on one thing: treating others with fairness, respect, and compassion is the right thing to do. At the same time, these traditions also justified hierarchies, such as caste in Hinduism or slavery in Abrahamic faiths, which limited how fully these values were applied in practice.

### 2.1.2.2 Enlightenment and the Rise of Individual Rights

The Enlightenment was a time in the 1600s and 1700s when many people in Europe began asking important questions about life, power, and fairness. Thinkers of this period believed that all people had natural rights, such as the right to live freely, speak their minds, and own property, simply because they were human. They argued that governments should not have total control and that rulers should only remain in power if the people agreed. Philosophers like John Locke argued that people had the right to choose their

leaders and replace them if they were unfair. Rousseau introduced the idea of a “*social contract*,” where people and governments have shared duties, and Montesquieu asserted that power should be divided so no one group becomes too strong. These ideas challenged kings and old traditions and helped shape new ways of thinking about justice and rights.

The Enlightenment greatly influenced major changes in history. Its ideas were incorporated into important documents like the *U.S. Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789). These writings asserted that all people are equal under the law and that governments must protect their rights. Later, the *U.S. Bill of Rights* (1791) promised freedoms such as speech, religion, and fair trials. These powerful ideas spread through coffeehouses and salons, where ordinary people discussed how society could be fairer. The Enlightenment helped transform subjects into citizens, i.e., people with rights and voices in how they are governed.

However, the Enlightenment also had its limits. The rights it spoke about often left out women, enslaved people, the poor, and colonised populations. Thinkers like *Mary Wollstonecraft* questioned why women weren’t treated equally and called for fairness for all. Over time, these questions led to important social changes. Even today, Enlightenment ideas like human dignity, freedom, and equality continue to guide how we think about justice, ethics, and human rights. This period reminds us that while rights begin with ideas, they must keep growing to include everyone.

### 2.1.2.3 Foundational Legal Milestones

Human rights did not appear all at once. They grew over time, shaped by people who stood up against unfairness and demanded better ways to live together. Throughout history, important documents have been created to protect people’s dignity, limit the power of rulers, and give voice to the idea that everyone should be treated fairly. These legal milestones are not just about laws; they reflect deep ethical beliefs about justice, freedom, and the value of every human being.

In this section, we look into three important documents that helped change the world: the *Magna Carta from England*, the *U.S. Declaration of Independence*, and the *French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. Each of these texts came from a time when people were challenging injustice, asking vital questions about power and fairness, and imagining a society where rights and freedoms were protected. While none of these documents were perfect and many people were still left out of their ideas, they have inspired generations to fight for equality and human dignity.

These milestones remind us that social ethics is not just about what is written in books, but about real struggles for fairness in everyday life. They show how ethical values like justice, freedom, and respect for others can lead to lasting change and why it’s important to keep expanding those rights so they include everyone.

#### a. Magna Carta (1215)

Over 800 years ago, in the year 1215, something very important happened in England. A group of noblemen were angry with *King John* because he was making unfair decisions, demanding high taxes, and using his power without asking anyone. They forced him to

sign a document called the *Magna Carta*, which means “*Great Charter*.” This was the first time in history that a king was told he must follow the law just like everyone else. It was a big step toward the idea that no one, not even a king, is above the law.

The Magna Carta introduced ideas that are still important today. It stated that people could not be put in jail or punished unless they were given a fair trial. This helped create the idea of due process, which means everyone has a right to be treated fairly by the law. It also stated the king could not collect taxes without asking first. This notion planted the seeds for representative government, where people have a say in how they are ruled. Although the Magna Carta mostly helped rich nobles at the time, its message of fairness and justice slowly began to include more people over the years.

Today, the ideas from the Magna Carta are used in many democracies around the world. It helped shape important documents like the *U.S. Constitution*, the *English Bill of Rights*, and even the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. By stating that rulers must follow laws and respect people’s rights, the Magna Carta helped turn unfair rule into more ethical and fair governance. It reminds us that laws should protect people, and that justice and dignity are important for everyone.

### **b. U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776)**

In the year 1776, the American colonies decided they wanted to be free from British rule. To explain their reasons, they wrote an important document called the *Declaration of Independence*, mainly written by Thomas Jefferson. This document made a powerful and lasting statement: “*All men are created equal*” and have certain rights that no one should ever take away, which is like the right to *live freely, make choices, and find happiness*. These ideas were inspired by Enlightenment thinkers and helped shape how people began to understand *freedom, equality, and democracy*. It also stated that governments should only stay in power if the people agree to it, and that their main job is to protect everyone’s rights.

But the truth at the time was very different from these words. Enslaved people had no freedom, women could not vote or own property, and Native American communities were being pushed off their lands. Although the Declaration spoke of equality, these groups were not treated equally. This shows a deep gap between what was promised and what was practiced. Across generations, many brave people like abolitionists, suffragettes, and civil rights activists stood up to say that these rights must belong to everyone, not just a few.

Even with its flaws, the Declaration of Independence became a symbol of hope. Its words have inspired *struggles for justice* in the United States and around the world. People still look to it today when they fight for *civil rights, fair treatment, and freedom from injustice*. It reminds us that standing up for human dignity and equal rights is a journey that continues, and that ethics isn’t just about ideas. It’s all about turning those ideas into action for everyone.

### **c. French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789)**

In 1789, during the *French Revolution*, people in France were fighting against unfair rule, heavy taxes, and a system that gave too much power and privilege to the king

and nobility. To show what they believed a fair society should look like, they wrote an important document called the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. This document stated that *all men are born free and equal in rights*, and that everyone has the right to liberty, property, security, and the right to resist oppression. In other words, it means standing up to unfair treatment by those in power.

The Declaration also explained that *freedom means being able to act however you like, as long as it doesn't hurt others*. It stated that people should be protected from being arrested or punished without good reason, and that no one's home or property should be taken away unfairly. These rights were meant to ensure everyone could live safely and fairly. It also introduced important ideas like *equality before the law, freedom of speech and religion*, and the idea that laws should come from the people, either directly or through leaders they choose.

Even though the Declaration spoke strongly about justice and equality, not everyone was included at the time. Women, enslaved people, and the poor were still left out of many of these rights. But the Declaration still became a powerful symbol. It helped change France and influenced many other countries to stand up for human dignity, freedom, and equal treatment.

#### 2.1.2.4 Modern Human Rights Framework

After the terrible events of World War II, countries around the world came together to ask an important question: how can we stop such suffering from happening again? To answer this, the United Nations created the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948. This vital document is like a global promise that every person, no matter who they are, where they live, or what they believe, has basic rights and freedoms. These include the right to life, education, safety, freedom of thought and religion, and protection from unfair treatment. Written by people from many different countries, including Eleanor Roosevelt (USA), René Cassin (France), and others from Lebanon, China, and Canada, the UDHR showed that human dignity is a shared value across all cultures. Although it is not a law by itself, it inspired over 70 international agreements and helped shape the laws of many countries around the world.

The UDHR also led to two very important international agreements that are legally binding: the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). The ICCPR protects rights such as the right to life, freedom from torture, freedom of religion and expression, fair trials, and participation in government. Countries that sign it must take action to ensure these rights are protected, and their efforts are monitored by the UN Human Rights Committee. The ICESCR focuses on rights that help people live with dignity, such as the right to work, fair wages, education, healthcare, housing, and social security. It reminds governments that economic and social well-being is just as important as freedom. Together, these two covenants form the *International Bill of Human Rights*, ensuring that both freedom and fairness are protected in law and practice across the world.

### Sometimes, Taking a Break Is the Right Thing to Do!

The “right to ignore” means that a person can choose not to join in certain activities or conversations, especially if they feel tired, uncomfortable, or unhappy. A long time ago, a thinker named Herbert Spencer said that people should not be forced to help or participate in something unless they genuinely want to. This idea prompts us to consider an important question: Is it acceptable to walk away when something feels overwhelming, or should we always strive to help others? In social ethics, we learn that it’s essential to care for ourselves while also considering how our choices affect other people.

## 2.1.3 Concept of Human Rights: Right to Life, Liberty, and Security

As we continue learning about human rights, it is important to focus on some of the most essential ones, particularly those that protect our life, freedom, and safety. These rights form the foundation of all other rights because, without life, liberty, and security, people cannot fully enjoy or exercise any other freedom. They ensure that every person has the right to live without fear, to make choices about their own life, and to be safe from harm, violence, or unfair treatment. These principles are not just part of legal documents like the UDHR but are also grounded in moral values such as dignity, fairness, and respect for others. In this section, we will explore what these core rights mean, why they matter, and how they help build a more just and ethical society for everyone.

### 2.1.3.1 The Right to Life

The right to life is considered the most fundamental of all human rights. It forms the foundation upon which every other right depends. Without life, no one can enjoy liberty, justice, education, or health. Internationally, this right is recognised in Article 3 of the UDHR, which affirms that “everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person,” and in Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which declares that “every human being has the inherent right to life.” This right is not just about protection from arbitrary killing; it also includes the responsibility of states to create conditions where people can live with dignity and safety. This means access to healthcare, clean air and water, disaster relief, and legal protection from violence.

Yet, the scope of the right to life is debated when it comes to issues such as abortion and euthanasia. Some argue that the right to life begins at conception, while others defend a woman’s right to choose. Similarly, while euthanasia is seen by some as a dignified end to suffering, others view it as incompatible with the sanctity of life. These debates highlight that the right to life is not only legal but also deeply ethical.

Legal systems and courts around the world have helped shape what the right to life means in practice. In India, Article 21 of the Constitution protects this right and has been interpreted in many important cases. Originally given a narrow reading, the right to life was later expanded by the Supreme Court in *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978) to include rights like health, education, privacy, and a clean environment. Other cases,

like *Olga Tellis* and *Ranjitsinh*, further widened this interpretation to include *livelihood*, *shelter*, and *protection from climate harm*. Globally, courts have responded to modern challenges by recognising that emerging threats like artificial intelligence, environmental degradation, and unsafe healthcare also endanger the right to life.

Another area of controversy is the death penalty. While some legal systems continue to use it for grave crimes, many human rights advocates argue that it violates the inherent dignity of human beings. India retains the death penalty in the rarest of rare cases, whereas international law increasingly favours its abolition. This shows how the right to life can be balanced differently across legal systems.

The right to life also protects people from serious violations such as genocide, state-sponsored violence, and arbitrary killings. These are not merely individual crimes; they represent major human rights violations that harm entire communities. International law firmly prohibits such acts, and instruments like the Genocide Convention and various United Nations reports hold states accountable when they fail to prevent or punish these crimes. However, real-world challenges such as political interests, weak legal systems, and cultural justifications often make enforcement difficult. In addition, hatred and the dehumanisation of specific groups, often spread through hate speech and propaganda, have played a central role in many historical genocides. Preventing such atrocities requires early intervention, especially through confronting the language and behaviour that deny people their dignity. Protecting the right to life is therefore not only a legal obligation but also a moral responsibility to uphold human dignity in every aspect of life.

### 2.1.3.2 Right to Liberty and Security of Person

The right to liberty and security of a person means that every individual has the right to be free and feel safe. It protects people from being arrested, locked up, or taken away without a valid reason. Important documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights state that no one should be imprisoned unfairly. Everyone must be treated properly by the law. If someone is arrested, they must be informed of the reasons, taken to court swiftly, and given an opportunity to explain their side. This right also protects people from being harmed or mistreated by those in power, such as police or government officials. No one should be tortured or punished in a cruel or unfair manner.

This right also means that individuals should be able to make their own choices about their bodies and personal lives. This includes decisions about medical care, health, and how they wish to live. This is referred to as personal autonomy and respect for bodily integrity. It means that no one, whether a doctor, government official, or even a family member, should force someone to do something with their body that they do not consent to. Courts around the world have agreed that allowing people to make these choices is vital for their dignity and freedom.

In India, these rights are protected by the Constitution, particularly in Article 21. This article states that no one can take away a person's life or freedom without a fair process. Indian courts have interpreted this to also include the right to live with dignity, to be healthy, and to make important life choices. The United Nations also works to protect these rights globally. Groups like the Human Rights Council monitor how countries

adhere to these rules and assist individuals when their rights are not respected. These protections ensure that everyone can live with freedom, safety, and respect.

### **2.1.4 Universality of Human Rights vs. Cultural Relativism**

Human rights are often termed “universal” because they are intended to belong to every person, irrespective of where they live, what religion they follow, or what culture they come from. This notion means that every human being should be treated with dignity and fairness simply because they are human. Important global documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenants, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), support this principle. They affirm that everyone has the same basic rights, including the right to life, safety, education, and freedom of speech. These rights are not intended to vary based on a person’s place of birth.

However, not everyone agrees on how these rights should be applied. Some argue that human rights should be understood within the context of local cultures and traditions. This view is known as *cultural relativism*. It posits that what is considered fair or right in one place may not be perceived the same way in another. For example, the way families dress, the roles of men and women, and how people marry can differ greatly across various regions. Cultural relativists believe we should respect these differences and not judge them by external standards, especially those from Western countries.

Nevertheless, cultural relativism can sometimes be used to excuse harmful practices. For instance, practices such as child marriage, gender discrimination, or violence carried out in the name of tradition can harm individuals and strip them of their dignity. While it is crucial to respect cultural diversity, it is equally important to ensure that no one’s basic rights are violated. Human rights defenders argue that certain rights, such as the right to safety, freedom from torture, and equal treatment, must always be protected, even when some traditions may conflict with them. They emphasise that rights should safeguard all individuals, particularly those who are often marginalised, including women, children, and minority groups.

Given these tensions, many experts advocate for a balanced approach. This means working with communities to understand their traditions while still upholding basic human dignity. This approach is referred to as “*inclusive universalism*.” It encourages listening to local voices and finding ways to align global human rights with local values. For example, some cultures may uphold dignity through family or community rather than solely through individual freedom. Finding common ground through dialogue and mutual respect helps ensure that human rights are not imposed upon people but instead arise from their values and experiences. In this way, we protect both diversity and dignity, both of which are essential components of social ethics.

### **2.1.5 Ethical Justifications for Equal Social, Economic, and Political Rights**

Equal rights across the social, economic, and political spheres are not merely legal claims; they are deeply rooted in the ethical understanding that every human being possesses

intrinsic dignity and equal moral worth. Social rights, such as the right to education, healthcare, and equal treatment under the law, stem from our shared responsibility to respect one another's humanity. These rights help create a fair and inclusive society where everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to grow, thrive, and participate fully in community life. Ethically, when people are denied these rights, they are not only excluded from opportunity but also deprived of their rightful place in society, which contradicts the very notion of justice and fairness.

Economic rights play a significant role in enabling individuals to live with dignity and independence. When people have access to fair wages, safe working conditions, and a basic standard of living, they are better able to meet their needs, care for their families, and contribute to the common good. These rights are grounded in the ethical principles of fairness, respect, and protection from exploitation. Without them, inequality increases, and many are left behind. Political rights are equally essential. The right to vote, express one's views, and participate in decisions affecting public life ensures that each person is recognised as an equal member of society. Ethically, these rights uphold the belief that every voice matters and that individuals should have a say in how their lives are shaped.

At the heart of these rights lies a simple yet powerful idea: all people are entitled to live with freedom, dignity, and respect. A just society does not privilege some while excluding others. Instead, it dismantles barriers, confronts injustice, and establishes systems that empower all individuals to flourish. When we uphold equal rights in every area of life, we honour our shared humanity and take meaningful steps toward a world where fairness and justice are not merely ideals but lived realities for everyone.

## Recap

- ◆ Human rights are both moral and legal entitlements inherent to all individuals, grounded in principles of dignity, fairness, and equality.
- ◆ The concept of human rights has gradually developed over centuries of religious, philosophical, and political thought, reflecting humanity's evolving ethical conscience.
- ◆ Ancient sources such as the Hammurabi Code, the Cyrus Cylinder, and Emperor Asoka's Buddhist governance laid early foundations for justice, tolerance, and respect for life.
- ◆ Enlightenment thinkers introduced powerful ideas of liberty, natural rights, and the social contract, which redefined the relationship between the individual and the state.
- ◆ Legal milestones such as the Magna Carta, the U.S. Declaration of Independence, and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man advanced the principle of equality before the law and the demand for accountable governance.

- ◆ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted after World War II, became a landmark global statement affirming the shared dignity and rights of all people.
- ◆ The ICCPR and ICESCR established enforceable commitments to protect civil, political, social, and economic rights, forming the backbone of international human rights law.
- ◆ The right to life, liberty, and personal security remains the most fundamental of all rights, serving as the ethical and legal basis for enjoying all other freedoms.
- ◆ Despite claims of universality, the debate between universal human rights and cultural relativism reveals tensions in applying global standards within diverse cultural contexts.
- ◆ A balanced and inclusive approach to human rights recognises cultural diversity while defending non-negotiable principles of human dignity and freedom.
- ◆ Upholding equal social, economic, and political rights is not just a legal obligation; it is an ethical imperative to build just, inclusive, and humane societies.

## Objective Questions

1. Who authored the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on behalf of the USA?
2. Which 18th-century revolution led to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen?
3. Which Indian emperor promoted Buddhist values after the Kalinga War?
4. What does “lex talionis” mean in the context of Hammurabi’s Code?
5. Which article of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to life?
6. What is the international legal document adopted in 1948 that promotes basic human freedoms?
7. Which Enlightenment philosopher introduced the idea of the social contract?
8. What term describes adapting human rights to fit cultural traditions?
9. Which principle emphasises not harming others and is central to Jainism and Buddhism?

10. What is the collective name for the ICCPR and ICESCR under international law?

## Answers

1. Eleanor Roosevelt
2. French Revolution
3. Ashoka
4. Eye-for-an-eye
5. Article 21
6. UDHR
7. Rousseau
8. Cultural Relativism
9. Ahimsa
10. International Bill of Human Rights

## Assignments

1. Trace the historical development of human rights from ancient to modern times.
2. Discuss how religious teachings contributed to early notions of justice and human dignity.
3. Analyse the impact of Enlightenment thought on the modern human rights framework.
4. Describe the relevance of documents like the Magna Carta, U.S. Declaration of Independence, and French Declaration of Rights.
5. What is the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)?
6. Compare the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights(ICESCR).

7. Elaborate on the right to life as interpreted in Indian and international contexts.
8. Critically assess the debate between universality and cultural relativism.
9. Justify the ethical need for equal social, economic, and political rights in a democratic society.

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## Equality

# UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ describe the meaning and importance of equality across social and legal settings
- ◆ explain the different forms of equality, including legal, social, political, and economic
- ◆ understand social exclusion and labour exploitation using real-life case examples
- ◆ recognise the effects of inequality on marginalised groups such as Dalits, tribals, women, and migrant workers

### Prerequisites

*“We may have all come on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”*

—Martin Luther King Jr

In a classroom in India, a young boy named Bhim sat outside the door, not because he was late, but because he was not allowed in. He belonged to a caste once called “untouchable,” and for that, he was denied even the right to sit with others or drink from the same pot of water. That boy, B.R. Ambedkar, grew up to become one of the greatest champions of equality the world has seen. He helped write the Indian Constitution and ensured it promised every person, regardless of caste, class, or background, the right to be treated with dignity. To Ambedkar, equality was not just a law written on paper; it was a moral duty to stand with those who are denied their voice and to build a society where no one is left behind.

Across the seas in England, another thinker, John Ruskin, asked a different but related question: What is a just society, and how do we treat the least among us? In his book *Unto This Last*, Ruskin used a parable from the Bible to show that a

person's value should not be measured by how much they produce or earn, but by their humanity. Inspired by this, *Mahatma Gandhi* made equality not only a political goal but also a way of life by serving the poorest, the last, and the most forgotten with care and priority.

Both Ambedkar and *Unto This Last* remind us that equality is not just about treating everyone the same. It is about ensuring that those who have less are given the support they need to be uplifted. In social ethics, this is the heart of justice: to recognise unfairness, to act with compassion, and to create systems where no one is seen as less than human. As we begin this unit, we ask: *How do we treat the last?* Because in the answer lies the measure of any just society.

## Keywords

Equality, Social Justice, Discrimination, Exclusion, Inclusion

## Discussion

As we observe the world around us, we find that the pursuit of equality is a shared goal across many of humanity's religious, philosophical, and political traditions. From ancient scriptures to modern democratic ideals, from spiritual teachings to revolutionary movements, there is a common longing to build a society where every individual is treated with fairness, dignity, and respect. This aspiration points toward the vision of an egalitarian society, one where justice prevails and each person has the freedom and opportunity to flourish.

However, the reality we encounter is far more complex. Despite the progress made through reforms and struggles, inequality continues to shape our lives in profound ways. Access to education, healthcare, employment, and justice remains unequal for many. Social hierarchies based on caste, class, race, gender, religion, and ability often determine who benefits from societal systems and who remains marginalised. The dream of an equal society is sometimes dismissed as utopian, and at other times, sincere efforts to achieve it are actively suppressed by powerful interests that seek to preserve the status quo.

Yet the idea of equality continues to inspire movements for justice and remains central to ethical thought. It compels us to ask critical questions about the moral values that guide our societies. What does it truly mean to be equal? Can justice exist without equality? How do we reconcile the existence of diversity with the demand for fairness? These questions are not only philosophical but deeply practical, influencing how we live together and how we build our collective future.

### 2.2.1 Equality

Equality means treating everyone with the same respect and giving them the same rights and opportunities, no matter who they are or where they come from. It is the idea

that all people, whether rich or poor, male or female, and from any race, religion, or background, deserve the same chances to live a good life. There are different types of equality, such as legal equality, where everyone is treated equally under the law; social equality, where everyone has fair access to things like schools, hospitals, and public services; and equality of opportunity, where everyone gets the same chance to succeed in life. However, sometimes treating everyone the same does not result in fairness. For example, giving every child the same book may seem equal, but if some children cannot read yet, they will still be left behind. That is where the idea of equity becomes important. Equity means giving people the right kind of help based on their needs so that everyone can do well. The word equality has a long history. It comes from old Latin and French words that meant balance, fairness, and sameness. Today, equality is not just about being the same but about making sure everyone is treated fairly and with kindness.

#### **Gandhi's Concept of Sarvodaya: Upliftment for All**



Did you know that Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya, meaning "universal upliftment," wasn't just about improving people's material conditions, but also about moral and spiritual growth? Gandhi believed that true progress could only be achieved when every individual, especially the most disadvantaged, experienced both economic and ethical development. He saw Sarvodaya as a vision for a society where compassion, non-violence, and self-reliance were as important as wealth and success, aiming for a world where everyone thrives together, not just a few.

#### **2.2.1.1 Meaning and Significance of Equality**

Equality plays an important role in making our society fair and respectful for everyone, no matter where they come from. It shows that all people deserve the same respect and chances in life, whether it is going to school, getting healthcare, or being treated fairly under the law. However, we also need to remember that not everyone starts from the same place. Some people face extra challenges because of their caste, religion, gender, or poverty. That is why fairness does not always mean treating everyone exactly the same.

Sometimes we need to give extra help to those who have been left behind so that everyone can reach the same level. This is called equity. When we use both equality and equity in the right way, it helps people grow, take part in democracy, and live with dignity. It also makes our society stronger, kinder, and more united. Things like fair wages, good schools for all, and laws that protect people from unfair treatment are steps towards building such a world. But to make real progress, we must ensure that fairness goes hand in hand with justice so that no one is left out just because of where they were born or what they look like.

#### **2.2.1.2 Equality as a Foundational Democratic Value**

Equality is one of the most important values in a democracy because it ensures that everyone is treated with the same respect and has the same rights, no matter who they are or where they come from. In a fair democracy, all citizens can vote, take part in decisions,

and question those in power. This is called political equality, and it is supported by the rule that every adult can vote. Legal and moral equality mean that everyone should be treated fairly under the law and seen as equally valuable.

Social and economic equality help people get fair chances in education, jobs, and basic services, which helps remove unfair disadvantages. Sometimes, simply giving everyone the same rules is not enough, especially when some groups have faced unfair treatment for a long time. That is where equity comes in, by giving extra support to help everyone catch up and live with dignity. True equality in democracy means no group or person should have more power just because of their status. It means everyone shares the responsibility to care for society. Fair laws, inclusive schools, and equal chances for all help democracy stay strong and just. Equality is not just about rules; it is the heart of a fair and free society where everyone matters and works together.

### **2.2.1.3 Formal vs. Substantive Equality**

Formal and substantive equality are two different ways of thinking about fairness in society. Formal equality means treating everyone the same, regardless of their background, gender, caste, or situation. It follows the idea that if the rules are the same for everyone, then society is fair. For example, giving every citizen the right to vote or asking everyone to pay the same kind of tax follows formal equality. But the problem is that not everyone starts from the same place. Some people have faced discrimination, poverty, or lack of access to good schools and healthcare for many years. So, even if the rules are the same, they may still be at a disadvantage. Formal equality does not always address those deeper, hidden unfairnesses.

That is why we need substantive equality, which considers people's real-life situations and tries to make things truly fair by giving extra support to those who have been left behind. This can include special measures like reservations in schools or jobs for marginalised communities, or extra help for children from poor families. Substantive equality understands that fairness sometimes means giving more to those who have less, so that everyone can reach the same level. It is like helping someone climb a hill by giving them a ladder if they cannot reach the top on their own. In modern democracies, both formal and substantive equality are important, but focusing more on substantive equality helps create a more just, caring, and equal society where everyone gets a fair chance to succeed.

### **2.2.1.4 Types of Equality: Legal, Social, Political, and Economic**

Equality is not a singular concept. It manifests in different forms across society. Each type of equality contributes uniquely to justice, fairness, and dignity. Understanding these variations is essential to grasping how societies function and evolve toward inclusive development. Legal, social, political, and economic equality are interdependent pillars that support democratic participation and safeguard individual rights.

#### **a. Legal Equality**

Legal equality refers to the principle that all individuals are subject to the same laws and entitled to the same legal protections and duties. It prohibits legal discrimination

based on caste, gender, race, religion, or socio-economic status. Constitutions and legal frameworks in democratic societies often enshrine this form of equality. Legal equality ensures fair trials, equal access to justice, and uniform application of laws, thereby laying the groundwork for broader rights and freedoms. For instance, anti-discrimination legislation and equal access to courts exemplify this form of equality.

#### **b. Social Equality**

Social equality concerns equal status and access within societal institutions. It focuses on removing discrimination based on identity such as gender, caste, class, or disability and ensuring inclusive participation in education, healthcare, housing, and culture. Social equality is vital in dismantling systemic barriers that prevent certain groups from fully engaging in public life. For example, universal education schemes, caste-reform measures, and inclusive health policies are manifestations of efforts to promote social equality. Without it, legal rights often remain inaccessible to marginalised communities.

#### **c. Political Equality**

Political equality ensures that every citizen has the same rights to participate in the political process. It is grounded in the “one person, one vote” principle and protects freedoms related to expression, assembly, and electoral participation. Political equality guarantees that individuals can influence governance and policy regardless of their background. Universal adult suffrage, fair representation, and the right to contest elections all stem from this ideal. However, political equality must be supported by social and economic access to be fully meaningful.

#### **d. Economic Equality**

Economic equality, meanwhile, addresses the fair distribution of wealth, income, and access to resources. It recognises that without tackling poverty, unequal opportunity, or inherited privilege, justice remains incomplete. Economic equality does not mean everyone earns the same but ensures everyone has a fair chance to succeed. This often involves redistributive measures such as minimum wages, social welfare, progressive taxation, and affirmative action. Equal pay for equal work, employment rights, and rural support programmes help bridge economic disparities and enable people to exercise their legal and political rights effectively.

Together, these forms of equality create a foundation for a just and democratic society. They are interconnected: social or economic exclusion can limit political participation, just as lack of legal equality can undermine efforts toward economic justice. A holistic approach to equality, therefore, requires an integrated framework where legal, social, political, and economic rights reinforce one another in ensuring the dignity and development of all citizens.

### **2.2.2 Equality before the Law**

Equality before the law means that every person, regardless of their caste, religion, gender, wealth, or background, must be treated fairly and equally by the legal system. It states that no one is above the law, and no one should be left behind by it. This

principle ensures that everyone has equal access to justice, equal protection, and the same responsibility to follow the law. Whether someone is rich or poor, powerful or weak, the same rules must apply to all. For example, if two people break the same rule, they should face the same punishment. This idea is supported by important human rights documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 14 of the Indian Constitution. That article states the State cannot deny anyone equality before the law or equal protection of laws. It also allows fair and reasonable measures, like reservations, to support those who have been treated unfairly for a long time. This helps ensure that equality is not just on paper but real and meaningful in people's lives.

Article 14 is part of the broader Right to Equality in the Indian Constitution, which runs from Articles 14 to 18. It not only protects people from unfair treatment by the government but also allows positive actions to correct past injustices. The law may treat people differently if there is a fair reason, such as helping students from poor families get extra support. Courts in India have explained this through the test of "reasonable classification," which requires two conditions: first, that the classification is based on an intelligible differentia, and second, that this differentia has a rational connection with the law's objective. In addition, the Supreme Court in *E.P. Royappa v. State of Tamil Nadu* (1974) made it clear that Article 14 also strikes down arbitrary state action, observing that arbitrariness is the very antithesis of equality. This means that the guarantee of equality under Article 14 protects people not only from unfair categories but also from unfair exercises of power.

### **2.2.2.1 Rule of Law**

The rule of law is another important idea that supports equality and justice in a democracy. It means that everyone, including the government and its officials, must follow the law. No one can act above the law or use power unfairly. Laws should be clear, fair, and apply equally to all. This principle protects people from arbitrary or biased decisions and helps resolve problems fairly. Courts must be free from pressure so they can make impartial decisions, and the law must always protect people's rights. Thinkers like A.V. Dicey and Lord Bingham have explored this concept in depth. They argued that the rule of law encompasses ideas such as fairness, equal treatment, legal clarity, and access to justice. In simple terms, the rule of law ensures that power is exercised responsibly, justice is not based on personal choices, and the system works for everyone, not just the powerful. This fosters a safer, fairer, and more respectful society for all.

### **2.2.2.2 Equal Protection vs. Equal Treatment**

Understanding the distinction between equal treatment and equal protection is crucial when discussing fairness in law and society. Equal treatment means applying the same rule to everyone, regardless of their circumstances. While this may seem fair, it can sometimes create additional problems, as not everyone starts from the same position. For example, if everyone pays the same amount of tax, it disproportionately affects poorer individuals compared to the wealthy, even though the rule is uniform. In contrast, equal protection considers people's real-life conditions and allows for fair differences in the law to assist those needing extra support. This principle is applied in policies such as reservations and welfare schemes, which strive to provide everyone with a fair chance

by addressing past injustices. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution supports this notion by permitting reasonable classifications, meaning the law can treat people differently if it aids in achieving true justice. Thus, while equal treatment focuses solely on uniformity, equal protection emphasises fairness, ensuring that the law benefits everyone equally, particularly those who have been marginalised.

### 2.2.2.3 Judicial Interpretations and Limitations

Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees that everyone should be treated equally under the law and that the government cannot act unfairly or without justification. However, the courts have clarified that treating people equally does not always equate to treating them identically. At times, the law can differentiate between individuals if there is a valid reason for doing so. For instance, in landmark cases like *State of West Bengal v. Anwar Ali Sarkar* and *Ram Krishna Dalmia v. Justice S.R. Tendolkar*, the Supreme Court stated that if a law distinguishes between groups, that distinction must be logical and must further the law's purpose. This is referred to as reasonable classification. The court also indicated in cases like *E.P. Royappa* and *Maneka Gandhi* that equality means the government cannot make arbitrary or capricious decisions. In the case of *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, the court held that providing special assistance to disadvantaged groups, such as reservations, does not violate the principle of equality as long as the classification is just and beneficial.

However, Article 14 does have some limitations. It primarily applies to actions taken by the government and not by private individuals or companies. Additionally, in specific areas such as taxation or foreign affairs, the law may permit certain distinctions. During a national emergency, some aspects of this right may be suspended, but only temporarily and under strict conditions. Courts are also cautious when reviewing government policies and usually uphold them if they are based on sound reasoning. Thus, Article 14 protects individuals from unfair treatment by the government while still allowing for fair distinctions when necessary, contributing to the establishment of a just and equal society.

#### Savitribai Phule: Champion of Education and Equality



Savitribai Phule was a courageous woman who believed that everyone should have the opportunity to learn, including girls and children from poor or lower-caste families. At a time when many were barred from attending school, she opened the first school for girls in Pune and welcomed Dalit children as well. People hurled mud and stones at her, but she never gave up. She carried an extra saree so she could continue teaching with pride. Over time, she opened eighteen schools across India and provided scholarships to assist poor students in their studies. Her bravery demonstrated that education can foster fairness and respect for all individuals.

### 2.2.3 Inequalities Based on Identity

Some individuals are treated unfairly because of their caste, religion, gender, wealth, or disability. These disparities can lead to fewer opportunities in education, employment,

or life in general. Understanding this helps us appreciate why everyone should be treated equally and with respect.

### **2.2.3.1 Caste-based Inequality and Social Hierarchy**

Caste-based inequality and social hierarchy in India are ancient and continue to impact how people live, work, and are treated today. In this system, a person is born into a caste, which determines their occupation, the treatment they receive from others, and their societal status. Individuals from higher castes typically enjoy more respect, wealth, and control over land and resources. Those from lower castes often face discrimination and are compelled to perform arduous or degrading tasks, such as cleaning human waste or engaging in bonded labour. They frequently encounter barriers to education, access to quality healthcare, and good employment opportunities. Even though the law now stipulates that everyone is equal, many individuals from lower castes still endure violence, disrespect, and exclusion from vital aspects of life. When an individual belongs to both a lower caste and is a woman, their challenges become even more pronounced due to the intersecting impacts of caste, gender, and poverty.

The caste system has existed for over 2,000 years, beginning with the Hindu varna system and becoming increasingly rigid over time through numerous small caste groups known as jatis. It was further entrenched during British rule. After India attained independence, the Constitution abolished untouchability and rendered caste discrimination illegal. Special assistance, such as reservations in education, employment, and politics, was provided to groups like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes to help rectify these deep-seated injustices. Leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar worked tirelessly to combat caste inequality and secure justice for Dalits and other oppressed communities. Today, despite the progress made through laws and movements, caste continues to dictate who receives respect, opportunities, and safety. Many young people and activists, both in India and globally, are leveraging social media and education to challenge caste injustices. However, the problem remains pervasive, and genuine change requires both improved laws and a shift in societal attitudes. Only then can we create a society where everyone is treated with fairness, dignity, and equal opportunities for growth.

### **2.2.3.2 Gender Inequality and Patriarchal Norms**

Gender inequality refers to the unfair treatment of individuals based solely on their gender, disproportionately affecting women and those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. This injustice stems from patriarchal norms, which are outdated beliefs and rules in society that grant greater power to men. These norms manifest in families, workplaces, schools, politics, and even in the media, where men are depicted as leaders and women are expected to remain in the background. As a result of patriarchy, women often earn less, are overlooked for leadership roles, and face restrictions on their life choices. It also leads to issues such as violence against women and control over their personal decisions, including their bodies and freedoms.

These gender norms negatively impact everyone, not just women. For instance, boys are often taught to suppress emotions, which can result in stress and diminished self-esteem. The media, along with family traditions, frequently perpetuates these unjust notions about the roles of boys and girls. To improve the situation, we must recognise

that patriarchy is not a natural state. It was constructed by people and can be dismantled. We need to address this by promoting equality in schools, reforming discriminatory laws and practices, and encouraging respectful and fair treatment for all genders. By challenging these outdated ways of thinking, we move closer to a more compassionate, equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to live freely and with dignity.

### **2.2.3.3 Racial and Ethnic Marginalisation**

Racial and ethnic marginalisation involves the unfair treatment or exclusion of individuals from opportunities based on their race or ethnicity. Race typically refers to physical characteristics like skin colour, whereas ethnicity pertains to shared culture, language, or traditions. Individuals from minority racial or ethnic groups frequently encounter obstacles in obtaining quality education, employment, healthcare, housing, or fair treatment in the legal system. They may also experience hate, bullying, or fear, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This form of discrimination can lead to mental health issues like stress, depression, or anxiety. Some of this trauma is transmitted across generations, particularly in communities that have long been subjected to discrimination.

This problem is not just about one person being rude or unfair. It is built into the rules, systems, and structures of society, such as unfair laws or policies that keep some groups behind. These groups may also face poverty, poor health, and fewer opportunities to grow or succeed. They may feel excluded from the rest of society. That is why racial and ethnic marginalisation is a serious issue that affects whole communities, not just individuals. To overcome this, we need to change the systems that cause this unfairness and create a world where everyone is treated with respect, has equal chances to succeed, and feels like they truly belong.

### **2.2.3.4 Community and Religious Discrimination**

Community and religious discrimination means treating people unfairly because of the group they belong to or the religion they follow. This can happen when individuals are excluded from schools, jobs, or public services solely because of their identity. For example, groups like Dalits in India or Roma people in Europe have often been treated unfairly for a long time. Discrimination can be direct, such as bullying or violence, or indirect, like rules and policies that quietly exclude certain groups. Religious discrimination occurs when people are mistreated because of their faith. This could involve not hiring someone, banning their religious dress, or even violence against them. It happens in many countries, including India, Pakistan, China, and the UK.

People who face this kind of unfair treatment often suffer in various ways. They may not receive a proper education, struggle to find good jobs, or feel scared and isolated. Sometimes, other factors such as their gender, caste, or poverty exacerbate these issues. This is called *intersectional discrimination*. To stop this injustice, we need strong laws, public education, fair government policies, and support from the global community. Everyone deserves to live with dignity and equal rights, regardless of the community or religion to which they belong.

### 2.2.3.5 Intersectionality: Overlapping Vulnerabilities

Intersectionality is a way of understanding how individuals can face multiple forms of unfair treatment simultaneously due to their identities. It was introduced by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Imagine someone who is a girl, poor, has a disability, and belongs to a minority religion. She might be treated unfairly not only because she is a girl or because of her religion, but because all these aspects of her identity intersect in her life. This combination of different facets of a person's identity, such as race, gender, religion, class, age, or disability, can create deeper problems that are harder to notice when we look at only one aspect at a time.

For example, a Muslim woman of colour may face challenges at work or school not only because she is a woman but also because of her religion and the colour of her skin. These challenges do not simply add up one by one; they connect in ways that can make life even more difficult. Intersectionality helps us understand that each person's experience is unique. It teaches us that rules, policies, and solutions should pay special attention to those who face pressure from many different directions. This way, we can create a fairer and more equal world for everyone.

### 2.2.4 Social and Political Exclusion

Social and political exclusion occurs when certain individuals or groups are unfairly left out of important aspects of life, such as education, jobs, healthcare, or decision-making. This exclusion often affects those who are already treated unequally because of their caste, religion, gender, poverty, or disability. It creates deep unfairness in society and prevents people from living with dignity and equal rights.

#### 2.2.4.1 Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is a process where certain individuals or groups are unfairly left out from aspects that are important in life, such as attending school, obtaining good jobs, accessing proper healthcare, living in safe housing, earning money, or participating in political and social activities. This means they don't have the same opportunities as others to live a fulfilling and healthy life. As a result, they are pushed to the edges of society, feeling excluded or ignored, and are unable to participate fully in the progress of their communities.

This unfair treatment often arises from disparities in power between individuals and groups, such as control over money, education, culture, or politics. It can happen to anyone, but it often affects those who are already discriminated against due to their race, gender, religion, disability, or sexual orientation. These forms of exclusion are interconnected and can perpetuate over time. For example, if someone is denied access to education, it becomes harder for them to secure a job later, which impacts their living conditions and participation in society. This creates a chain of disadvantages that can even affect their children.

The concept of social exclusion first gained importance in France in the late 1900s. It helped people understand that being poor isn't just about lacking money; it's also about being unheard, unseen, and disrespected. Social exclusion illustrates how individuals

can be excluded in various ways—economically, socially, culturally, and politically. It harms not just the individuals but society as a whole, as a fair and just community should include and value everyone.

#### **2.2.4.2 Political Exclusion**

Political exclusion occurs when certain individuals or groups are unfairly left out of political life. This means they do not have the same opportunities to vote, run for office, express their opinions, or participate in important decisions that affect their lives. Often, this happens to people who are already treated unfairly, such as those from minority communities, different religions, lower castes or classes, women, people with disabilities, or those with less wealth or power. Sometimes, the rules or systems in a country are structured in a way that allows powerful groups to maintain control while keeping others silent or invisible. This creates a political system that does not truly represent everyone, undermining the concept of democracy.

When individuals feel ignored or blocked from participating, they may lose trust in the government. They might disengage from politics, feel angry, or even resort to protests or violence. In serious cases, this can lead to significant issues like unrest or conflict within society. To combat political exclusion, a country needs to implement changes across multiple areas. The laws must be fair, leaders must listen to all voices, and people must be educated about their rights. It is crucial to establish a system where everyone, regardless of their identity, can speak up and be part of the decisions that shape their lives. This strengthens democracy and promotes a more peaceful and united society.

#### **2.2.4.3 Exclusion from Education, Health, and Services**

When individuals are excluded from essential areas such as education, healthcare, and basic public services, it creates numerous interconnected problems. In education, some children cannot attend school or learn effectively due to factors such as lack of funds, disabilities, language barriers, or facing unfair treatment based on their caste, gender, or background. This hinders their ability to excel in school, form friendships, or secure good jobs as adults. Consequently, they may remain impoverished and experience inequality throughout their lives. Similarly, many individuals are denied access to adequate healthcare because they cannot afford it, live far from medical facilities, or face discrimination. Without access to doctors and medications, their health deteriorates, making their lives more challenging and shorter. These issues often affect their children as well.

Moreover, when people are excluded from basic public services like clean water, sanitation, electricity, transportation, or internet access, it impacts their daily lives. This is particularly true for those living in impoverished or remote areas. Without these services, it becomes increasingly difficult to study, work, maintain health, or engage in community life. These problems do not just affect one aspect of life; they are interconnected and exacerbate the difficulties faced by those who are already struggling. To address this effectively, governments and communities must collaborate to establish fair rules, enhance services, and ensure no one is left out. By doing so, we can create a world that is more equal, fair, and compassionate for everyone.

#### 2.2.4.4 Political Under-Representation

Political under-representation occurs when certain groups of people are not fairly included in political decision-making, even though they constitute a significant portion of the population. This means that individuals from groups such as women, lower castes, impoverished communities, religious or ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, young people, and gender minorities often lack sufficient leaders or voices advocating for them in government. This problem arises from various factors, including unfair voting laws, high costs associated with running for elections, and political parties that do not support individuals from diverse backgrounds. In many regions, social and cultural beliefs also hinder members of these groups from engaging in politics. For instance, traditions that confer more power to men or systems that deem certain castes as superior make it more challenging for others to participate in political life. Additionally, impoverished individuals and those with lower levels of education often find it harder to become involved due to facing greater challenges and having fewer opportunities to voice their opinions.

When some groups are not included in politics, their needs are often ignored. Laws and policies predominantly benefit the powerful or wealthy, while important issues like education, healthcare, housing, and justice for poorer or minority groups are left behind. This exclusion makes people feel disenfranchised and less interested in participating in politics, perpetuating the cycle of exclusion. For example, if there are no leaders from certain groups, young people from those communities may stop aspiring to become leaders themselves. To break this cycle, we need to implement significant changes. These can include fair voting systems, regulations that ensure women and minority communities have opportunities to lead, and enhanced support for individuals who wish to enter politics but face challenges. Schools and communities should also teach the value of equality and inclusion. When all individuals have a voice and feel represented, democracy becomes stronger, and society becomes fairer for everyone.

#### 2.2.4.5 Case examples: Manual scavengers, displaced tribals

Manual scavenging and the displacement of tribal communities are two clear examples of social exclusion in India. Manual scavenging is often performed by Dalit communities, such as the Madigas, and continues even though it is against the law. These workers are compelled to clean human waste by hand, without any safety equipment. This type of work is not only harmful to their health but also deeply disrespectful to their dignity. Society often treats them unfairly because of their caste, and their children are bullied in schools, forcing families to hide their identities. In places like Yemmiganur in Andhra Pradesh, many children leave school early, and adults continue this dangerous work because they have no other means to earn a living. Despite government efforts to end this practice through various campaigns, real change has been very slow. Without proper education, jobs, or support from officials, these families remain trapped in the same painful situation.

Tribal communities also face exclusion when they are forced to leave their homes for developments like dams, factories, or wildlife parks. These families are often not provided with sufficient financial compensation or assistance to start anew. They are relocated to areas where farming is difficult, and their traditional ways of living cannot

continue. This leads to hunger, poor health, and the loss of close community bonds. In the Achanakmar Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh, Baiga tribal families were displaced without adequate support, losing their land and food security. In Raigarh, individuals like Tarika Lakra lost their land to steel factories without fair compensation or a means to survive. Both manual scavengers and displaced tribal people are denied dignity and basic rights. One group suffers due to untouchability and social shame, while the other is forcibly removed from their homes and forgotten. However, both groups face poverty, lack of power, and exclusion from key decisions. Their stories highlight not only their suffering but also the urgent need for fair laws, respectful treatment, and support that fosters a just and equal society for all.

## 2.2.5 Labour Exploitation and Ethical Implications

Many individuals, including children and migrants, are made to work in unfair and unsafe conditions. This is known as labour exploitation. It is essential to recognise that every worker deserves fair pay, safe working conditions, and respect.

### 2.2.5.1 Forms of exploitation: Bonded, informal, unsafe labour

Labour exploitation involves treating workers unfairly and forcing them to work in poor, dangerous, or illegal conditions. One major form is bonded labour, where individuals are compelled to work to repay debts they may not fully understand or never agreed to. These workers, often found in brick kilns, farms, or factories, become trapped in this cycle for years, with their children sometimes having to undertake the same work. Another form is informal labour, where individuals work without any legal contract, protection, or benefits. Jobs such as domestic work, street vending, or small factory roles fall into this category. These workers are often paid very little and can be dismissed at any time without cause. Unsafe labour is also prevalent, where individuals operate dangerous machinery or handle toxic substances without safety measures. Due to the absence of proper regulations or protections, these workers frequently suffer injuries or illnesses, with no support available to assist them.

#### Did You Know? Some People Face Invisible Walls at Work

In the world of work, not everyone is treated equally. The “*glass ceiling*” is a hidden barrier that prevents many women and individuals from minority groups from attaining top positions, even if they work hard and possess the right skills. It is as if they can see the top, but something invisible is holding them back. Conversely, the “*glass escalator*” occurs when certain men, particularly in professions such as nursing or teaching, are promoted quickly even if they do not exhibit exceptional qualities. In social ethics, we learn that this is unjust because everyone should have the same opportunities. These concepts help us understand why it is crucial to treat people with respect and ensure everyone has equal chances.

Child labour and the exploitation of migrant workers exacerbate these issues. Many children are forced to work on farms, in mines, or in small shops because their families are

too impoverished to send them to school. These children miss out on their childhood and often work in unsafe and unhealthy conditions. Migrant workers, who relocate in search of employment, are also highly vulnerable to exploitation. They frequently perform the most arduous tasks for the lowest wages, lacking rights or assistance when problems arise. Caste and class discrimination significantly contribute to labour exploitation, especially in countries like India. Individuals from lower castes, such as Dalits, are often forced into hazardous and menial jobs, such as cleaning human waste, despite it being illegal. Poor individuals, regardless of their background, are also more likely to be pushed into informal and unsafe work.

These forms of labour exploitation raise serious ethical questions. They strip individuals of their dignity, freedom, and basic rights. A fair and just workplace should treat all workers with respect, provide safe working conditions, fair wages, and protect them from discrimination. To combat exploitation, we need robust laws, improved support for poor and marginalised groups, and a collective belief that every person deserves to work in a safe and respectful environment. Only then can we build a society that values justice, fairness, and human dignity for all.

### **2.2.5.2 Child labour and migrant workers**

Child labour and the exploitation of migrant workers are serious issues that continue to harm millions of people worldwide. As of 2025, approximately 138 million children are still working, with more than 50 million engaged in hazardous jobs. Many of these children labour on farms, in mines, or perform informal tasks in homes. Their families are often extremely impoverished, and due to a lack of nearby schools or governmental assistance, they are compelled to work instead of attend school. Some children also lose their homes due to wars, natural disasters, or family issues, making them even more susceptible to exploitation. These children face numerous dangers, suffer injuries, miss out on education, and often grow up trapped in poverty. Children from migrant families, tribal groups, or those with disabilities endure even harsher conditions, sometimes facing trafficking or being forced into extremely harmful work.

Migrant workers, including both adults and children, also experience extreme exploitation. Many migrate to cities or other countries in search of work but find themselves in unsafe jobs where they are underpaid, treated unjustly, or even forced to work without breaks. In 2025, reports indicated a significant rise in abuse against migrant workers, highlighting the inadequacies of protective systems. Migrants often do not speak the local language, cannot join workers' unions, and owe substantial amounts of money to recruiters, making it difficult for them to escape poor working conditions. Migrant children are particularly at risk, especially in agriculture and plantation work, where they often labour without legal documentation or access to education. These children are often invisible to the government and rarely receive the assistance they require. To effectively address these issues, we need strong laws, enhanced protections for children and workers, and equal opportunities for education and safety. Only then can we disrupt the cycle of unfair labour and provide every child and worker with a better future.

### 2.2.5.3 Caste, class, and labour segregation

In India, caste and class continue to play a significant role in determining the type of work individuals do and how they are treated in the workplace. For centuries, the caste system forced Dalits and other marginalised groups to undertake menial, dangerous, or denigrated jobs such as cleaning toilets or manual scavenging. Even though laws now exist prohibiting such practices, these injustices persist. For instance, in some prisons, upper-caste individuals were assigned cooking duties while lower-caste individuals were forced to clean. The Supreme Court of India intervened, deeming this practice forced and unjust. However, these caste-based divisions of labour continue to undermine the dignity of many individuals and hinder their ability to secure better employment or improve their circumstances.

Class, or how rich or poor someone is, also affects the kind of jobs they can get. People from poor families, who often belong to lower castes too, do not receive the same opportunities for good education or good jobs. This means they usually end up doing work that pays less and lacks security. Around the world, people who are poor or treated unfairly because of their race or background face similar problems. Even when they possess the same skills as others, they receive fewer job offers and lower pay. Laws like the Supreme Court's judgment help, but real change requires more than just rules. It necessitates better schools, fairer policies, and genuine efforts to treat everyone equally. Only then can we build a society where no one is stuck in bad jobs simply because of their caste or class.

### 2.2.5.4 Ethical Issues: Dignity, Fairness, and Justice

Ethical work means treating all workers with dignity, fairness, and justice. Dignity involves respecting every worker as a human being, not just viewing them as someone who gets a job done. When workers are forced to work in unsafe conditions, treated poorly because of their caste or gender, or not allowed to voice their concerns, their dignity is compromised. Every person deserves to feel safe, respected, and valued at work. A workplace that upholds dignity allows individuals to have a voice, protects their health, and treats them as equal members of the team.

Fairness means ensuring that everyone is treated equally and receives what they deserve. If some workers are paid less, given harder jobs, or excluded from leadership positions because of who they are, that is unfair. Justice takes this concept further. It means addressing these wrongs, ensuring that those who mistreat workers are held accountable, and assisting those who have been harmed or excluded. To foster a fair and just workplace, we need sound laws, robust regulations to protect workers, and changes in attitudes and behaviours. True justice in labour is not merely about adhering to rules; it is about ensuring that every worker is treated with respect, kindness, and equality.

## 2.2.6 Social Inclusion and Diversity

Social inclusion means ensuring that every person, especially those who are often marginalised, has the opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of life, such as attending school, securing a job, engaging in community activities, and having a voice in decisions. It is founded on the values of fairness, dignity, and justice, and seeks to eliminate the

barriers that prevent people from being included. These barriers can be physical, such as the lack of facilities for people with disabilities, or social, like the unfair treatment of certain castes, classes, or genders. Social inclusion ensures that everyone has equal opportunities, regardless of their background, and helps them feel accepted, respected, and valued in society.

We can observe social inclusion in action in many areas of life. In schools, it means providing support to students who need it, offering scholarships to children from low-income families, and creating learning environments that celebrate all cultures and languages. In workplaces, it includes fair hiring practices, equal pay, and appropriate support for individuals with diverse needs. In public life, social inclusion ensures that everyone can vote, express their opinions, and be treated fairly by the law. Inclusive communities also ensure that all individuals have equal access to housing, healthcare, and other essential services. When a society becomes truly inclusive, it brings people together, reduces inequalities, and helps everyone live with respect and dignity. It also teaches us to value our differences and work collaboratively towards a better future.

## Recap

- ◆ Equality is a core democratic value that ensures fair treatment, opportunities, and dignity for all individuals, regardless of caste, class, gender, religion, or ability.
- ◆ Substantive equality goes beyond formal rules by addressing real-life disadvantages through equity-based support.
- ◆ Legal, social, political, and economic equality are interlinked and together form the foundation of a just society.
- ◆ Inequalities based on caste, gender, ethnicity, and religion persist and must be challenged through both legal action and social reform.
- ◆ Labour exploitation, especially of children, Dalits, and migrant workers, violates ethical principles of justice and dignity.
- ◆ Social and political exclusion leads to deep-rooted marginalisation and must be tackled by creating inclusive systems.
- ◆ Social inclusion and diversity are essential for building a democratic, compassionate, and thriving society.

## Objective Questions

1. Who introduced the idea of intersectionality?
2. Which Article in the Indian Constitution ensures equality before the law?
3. What term refers to unfair treatment based on caste, gender, or class in labour?
4. What does the rule of law ensure?
5. Who is known for advocating legal reforms for Dalits and for writing the Indian Constitution?
6. What is the practice of cleaning human waste by hand called?
7. What kind of equality deals with equal voting rights?
8. What is the term for treating people based on their real-life needs?
9. What is social exclusion based on religion or community called?

## Answers

1. Kimberlé Crenshaw
2. Article 14
3. Exploitation
4. Fairness
5. Ambedkar
6. Manual Scavenging
7. Political
8. Equity
9. Discrimination

# Assignments

1. Define equality and explain its role as a foundational value in democracy.
2. Distinguish between formal equality and substantive equality with suitable examples.
3. Discuss how caste-based inequality continues to affect Indian society today.
4. What are the different types of equality, and how do they contribute to social justice?
5. Explain the concepts of social and political exclusion with real-life examples.
6. Describe the forms of labour exploitation and their ethical implications.
7. What role does intersectionality play in understanding inequality?
8. Analyse the impact of gender inequality and patriarchal norms on women's lives.
9. Discuss the challenges faced by manual scavengers and displaced tribal communities.
10. Suggest measures to promote social inclusion and diversity in education and workplaces.

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## Social Justice

# UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ describe the meaning and significance of social justice in ethical and policy contexts
- ◆ understand and explain theories such as Rawls' Justice as Fairness and the Capabilities Approach
- ◆ apply the concept of distributive justice to real-life policies and social institutions
- ◆ recognise systemic injustices and propose strategies to promote equity and inclusion

### Prerequisites

*"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."*  
-Desmond Tutu

In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a woman named Rosa Parks boarded a segregated bus and took a seat. When the bus driver told her to give it up for a white passenger, she quietly refused. That small act of courage sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott and helped ignite the American civil rights movement. Her choice to stay seated became a symbol of standing up to injustice.

Far away, in a small village in Kerala, a poor family watches with hope as their plantain tree bears fruit. It is a single bunch, grown through weeks of care and hard work. For this family, it represents more than just food; it embodies pride, a reward, and a rare comfort in a life of struggle. But just as the fruit ripens, a powerful landlord arrives. Without permission or payment, he cuts the bunch and takes it away.

The family says nothing. The father lowers his eyes. The mother holds back her tears. A child, too young to understand caste or class, watches in silence and learns for the first time what it means to be powerless.

This is the story told in Vazhakkula, a poem by Changampuzha Krishna Pillai. Through simple words and familiar images, it reveals a profound truth: justice is not only broken in courtrooms. It is broken in everyday life when power silences the weak. Social justice means more than merely speaking of fairness; it means standing beside those whose lives are shaped by unfairness they did not choose and cannot escape. As you begin this unit, ask yourself: Who gets to enjoy the fruit of labour? And who is left hungry?

## Keywords

Social Justice, Rawlsian Theory, Capabilities Approach, Distributive Justice, Equity

## Discussion

Social justice means treating everyone fairly and giving all people the same chances to live with dignity, safety, and respect. It is about ensuring that no one is left out simply because of their caste, gender, background, or identity. In a state like Kerala, which is known for its good schools, hospitals, and overall development, there are still many problems that illustrate not everyone is treated equally. Some girls and women suffer due to dowry demands or domestic violence. In some tragic cases, people are even harmed or killed for choosing their own partners in marriage, a phenomenon known as honour killing. Dalits, Adivasis, people with disabilities, and gender minorities often face unfair treatment and are excluded from good education, jobs, or public spaces. These issues highlight that while Kerala has made progress, we still need to do more to make society truly fair for everyone.

As a learner in the Open and Distance Learning system, you are also part of this journey towards fairness and justice. Learning about these issues helps you understand the real world and how we can improve it. Social justice is not only about rules and laws but also about being kind, standing up against wrongs, and ensuring everyone has a chance to live a good life. By engaging with these ideas, you contribute to building a society where no one is left behind and everyone can feel safe, respected, and included.

### 2.3.1 Social Justice

Social justice is the idea that everyone in society should have a fair and equal chance to live a good life. This means people should have equal access to resources such as education, healthcare, jobs, and housing. It applies to all, regardless of their gender, caste, religion, wealth, or ability. It particularly focuses on helping those who have been treated unfairly or excluded in the past. Social justice asks us to examine our world and change the systems that create unfair advantages for some while holding others back. It encourages respect for all people and aims to build a society where everyone can belong and participate equally.

The idea of social justice gained popularity during the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s. This was a time when many workers were treated poorly, paid inadequately, and forced to work in unsafe conditions. People began to demand fair treatment and better lives. This led to significant social movements, such as the fight to end slavery, the push for women to gain voting rights, the struggle for civil rights for all races, and the efforts to protect and recognise gender minorities. These movements helped expand the meaning of social justice beyond just employment and income. Today, it also encompasses ensuring people are treated fairly in areas such as education, health, culture, politics, and the environment.

At its core, social justice teaches us to look beyond individual actions and consider how rules, laws, and institutions shape people's lives. It illustrates that fairness is not solely about obeying the law but also about changing laws and systems that harm people or exclude them. For example, in fields like nursing and social work, professionals are trained to promote health equity and advocate for communities that are often overlooked. Transforming these values into real change requires effort. It means creating new policies, improving existing ones, and ensuring they work for everyone, not just the wealthy or powerful.

The main values of social justice are fairness, equity, dignity, and inclusion. Fairness means treating everyone justly and adhering to rules without showing favouritism. Equity involves providing people with what they need to succeed based on their individual circumstances. Dignity entails respecting every person's value and worth. Inclusion ensures that all people, especially those often marginalised, have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. These values are strongest when applied together. Fairness without inclusion may still leave people behind. Equity without dignity can feel cold or controlling. When fairness, equity, dignity, and inclusion come together, they help us build a society that is peaceful, just, and caring for everyone.

### **2.3.1.1 Real-Life Relevance: Why it Matters Today**

In today's changing world, fairness, equity, and dignity are not just moral values but essential tools for addressing real-life problems. Many people still face unfair treatment because of their race, gender, disability, or income, which manifests in areas such as education, healthcare, employment, and access to justice. Social movements like Black Lives Matter, MeToo, and the global disability rights movement remind us that many voices are still fighting to be heard and respected. These movements advocate for systems that work for everyone and treat each person with care and equality. When people feel respected and fairly treated, they are more likely to trust others, feel safe, and participate in building better communities. Fair societies are more peaceful, creative, and productive because they allow everyone to grow and contribute. Policies that support fairness and inclusion, such as equal pay and healthcare for all, help remove barriers and create real opportunities. Even during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, fairness and dignity proved vital for survival and recovery. As we face challenges such as climate change and technological advancements, these values remain the foundation for a kinder and more just world where every person can live with confidence and hope.

## 2.3.2 Theoretical Foundations of Social Justice

Social justice means ensuring everyone is treated fairly and has the opportunity to live with dignity, regardless of their background or situation. Two important theories help us understand how to create a just society. John Rawls' concept of Justice as Fairness asks us to imagine making rules without knowing who we are—for example, whether we are rich or poor, male or female, or part of any particular group. This thought experiment encourages us to think fairly and make choices that protect everyone's rights, especially those who are less fortunate. The Capabilities Approach, developed by Amartya Sen and expanded by Martha Nussbaum, focuses on what people are actually able to do with their lives, such as staying healthy, receiving an education, and participating in their communities. It teaches us that justice is not merely about providing people with the same resources but about helping everyone use what they have to lead a meaningful life. These two theories illustrate that true justice involves fairness, equal opportunities, and the freedom to grow and thrive.

### 2.3.2.1 Rawls' Theory of Justice as Fairness

John Rawls, a famous thinker of the 20th century, shared an incredible idea called Justice as Fairness to explain how we can build a fair and just society. He believed that if we want to create fair rules, we must imagine ourselves in an “original position,” a situation where we do not know anything about who we are in real life. We would not know if we are rich or poor, what religion we follow, if we are boys or girls, or how smart or strong we are. This is called the “*veil of ignorance*.” When people make decisions from this point of view, they cannot create rules that benefit only their group. They would be forced to think of what is fair for everyone, especially those who might not be as lucky in life. Rawls believed this way of thinking would help create rules that protect each person's dignity and rights.

Rawls' theory is built on two important principles. The first is the Principle of Equal Liberty, which means that everyone should enjoy the same basic freedoms, like the right to speak freely, to follow their religion, and to be treated equally by the law. These rights must be the same for all and should not be traded for anything else. The second is the Principle of Equality, which has two parts. The first is fair Equality of Opportunity, meaning everyone should have a genuine chance to succeed, no matter where they come from. The second is the Difference Principle, which states that some differences in wealth or power are acceptable, but only if they help improve the lives of those who are least well off. Rawls did not agree with the idea that society should aim solely for the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Instead, he believed fairness and justice must come first, especially for the most disadvantaged people.

Rawls called his idea justice as fairness because it focuses on creating systems where everyone is treated with respect and given the support they need to thrive. It is not just about stopping unfair treatment; it is also about building a society where people can grow and live with dignity, no matter their background. His ideas continue to guide laws, policies, and ethical thinking in many parts of the world. Rawls' theory helps us understand that fairness is not just about being kind, but about building fair rules and institutions that work for everyone, including those who often get left behind.

### 2.3.2.2 Capabilities Approach

The Capabilities Approach, developed by economist Amartya Sen and later expanded by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, is a meaningful and transformative way to think about justice and human development. Instead of just looking at how much money people have or how fast a country's economy grows, this approach asks a deeper question: *“What can people actually do and be in their lives?”* Can they go to school and really learn? Can they stay healthy, live safely, express their thoughts freely, and be part of their community? These are known as “capabilities,” the real freedoms and chances people have to live a life they value. Sen believed that a just society should focus on expanding these freedoms so that everyone, especially those facing disadvantages, can lead meaningful lives with dignity.

Amartya Sen introduced this idea in the 1980s as a response to older models that only measured success by income or total happiness. He pointed out that people with the same amount of resources might still live very different lives. For example, someone who has a disability or faces discrimination may need more support to reach the same level of opportunity. That is why Sen argued that fairness is not just about giving everyone the same things, but about making sure everyone can “use” those things to reach their full potential. He did not provide a fixed list of capabilities, believing they should be discussed and chosen by each society based on its values and needs.

Martha Nussbaum built on Sen’s work by creating a list of ten essential capabilities that she believes all people must have to live with dignity. These include life, health, bodily safety, education, emotional well-being, and the ability to take part in politics and community life. She also stressed that each person should reach at least a “*minimum level*” in all of these areas. This means that justice is not only about avoiding harm but about actively supporting people to live full and flourishing lives. Nussbaum’s approach is especially important for understanding the rights of women, children, people with disabilities, and other groups who often face unequal treatment in society.

What makes the Capabilities Approach so special is that it looks beyond just giving people resources. It asks: *“Can people actually use what they are given to live better lives?”* For example, building a school is not enough if children cannot attend because of poverty, discrimination, or disability. Giving food does not help if someone cannot digest it properly or lacks clean water. That is why this approach puts human dignity and real freedom at the centre of development and justice. It has helped shape major global efforts, like the United Nations Human Development Index, and has influenced how we think about poverty, rights, and fairness. In essence, the Capabilities Approach teaches us that a good society is one where everyone, not just the lucky or strong, can grow, choose, and thrive.

### 2.3.3 Distributive Justice in Practice

Distributive justice means making sure that things like money, jobs, education, and healthcare are shared fairly in society. It is about asking important questions like who gets what and why. To answer these questions, we use different ideas such as equality, where everyone gets the same; need, where people who have less receive more help; merit, where those who work hard are rewarded; contribution, where people are given

based on what they give; and equity, where people are treated fairly based on their unique situation. These principles guide governments and institutions in deciding how to share resources in ways that are just and acceptable to most people.

In real life, distributive justice is seen in many areas. In education, it means giving extra support to students from poor backgrounds or those with disabilities so they can learn well like others. In healthcare, it ensures that poor people or those living far from hospitals can still get treatment, even if they cannot pay much. During health emergencies like pandemics, fair rules are created to decide who gets care or vaccines first, usually starting with those who are most at risk. In public services and job opportunities, systems such as the reservation policy in India help people from historically disadvantaged communities like Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes to have better access to education and employment.

Distributive justice also shapes how laws are made, how governments run programmes, and how people feel about fairness in society. For example, the Indian Constitution supports these ideas through Article 14, which states that everyone should be treated equally before the law. Tax systems that ask richer people to pay a higher share help fund important services such as free schools, food programmes, and pensions for the elderly or unemployed. These efforts not only support those in need but also help reduce feelings of injustice and bring people closer together by building trust in the system.

Even though distributive justice sounds simple, it can be hard to decide what is truly fair. Should everyone be treated the same, or should those with greater needs get more help? Should hard work matter more than someone's background? These questions often lead to serious debates. But the main goal of distributive justice is to build a society where no one is left out, and everyone has a real chance to live with respect and hope. It teaches us that fairness is not just about dividing things equally but about understanding people's different needs and doing what is right for the whole community.

### 2.3.4 Social Policy and Justice

Social policy means the plans and actions made by the government to solve social problems and improve people's lives. It includes important areas such as healthcare, education, housing, jobs, and support for those in need. These policies are closely connected to social justice, which is the belief that everyone should have a fair chance to live with dignity and access the things they need. Fairness in social policy is based on certain values such as equality, where everyone is treated the same; equity, where people who need more help receive more support; participation, where people are involved in decisions; human rights, where everyone is treated with respect; and diversity, where different communities are understood and included. Social policy helps decide what people receive, how they receive it, and why they receive it, making sure everyone has access to basic services and opportunities. It is not only about outcomes but also about the process of decision-making. This includes how policies are planned, carried out, and evaluated, ensuring that fairness and justice are maintained at every stage.

Justice is at the heart of good social policy because it helps share resources fairly and supports those who are struggling the most. For example, free public schools and healthcare services benefit everyone, while additional programs like food assistance, job

training, or social housing help those in greater need. Rules such as the minimum wage or social security protect workers, the elderly, and others who may be vulnerable. At the same time, social policies must address real-life problems such as limited resources, unfair treatment, and new challenges like climate change or health crises. When social policies are guided by justice, they help build a fairer and more caring society where every person feels included, respected, and able to live a good life.

### **2.3.4.1 Applying Theories to Policy-Making**

Applying theories of justice to policy-making means using important ideas about fairness to guide real decisions that affect how people live. These theories help governments decide how to share resources, provide opportunities, and protect rights in ways that support everyone. One important idea is distributive justice, which focuses on sharing wealth, services, and responsibilities fairly. Different theories offer different perspectives on fairness. Egalitarianism supports providing everyone with the same basic necessities, such as healthcare and education. Utilitarianism aims to create the most happiness for the greatest number of people by choosing actions that benefit many. Libertarianism values individual freedom and believes people should keep what they earn, with less assistance from the government. Rawlsian justice posits that fairness means prioritising assistance to those who have the least. The capabilities approach considers what people are genuinely able to achieve in their lives, such as maintaining good health, obtaining an education, and participating in their communities.

These ideas help shape various types of social policies. Egalitarian principles support public services for all. Utilitarian thinking is applied in planning areas such as transport and energy to benefit many people simultaneously. Libertarian views may result in fewer government programmes but stronger protections for private property and individual freedom. Rawlsian justice advocates for higher taxes on the wealthy to aid the poor, alongside policies like job training or school admissions for disadvantaged groups. The capabilities approach focuses on enhancing people's genuine life chances through improved healthcare, clean water, and access to education. Policymakers utilise tools to measure whether policies are fair and effective, such as income comparisons or assessments of whether people can truly live fulfilling lives.

Even though these theories are helpful, implementing them in real life can be challenging. People hold different beliefs about what is fair, and sometimes these beliefs conflict. Leaders must balance individual rights with the needs of society as a whole. They must also consider what justice means in different cultural contexts and situations. Despite these challenges, applying theories of justice in policy-making helps create societies that are fairer, more inclusive, and respectful. It guides leaders to develop laws and programmes that enable everyone to live with dignity and hope.

### **2.3.4.2 Case Examples from India and Global Contexts**

Distributive justice in India is closely tied to the country's Constitution and legal system. It seeks to create fairness by assisting those who have faced historical injustices. One well-known example is the reservation system, which allocates seats in educational institutions and government jobs for groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes. This policy follows the recommendations of the Mandal

Commission and was upheld by the Supreme Court in the Indra Sawhney case in 1992. Another significant law in Maharashtra assists tribal communities in reclaiming land that was unjustly taken from them long ago. These efforts align with the goals outlined in the Constitution, which emphasises fair resource distribution and preventing any one group from becoming excessively wealthy or powerful. India also strives for fairness in environmental protection. For instance, polluting industries are mandated to rectify the damage they cause and compensate those affected. This demonstrates the courts' commitment to justice in environmental matters. Social programmes like MGNREGA exemplify distributive justice by providing rural families with paid work for 100 days each year, enabling them to earn a living with dignity. Taxes collected from those who can afford to pay more are then allocated to support these types of initiatives, ensuring help reaches those who need it most.

In other countries, distributive justice takes different but equally significant forms. In Brazil, poor families receive financial assistance through a programme called Bolsa Familia, contingent on their children attending school and receiving health check-ups. In Ethiopia, a similar programme aids families facing food insecurity. The United Kingdom provides free healthcare for all through its National Health Service, contributing to reducing health disparities between wealthy and poorer populations. In Sweden, taxes are levied based on income, and the revenue supports unemployment benefits, housing assistance, and support for families with children. These examples illustrate how fairness in resource distribution is implemented in various parts of the world. Environmental and legal justice are also critical globally. In the United States, communities advocate against the placement of polluting factories in economically disadvantaged or minority areas, demanding cleaner air and water for all. Legal organisations, such as the Innocence Project, strive to assist individuals who have been wrongfully incarcerated. In African nations like Kenya and Botswana, laws safeguard the health rights of workers and rural populations by ensuring access to medical care. All these initiatives, whether related to land, health, employment, or the environment, demonstrate that distributive justice is a powerful tool for fostering fairer, more compassionate, and inclusive societies.

### **2.3.4.3 Challenges in Implementing Just Policies**

Creating and implementing fair and just policies is not always straightforward, particularly when individuals have differing interpretations of what fairness entails. Some believe justice means treating everyone the same, while others argue it necessitates providing more assistance to those who need it most. These differences often lead to disagreements when governments attempt to determine what is fair for all. Additionally, translating essential concepts like fairness and equal opportunity into concrete, measurable actions can be challenging. For example, when seeking to assist groups that have historically faced discrimination, it can be difficult to ascertain whether the support is genuinely effective, as the tools used to measure progress might be limited or unclear.

### When Explaining Becomes a Power Play: The Ethics of Mansplaining



Mansplaining is a term used to describe a form of gendered communication in which a man explains something to a woman in a condescending or overly confident way, assuming she knows less about it, even when she may be more knowledgeable or an expert. The word combines “man” and “explaining,” and became widely known after author Rebecca Solnit described an incident where a man explained her own book to her, unaware that she had written it.

Many times, powerful individuals or groups resist change, particularly if such changes require them to relinquish certain advantages. Policies aimed at redistributing wealth or opportunities more equitably can encounter significant opposition and the dissemination of misinformation. Financial constraints also pose challenges, as programmes like free healthcare or education require substantial funding, and governments often have to make choices between various critical areas, such as defence or infrastructure. Even when effective policies are established, they may falter due to inadequate planning, corruption, or sluggish governmental processes. Deep-seated issues like caste, gender, or class inequality complicate matters further. People’s beliefs and traditions also influence how policies are received. For instance, some may oppose initiatives designed to assist women or specific social groups due to longstanding cultural norms. Without robust mechanisms to evaluate whether policies are genuinely benefiting people, it becomes challenging to rectify issues or enhance regulations. To improve the efficacy of fair policies, governments require strong systems, respectful dialogue with communities, and a genuine understanding of people’s lives and challenges.

### 2.3.5 Strategies for Promoting Equity and Addressing Injustice

Promoting fairness and addressing injustice necessitates thoughtful and enduring measures, rather than quick fixes. One crucial approach involves altering the rules and systems that often perpetuate unfairness in the first place. This entails crafting policies that treat everyone equally while considering the broader context rather than simply assisting individuals one at a time. A useful framework for this is the “5-R” approach: *Recognition* (acknowledging past wrongs), *Representation* (ensuring everyone has a voice), *Respect* (treating people with dignity), *Reparation* (making amends for harms done), and *Reclamation* (restoring rights and opportunities). It is also vital to design services in ways that honour people’s culture, language, and local needs, ensuring that no one is left out.

Another vital part of promoting justice is allowing communities to lead the change, especially those who have been treated unfairly for a long time. Supporting youth groups and collaborating across different areas like health, education, and law helps build stronger, fairer communities. It is also important to combat bias and ensure there are fair rules at work, such as equal pay and leadership roles for all. To maintain progress, we need public awareness, strong laws, and fair systems where people can speak up if

something is wrong. Teaching about fairness and injustice helps everyone understand each other better. Assisting small businesses, ensuring workers are treated well, and regularly checking whether changes are effective are all part of building a society where everyone has a fair chance.

### **2.3.5.1 Affirmative Action, Reservations, Inclusive Laws**

Affirmative action in India comprises a set of special rules and laws designed to assist people who have been treated unfairly for a long time. These include individuals from lower castes, tribal communities, poor families, people with disabilities, and others who have been excluded from quality education, jobs, and government roles. One well-known method of achieving this is through reservations, where certain seats in schools, government jobs, and politics are allocated for these groups. This helps ensure everyone has a fair chance to grow, learn, and participate in nation-building. These measures are based on the Indian Constitution, particularly Articles 15 and 16, which empower the government to provide extra support to disadvantaged individuals. Other articles, such as 330 to 342, ensure they also have a voice in politics and local decision-making.

Over time, these rules have become even more inclusive. For example, the Right to Education Act ensures all children, including those with disabilities, can attend school. The law also promotes equal opportunities for women and people from gender minorities. Significant court decisions like NALSA and Navtej Singh Johar have helped protect the rights of transgender individuals and those with diverse gender identities. Today, some workplaces also implement Equal Opportunity Policies to create fair and welcoming environments. Despite many changes, issues such as unfair treatment in private companies and a lack of awareness still persist. Nevertheless, India's efforts to support all its citizens, especially those who have been marginalised, are viewed as a strong example of how a country can strive to become more just and equitable for everyone.

### **2.3.5.2 Gender Equity, Caste Justice, and Rights of Marginalized Communities**

Gender equity, caste justice, and the rights of marginalised communities are crucial for making India a fair and equal place for everyone. The Indian Constitution stipulates that all people should be treated equally and with respect. It permits the government to establish special laws and programmes that support women, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, the National Creche Scheme, and Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana. In 2023, a significant change was made to reserve one-third of the seats in Parliament and state assemblies for women. This helps women have a stronger voice in governance. Even with these efforts, women continue to face numerous challenges, such as lower pay, limited leadership roles, and experiences of violence.

Caste justice is another vital aspect of India's plan for equality. The Constitution prohibits untouchability and any form of discrimination based on caste. It mandates the government to support people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Laws like the Protection of Civil Rights Act and the SC and ST Prevention of Atrocities Act were enacted to combat caste injustice. Reservation policies facilitate these communities' access to better education, jobs, and government positions. However, some challenges remain, such as violence and underrepresentation in high-level positions, including the judiciary.

The rights of marginalised communities also encompass groups like Adivasis, religious minorities, people with disabilities, and gender minorities. Their rights are safeguarded by the Constitution and laws like the Right to Education Act and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. Special commissions work to protect these groups, and programmes like scholarships and hostels assist students from impoverished and minority communities. Still, some individuals face multiple challenges simultaneously. For example, a Dalit woman or a person with a disability from a minority background may encounter additional difficulties. To truly realise equality for all in India, we need robust laws, compassionate leaders, and a society that respects and includes everyone. When individuals are treated fairly and given equal opportunities, our entire country becomes stronger and better.

### **2.3.5.3 Grassroots Movements and Civil Society Efforts**

Grassroots movements and civil society organisations are groups formed by everyday people in local communities who come together to enact change and create a fairer society. In India, these groups have played a significant role in combating unfair treatment based on caste, gender, poverty, and environmental degradation. Movements like the Chipko Movement, SEWA, and anti-caste campaigns have empowered individuals to advocate for their rights and protect their communities. These efforts demonstrate that when people unite, they can challenge injustice and demand better services, such as clean water, education, and healthcare, particularly where government assistance is lacking.

These organisations have also contributed to the creation of important laws like the Right to Information Act, which allows individuals to inquire about government operations, and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, which supports individuals with disabilities. Groups like *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* and *Akshaya Patra* have made a tangible difference by promoting transparency and ensuring children receive meals at school. Globally, movements like *Black Lives Matter* and those advocating for climate justice illustrate that local voices can drive global change. Although these groups face challenges such as a lack of funding and pressure from powerful entities, they are vital to building a more just, equal, and compassionate society. Supporting them helps ensure everyone's voice is heard and respected.

### **2.3.6 Conclusion and Reflection**

Justice is one of the most important values in building a kind and fair society. It ensures that everyone is treated with respect and given equal chances, regardless of who they are or where they come from. A just society protects individuals from unfair treatment, grants them freedom, and enables them to live with dignity. When justice is upheld, people trust one another more, feel safer, and collaborate to strengthen communities. Justice also underpins laws and policies that assist the poor, prevent discrimination, and provide everyone access to education, healthcare, and employment. These efforts not only distribute resources more equitably but also help individuals feel valued and included.

Social justice goes beyond mere fairness. It compels us to examine the deeper issues in society and address them by creating equal opportunities for all. It teaches us that justice is not solely about having good laws but about treating others with care and fairness every day. From improving schools for all children to providing support to those who have been left behind, justice helps us build a better world. Although challenges remain,

the concept of social justice offers us hope and direction. It reminds us that a truly good society is one where everyone can grow, share, and live with pride and purpose.

## Recap

- ◆ Social justice is about fairness, dignity, and inclusion for all, particularly marginalised groups.
- ◆ Kerala's development story still reveals injustices like dowry, honour killings, and caste-based discrimination.
- ◆ Theories of justice, such as Rawls' Justice as Fairness and the Sen–Nussbaum Capabilities Approach, offer ethical frameworks that aid in creating just societies.
- ◆ Distributive justice ensures fair allocation of resources like healthcare, jobs, and education based on equality, need, and merit.
- ◆ Social policy must reflect justice values to guarantee dignity, inclusion, and fairness in welfare programmes.
- ◆ Case studies from India and the world demonstrate practical applications of just policies (e.g., reservations, MGNREGA, Bolsa Familia).
- ◆ Challenges to justice include resistance from elites, cultural prejudices, lack of resources, and administrative barriers.
- ◆ Strategies like the 5Rs (Recognition, Representation, Respect, Reparation, Reclamation), affirmative action, and civil society movements are crucial to achieving justice.

## Objective Questions

1. Who introduced the Capabilities Approach?
2. What is the “veil of ignorance” associated with?
3. Which Indian article ensures equality before the law?
4. What does MGNREGA guarantee?
5. Which theory emphasises human functioning and freedom?
6. What does the Difference Principle focus on?
7. What does Article 15 of the Indian Constitution allow?

8. Which movement highlighted environmental justice in India?
9. Which act ensures the rights of transgender persons?
10. What principle is emphasised by affirmative action?

## Answers

1. Amartya Sen
2. Rawls
3. Article 14
4. Employment
5. Capabilities
6. Disadvantaged
7. Reservation
8. Chipko
9. NALSA
10. Equity

## Assignments

1. Define social justice and explain its importance in a democratic society.
2. Discuss the key principles of Rawls' theory of justice.
3. Compare Rawlsian theory with the Capabilities Approach.
4. How does distributive justice influence policy decisions in India?
5. Explain with examples how social justice policies are implemented in health and education.
6. What are the major challenges in achieving social justice in India?
7. Critically evaluate affirmative action policies in India.
8. Describe the 5Rs of promoting equity.

9. Discuss the role of civil society and grassroots movements in social justice.
10. Why is gender equity a core part of justice in Indian society?

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SGOU



**BLOCK**

# Ethics of Information and Technology



# Ethics in Information Literacy and Media Analysis

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

On completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the ethical principles guiding the production and dissemination of information across various media platforms
- ◆ analyse the influence of political ideologies and power structures on information creation and media narratives
- ◆ evaluate ethical challenges in the communication and consumption of media content in both traditional and digital contexts
- ◆ understand ethical frameworks to assess real-world media cases and make informed judgments about responsible information use

### Prerequisites

In this information age, information flows faster than ever before, crossing borders and devices in seconds. Still, this unprecedented access comes with equally unprecedented responsibilities. Ethical lapses in information production and sharing can amplify misinformation, distort political debates, and erode public trust. This unit invites you to explore the moral compass that guides how information is created, interpreted, and disseminated. We will examine the duties of journalists, content creators, and consumers in ensuring accuracy and fairness while also unraveling how political agendas shape what we see and read. By the end, you will not only understand the ethical frameworks behind media practice but also be equipped to navigate the moral challenges of consuming and sharing information in a hyper-connected world.

## Keywords

Code of ethics, Information dissemination, Ethical journalism, Media consumption, Information literacy, Misinformation, Manipulation

## Discussion

The twenty-first century has been defined by the unprecedented speed, scale, and reach of information. The rise of the internet, social media platforms, and digital communication tools has created a world in which information flows across borders in seconds. This interconnected environment has opened remarkable opportunities for learning, creativity, and civic engagement; however, it has also presented deep ethical challenges. Questions of responsibility, integrity, transparency, and fairness have become central to how we produce, share, and consume information.

Information literacy, the ability to identify, locate, evaluate, and use information effectively, cannot be separated from ethical considerations. The very act of producing and disseminating information has consequences, influencing public opinion, shaping policy, and impacting individuals' lives. Ethical media analysis involves not only detecting bias, propaganda, and manipulation but also understanding the systemic and political forces that influence content creation.

This unit examines three core themes: the ethical considerations and responsibilities in information production and dissemination; the political influences on information and content creation; and the ethical challenges involved in communication and media consumption. Each section integrates examples from contemporary media landscapes, historical context, and case studies that highlight the real-world implications of these issues.

### 3.1.1 Ethical Considerations and Responsibilities in Information Production and Dissemination

Producing and disseminating information is never a neutral act. Every news report, social media post, documentary, or academic paper is shaped by decisions about what to include, what to omit, and how to frame the message. These decisions carry ethical weight because they influence how audiences interpret reality.

One of the most fundamental ethical principles in information production is accuracy. Journalists, researchers, and content creators have a responsibility to verify facts, provide context, and avoid presenting speculation as fact. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics emphasises that "ethical journalism should be accurate and fair," highlighting the moral duty to seek truth and report it. When errors occur, they should be corrected promptly and transparently.

Another principle is fairness. Ethical communicators strive to represent multiple perspectives, particularly when reporting on contentious issues. Failing to do so risks reinforcing stereotypes or contributing to public polarization. Fairness is not the same

as false equivalence; it requires careful discernment to avoid giving undue weight to fringe or harmful viewpoints in the name of balance.

Transparency is equally important. Audiences have the right to know the sources of information, the methods used to gather it, and any potential conflicts of interest. In investigative reporting, for instance, disclosing relationships with sources or funders is essential for maintaining credibility. Similarly, in academic publishing, researchers are expected to reveal funding sources and affiliations that might bias their findings.

In the digital age, the ethical responsibilities of information dissemination have expanded to include considerations of speed and virality. Social media rewards immediacy, often at the expense of verification. This dynamic can lead to the rapid spread of unverified or false information, which may cause harm before corrections can be made. Ethical communicators must balance the desire for timely reporting with the need for accuracy, recognising that once misinformation is released, it can be difficult to fully retract its influence.

A final consideration is the potential impact of information on vulnerable populations. Reporting on sensitive topics such as mental health, sexual violence, or minority communities requires sensitivity to avoid causing harm or reinforcing stigma. Ethical guidelines in these contexts may involve anonymising identities, avoiding sensationalism, and prioritising the dignity of those involved over the pursuit of audience engagement.

### **The 2010 Haiti Earthquake and Media Ethics**

Following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, global media coverage played a crucial role in mobilising humanitarian aid. However, ethical concerns emerged regarding the portrayal of Haitian people. Some reports relied on images of devastation and suffering without context, reducing individuals to symbols of tragedy. Others amplified unverified rumours about looting, which reinforced harmful stereotypes and influenced how aid was distributed. This case illustrates the ethical responsibility to balance urgency with accuracy and to portray affected communities with dignity and agency.

### **3.1.2 Political Influences on Information and Content Creation**

The production of information is deeply embedded in political and economic systems. Media organisations operate within regulatory frameworks, respond to political pressures, and are often shaped by the ideologies of their owners or sponsors. Understanding these influences is essential to ethical media analysis.

In many countries, state-owned or state-controlled media explicitly reflect government priorities. In such cases, political leaders may directly influence editorial decisions, shaping narratives to support official policies or suppress dissenting voices. In authoritarian regimes, censorship may prevent certain topics from being reported altogether, while in more open societies, political influence may operate through subtler mechanisms such as advertising revenue, lobbying, and preferential access to sources.

Even in ostensibly free media environments, political influence can shape coverage through agenda-setting the process by which media outlets determine which issues receive attention. Political actors, from elected officials to lobbyists, compete to frame issues in ways that align with their interests. For example, during election campaigns, candidates and their parties strategically release information, time announcements, and use press conferences to dominate news cycles.

Ownership patterns in media industries also have political implications. In highly concentrated media markets, a small number of corporations control a large proportion of information flows. This can limit the diversity of viewpoints and result in editorial policies that reflect corporate or political affiliations. Rupert Murdoch's media empire, which includes outlets such as Fox News and The Times, has been cited as an example of how media ownership can influence political discourse across multiple countries.

Political influence extends to digital platforms, where algorithms determine which stories users are most likely to see. These algorithms can be influenced by political actors who invest in targeted advertising or exploit platform vulnerabilities to spread disinformation. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how data harvested from millions of Facebook users was used to deliver politically targeted messages during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum, raising questions about consent, privacy, and the manipulation of democratic processes.

#### **Media Blackouts and Political Control**

In 2019, the Indian government imposed a months-long internet shutdown in Jammu and Kashmir following the revocation of the region's special constitutional status. The stated rationale was to prevent the spread of misinformation and maintain public order, but the blackout also restricted access to independent reporting and hindered the flow of information both within the region and to the outside world. Critics argued that the shutdown was a form of political control that limited transparency and undermined democratic accountability.

### **3.1.3 Ethical Challenges in Communication and Consumption of Media Content**

Ethical challenges are not limited to the producers of information; consumers also bear responsibilities in how they engage with media. The digital age has blurred the lines between producers and consumers, with individuals often functioning as both through their social media activity. Sharing, commenting, and liking content can amplify messages, whether true or false.

One major challenge is the temptation to share sensational content without verification. In a highly networked environment, this behaviour can contribute to the spread of misinformation, sometimes with harmful consequences. Ethical consumption of media involves pausing to evaluate the credibility of sources, checking facts, and considering the potential impact before amplifying content.

Privacy is another ethical concern. The widespread collection and use of personal data for targeted advertising or content recommendations raises questions about consent and surveillance. Users often underestimate the extent to which their online behaviour is tracked and monetised. Ethical media consumption requires awareness of these dynamics and the ability to make informed decisions about personal data.

Echo chambers and filter bubbles present further challenges. When algorithms curate content based on past behaviour, users may be exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs. This can limit critical engagement with diverse perspectives and contribute to societal polarisation. Overcoming this challenge requires intentional efforts to seek out varied sources and viewpoints.

Finally, the commodification of attention has ethical implications for mental health and civic engagement. Platforms are designed to capture and retain user attention, often through emotionally charged or sensational content. This design can encourage superficial engagement with complex issues, replacing deep understanding with fleeting impressions. Ethical communication and consumption involve resisting manipulative design features and prioritising substantive engagement over passive scrolling.

### **The “Plandemic” Video and Viral Misinformation**

In May 2020, a video titled *Plandemic* spread widely across social media platforms, promoting conspiracy theories about COVID-19. Despite being debunked by multiple fact-checkers, the video was viewed millions of times before platforms removed it. This case highlights the ethical challenge for consumers: even sharing a video “just to see what others think” can contribute to its visibility and perceived legitimacy. It also underscores the responsibility of platforms to act quickly and transparently in addressing harmful content.

Ethics in information literacy and media analysis is a complex and evolving field. Producers of information carry the responsibility to ensure accuracy, fairness, transparency, and respect for human dignity. Political influences on media shape what information is available, how it is framed, and whose voices are heard. Consumers, too, have ethical obligations: to verify information, protect privacy, seek diverse perspectives, and resist the lure of sensationalism.

#### **3.1.3.1 Laws and Policies Relevant to Ethics in Communication and Media**

The twenty-first century has transformed communication and media into a global, real-time network, where information flows across borders instantly. While this democratises access and enhances participation, it also raises deep ethical concerns. Misinformation, privacy breaches, algorithmic bias, sensationalism, hate speech, and the commercialisation of personal data are some of the challenges that affect both producers and consumers of media content. To address these, a combination of laws, policies, and ethical guidelines has been developed at national and international levels. These frameworks are not merely technical regulations; they set the ethical compass for responsible communication, balancing freedom of expression with accountability and fairness. Let us look at some of the major laws and policies related to ethics in communication and media in India and across the world:

## 1. Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 (India)

The IT Act, 2000, is India's primary law governing digital communication and electronic commerce. Its relevance to ethics lies in how it addresses privacy, cybercrimes, and accountability in online communication:

- ◆ **Cybercrime & Misuse:** Sections dealing with hacking, identity theft, cyberstalking, and spreading obscene or offensive material protect individuals from harm in online interactions.
- ◆ **Ethical Relevance:** By criminalising the spread of obscene and defamatory content, the Act creates boundaries against unethical communication such as cyberbullying or revenge pornography.
- ◆ **Intermediary Guidelines & IT Rules (2021):** Updated rules hold social media platforms accountable for content moderation, requiring grievance redressal mechanisms and takedown of harmful content.
- ◆ **Ethical Debate:** Balancing state regulation with freedom of expression is a major challenge, as excessive control may lead to censorship, while inadequate regulation permits online abuse.

## 2. General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), 2018 (European Union)

GDPR is globally recognised as the gold standard for data protection and privacy. Its importance in the media and communication sphere is profound:

- ◆ **Informed Consent:** Organisations must obtain clear consent before collecting personal data, ensuring users are aware of how their data is used.
- ◆ **Right to be Forgotten:** Individuals can demand deletion of their data, an ethical safeguard against the permanent trace of online mistakes or unwanted exposure.
- ◆ **Accountability & Transparency:** Media platforms and advertisers must disclose data practices, reducing exploitative targeting or manipulation.
- ◆ **Ethical Relevance:** GDPR challenges the common practice of "surveillance capitalism," where personal data is monetised without adequate consent, raising questions of dignity and autonomy in communication.

## 3. UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021)

AI increasingly mediates communication from social media feeds to content moderation and recommendation algorithms. UNESCO developed the first global framework for AI ethics.

- ◆ **Human Rights & Human Dignity:** AI in media must respect fundamental rights, avoiding discriminatory profiling or biased content curation.
- ◆ **Transparency & Explainability:** Media algorithms (e.g., news feeds, search results) should be explainable to prevent opaque manipulation of public opinion.

- ◆ **Accountability:** States and private corporations must be accountable for the societal impacts of AI-driven communication.
- ◆ **Sustainability & Diversity:** Encourages AI systems to promote cultural diversity and avoid the homogenisation of global media.
- ◆ **Ethical Relevance:** UNESCO AI ethics connects directly with concerns about filter bubbles, echo chambers, and algorithmic bias in digital communication.

#### 4. Press Council of India Guidelines

In traditional media, the Press Council of India (PCI) provides a code of ethics that remains relevant even in the digital age:

- ◆ **Accuracy & Fairness:** Journalists are expected to avoid sensationalism, distortion, or misrepresentation.
- ◆ **Privacy & Dignity:** Coverage of vulnerable groups, victims of violence, or minors must respect privacy.
- ◆ **Communal Harmony:** Media must avoid publishing content that promotes hatred or communal disharmony.
- ◆ **Paid News & Advertorials:** PCI cautions against blending news with advertisements, an unethical practice that manipulates public opinion.
- ◆ **Ethical Relevance:** With the rise of digital journalism and hybrid platforms, PCI's guidelines highlight enduring principles of responsible reporting and media ethics.

#### 5. Larger Context: Global and National Ethical Challenges

- ◆ **Misinformation & Fake News:** Despite IT Act provisions and PCI guidelines, misinformation spreads rapidly on digital platforms, raising questions about responsibility and regulation.
- ◆ **Surveillance & Privacy:** Governments and corporations alike use communication data for surveillance, challenging ethical norms of autonomy and dignity (countered partly by GDPR).
- ◆ **Algorithmic Bias:** AI-driven platforms may amplify extremist content for engagement, violating fairness and inclusivity (addressed in UNESCO's AI ethics).
- ◆ **Freedom of Expression vs. Harm:** Legal frameworks struggle to balance the right to free speech with the need to curb hate speech, trolling, and harmful propaganda.
- ◆ **Commercialisation of Attention:** The “attention economy” of social media prioritises profit over ethics, often leading to addictive design and mental health impacts.

Laws like the IT Act, GDPR, international frameworks such as UNESCO's AI Ethics, and national codes like the Press Council of India guidelines represent attempts to translate ethical concerns into enforceable standards. Yet, gaps remain: enforcement varies, global cooperation is limited, and technology evolves faster than regulation. In the broader ethical landscape, these policies highlight that communication is not only about the freedom to speak but also about the responsibility of shaping social realities. Ethical consumption and communication of media content therefore require a dual approach: strong legal safeguards and a culture of media literacy, accountability, and respect for human dignity.

In a world where information flows continuously and the boundaries between producer and consumer blur, ethical awareness must be an integral part of both media creation and media engagement. This awareness is not static; it must evolve alongside technological developments, political shifts, and societal changes. Ultimately, the goal is to foster an information environment that supports truth, accountability, and democratic participation.

## Recap

- ◆ The 21st-century information age is marked by the speed, scale, and global reach of information flows.
- ◆ Information literacy is the ability to identify, evaluate, and use information effectively, tied to ethics.
- ◆ Producing and sharing information always involves choices of inclusion, omission, and framing, which carry ethical weight.
- ◆ Accuracy is a fundamental principle; journalists and creators must verify facts and correct errors promptly.
- ◆ Fairness requires the representation of multiple perspectives without reinforcing stereotypes or giving undue weight to fringe views.
- ◆ Transparency involves disclosing sources, methods, and possible conflicts of interest (e.g., in journalism and research).
- ◆ In the digital age, the drive for speed and virality often undermines verification, leading to harmful misinformation spread.
- ◆ Sensitive reporting on issues like mental health, sexual violence, or minorities requires dignity, anonymity, and care.
- ◆ Political influence shapes media content through censorship, regulation, lobbying, and ownership control.
- ◆ Agenda-setting: media outlets decide which issues receive attention, often influenced by political or corporate actors.
- ◆ Media concentration (e.g., the Murdoch empire) reduces the diversity of viewpoints and reflects owner ideologies.

- ◆ Algorithms on digital platforms amplify politically targeted ads, disinformation, and manipulation (e.g., the Cambridge Analytica scandal).
- ◆ Consumers share, like, and comment, blurring the line between producer and consumer of media.
- ◆ Sharing unverified or sensational content contributes to the spread of misinformation and harm.
- ◆ Privacy concerns arise from data collection, surveillance, and monetisation by platforms.
- ◆ Echo chambers and filter bubbles reinforce existing beliefs, polarising society.
- ◆ The commodification of attention through manipulative design features undermines deep engagement and harms mental health.
- ◆ Both producers and consumers share ethical responsibilities in shaping media environments.
- ◆ Ethical awareness in information use must adapt to technological and political changes.
- ◆ The ultimate goal is an information environment that supports truth, accountability, and democracy.
- ◆ The IT Act, 2000, is India's primary law governing digital communication and electronic commerce.
- ◆ The relevance of the IT Act to ethics lies in how it addresses privacy, cybercrimes, and accountability in online communication.
- ◆ GDPR is globally recognised as the gold standard for data protection and privacy. Its importance in the media and communication sphere is profound.
- ◆ AI increasingly mediates communication, from social media feeds to content moderation and recommendation algorithms; UNESCO developed the first global framework for AI ethics.
- ◆ In traditional media, the Press Council of India (PCI) provides a code of ethics that remains relevant even in the digital age.

## Objective Questions

1. Which ethical principle requires verifying facts and avoiding speculation as fact?
2. Representing multiple perspectives in reporting reflects which principle?

3. Which principle emphasises disclosing sources, methods, and conflicts of interest?
4. Which professional body's Code of Ethics highlights accuracy and fairness?
5. What type of media often reflects direct government priorities?
6. What process involves deciding which issues receive media attention?
7. Name the media empire often cited for its influence on political discourse.
8. Which scandal revealed Facebook data misuse in elections and Brexit?
9. What online environment reinforces existing beliefs through curated content?
10. What term describes selective exposure caused by algorithms limiting perspectives?
11. What is commodified by platforms designed to capture user focus?
12. Ethical media practices ultimately aim to strengthen which system?
13. Which Indian law governs digital communication and cybercrimes?
14. Which regulation introduced the "Right to be Forgotten"?
15. Which global body issued the 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence?
16. Which council in India issues guidelines to uphold journalistic ethics?
17. Which economy model is criticised for exploiting user data and attention?

## Answers

1. Accuracy
2. Fairness
3. Transparency
4. SPJ (Society of Professional Journalists)
5. State-owned
6. Agenda-setting
7. Murdoch

8. Cambridge Analytica
9. Echo Chamber
10. Filter Bubble
11. Attention
12. Democracy
13. IT Act
14. GDPR
15. UNESCO
16. PCI (Press Council of India)
17. Surveillance

## Assignments

1. Discuss the ethical principles of accuracy, fairness, and transparency in information production, citing examples from journalism and research.
2. Analyse the impact of political influence and ownership patterns on media content creation, with examples like state-owned media and Murdoch's empire.
3. Examine the role of algorithms and targeted advertising in shaping political discourse, with reference to the Cambridge Analytica scandal.
4. Critically analyse how laws and policies such as the IT Act (2000), GDPR, UNESCO's AI Ethics framework, and the Press Council of India guidelines address ethical challenges in the communication and consumption of media content.
5. Evaluate the ethical responsibilities of media consumers in an era where sharing and amplification blur the line between producer and consumer.
6. Explain how echo chambers and filter bubbles affect democratic participation and suggest ways to overcome them.
7. Critically assess the ethical challenges posed by the commodification of attention on mental health, civic engagement, and information quality.

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# Critical Analysis of Media Sources

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

On completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain the nature and characteristics of fake news, deep fakes, misinformation, and propaganda
- ◆ identify and critically evaluate media manipulation techniques
- ◆ assess the consequences of disinformation on public discourse and democracy
- ◆ critically think of strategies to distinguish credible information from falsehoods

### Prerequisites

In the digital age, information is abundant, instantaneous, and global. The same forces that allow for the democratization of knowledge have also enabled the spread of falsehoods on an unprecedented scale. From viral conspiracy theories to algorithmically amplified propaganda, the modern media environment is a complex arena in which truth and deception coexist and often compete for attention. The ability to critically analyse media sources is no longer an optional skill; it is a civic necessity. Understanding how misinformation is created, distributed, and consumed equips individuals to safeguard democratic processes, resist manipulation, and contribute meaningfully to public discourse.

### Keywords

Misinformation, Fake news, Agenda, Media manipulation, Disinformation, Propaganda, Bias

## Discussion

### 3.2.1 Detecting Fake News, Deep Fakes, and Misinformation, and Identifying Bias and Propaganda

Fake news refers to fabricated or heavily distorted information presented as legitimate news. It is typically designed to provoke emotional responses—fear, anger, or amusement—that encourage rapid sharing without verification. In 2016, during the U.S. presidential election, stories such as “Pope Endorses Trump” circulated widely despite being entirely false, demonstrating the viral power of fake news.

Deep fakes, a more recent phenomenon, employ artificial intelligence (AI) to create realistic synthetic audio and video. Using Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), deep fakes can superimpose one person’s face onto another’s body or mimic voices with startling accuracy. In 2022, a deep fake video of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky allegedly calling for military surrender appeared on hacked news channels and social media. Although debunked within hours, it demonstrated how deep fakes could be weaponised in wartime information campaigns.

Misinformation is false or inaccurate information spread without intent to deceive, often by individuals who believe it to be true. Disinformation, in contrast, is deliberately fabricated with the goal of misleading. Both can influence perceptions and decision-making. Bias and propaganda further complicate the information landscape. Bias occurs when reporting is influenced by particular political, economic, or cultural perspectives. Propaganda is a more deliberate and systematic attempt to shape public opinion, often by omitting context, exaggerating facts, or appealing to emotions over reason. Historical examples include Nazi Germany’s propaganda ministry; modern examples include state-controlled media narratives in authoritarian regimes.

#### WhatsApp Rumours in India

Between 2017 and 2019, false rumours spread via WhatsApp in rural India, warning of “child kidnappers” in various villages. The messages, often accompanied by edited videos, led to the mob lynching of innocent people. Despite efforts by WhatsApp to label forwarded messages and limit their spread, the incidents underscored how misinformation, when combined with existing fears, can trigger deadly consequences.

### 3.2.2 Media Manipulation and the Spread of Disinformation

Media manipulation is the intentional shaping of information flows to achieve political, financial, or ideological goals. Disinformation campaigns may be orchestrated by state actors, private companies, or extremist groups. The mechanisms range from selective editing and clickbait headlines to coordinated bot networks that amplify targeted messages. Social media algorithms amplify manipulation by prioritising content that generates strong engagement—often outrage or fear. This creates feedback loops where sensational, polarising, or false content spreads faster than nuanced, accurate reporting.

The Russian Internet Research Agency's activity during the 2016 U.S. election is a prominent example. The agency created thousands of fake social media accounts that posted divisive political content, organised protests, and amplified conspiracy theories. Many posts blended factual details with false claims, making them harder to detect.

The globalisation of digital media means that such campaigns can transcend borders instantly. During the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, coordinated false narratives about the Rohingya Muslim minority circulated widely on Facebook, contributing to ethnic violence. The UN later cited Facebook's role in enabling hate speech that exacerbated the humanitarian crisis.

### **3.2.3 Consequences of Media Manipulation for Public Discourse and Democratic Processes**

The consequences of media manipulation are wide-ranging and deeply interconnected:

First, manipulation polarises public discourse. Individuals in algorithmically curated “echo chambers” are exposed primarily to viewpoints that reinforce their beliefs. This fosters ideological rigidity and reduces openness to alternative perspectives.

Second, manipulation erodes trust in institutions. When people discover misinformation, they may begin to doubt all media, even reliable sources, leading to what scholars call a truth decay phenomenon. This cynicism extends to political institutions, scientific authorities, and public health agencies.

Third, disinformation directly influences elections and policy debates. The Brexit referendum campaign saw targeted Facebook ads containing false or misleading claims about EU membership, influencing voter perceptions.

Fourth, online manipulation can have real-world consequences. Hate speech and inflammatory falsehoods can incite violence, as in the case of anti-refugee riots in Germany in the late 2010s, which were linked to viral false stories about migrants.

#### **COVID-19 “Infodemic”**

The World Health Organization coined the term *infodemic* to describe the overwhelming flood of information—some accurate, much of it false—during the COVID-19 pandemic. Misinformation ranged from claims that drinking hot water could prevent infection to elaborate conspiracy theories about the virus being a bioweapon. The spread of false information undermined public health measures, fuelled vaccine hesitancy, and complicated pandemic response efforts.

### **3.2.4 Importance of Developing Critical Thinking Skills for Discerning Facts from Fakes**

In the face of this complex information landscape, critical thinking emerges as the most important defence. It is the disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualising, applying, analysing, and evaluating information. Media literacy education equips individuals

to ask key questions: Who created this message? For what purpose? What evidence supports the claims? Are credible sources cited? What perspectives are missing? Finland provides a notable model. In response to Russian disinformation campaigns, Finland integrated media literacy into its national curriculum from primary school onward. Students learn how to fact-check, identify propaganda techniques, and recognise emotional manipulation in media. Self-awareness of cognitive biases is equally crucial. Confirmation bias—the tendency to seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs—can lead individuals to accept false information that aligns with their worldview. Recognising this tendency allows for a more balanced evaluation of sources. Technological aids such as reverse image search, deepfake detection software, and browser plug-ins that flag questionable sources can support critical thinking but cannot replace it. Algorithms themselves can harbour biases, making human judgment indispensable. Critical thinking is also a civic responsibility. Sharing information without verification can contribute to harm on a mass scale. In an interconnected digital environment, each user becomes a node in the information network and therefore a potential amplifier of truth or falsehood.

## Recap

- ◆ Fake news, deep fakes, and misinformation pose escalating threats to public trust and democracy.
- ◆ Media manipulation techniques exploit algorithmic systems and human psychology to spread disinformation.
- ◆ Disinformation erodes institutional trust, polarises discourse, and can cause direct physical harm.
- ◆ Critical thinking and media literacy are essential defences against the manipulation of public opinion.
- ◆ Fake news consists of fabricated or distorted stories, often designed to provoke emotional responses and spread quickly online.
- ◆ Deep fakes use artificial intelligence (AI), especially Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), to create synthetic but realistic videos or audio.
- ◆ Misinformation = false information spread unintentionally; disinformation = deliberately deceptive content.
- ◆ Bias in media arises from political, cultural, or economic influences on reporting.
- ◆ Propaganda is deliberate manipulation of information to influence public opinion.
- ◆ Media manipulation involves the intentional shaping of information flows for political, financial, or ideological gain.

- ◆ Disinformation can be spread through bot networks, clickbait, selective editing, and fake accounts.
- ◆ Social media algorithms amplify manipulation by prioritising outrage or fear-driven content.
- ◆ Decline of trust in media and institutions (“truth decay”).
- ◆ Real-world violence, e.g., anti-refugee riots in Germany linked to viral falsehoods.
- ◆ Critical thinking is key to combating misinformation—it requires questioning sources, evidence, and intentions.
- ◆ Media literacy education helps individuals identify propaganda and emotional manipulation.
- ◆ Awareness of cognitive biases (e.g., confirmation bias) is essential to avoid blindly believing information that aligns with pre-existing beliefs.
- ◆ Technological tools (reverse image search, deepfake detection software, browser plug-ins) can help but cannot replace human judgment.
- ◆ Each individual user is a node in the information network, responsible for verifying information before sharing to prevent amplifying falsehoods.

## Objective Questions

1. What does fake news usually provoke?
2. Which technology is used to create deepfakes?
3. Who appeared in a 2022 deepfake video calling for surrender?
4. False information spread without intent to deceive is called?
5. False information deliberately spread to mislead is called?
6. Which Nazi institution was infamous for propaganda?
7. Which country’s Internet Research Agency manipulated the 2016 US elections?
8. What social media platform was central in the Rohingya crisis disinformation?
9. What term describes the decline of trust in facts, known as truth decay?
10. Which country integrated media literacy into the school curriculum to counter disinformation?

## Answers

1. Emotion
2. GANs
3. Zelensky
4. Misinformation
5. Disinformation
6. Ministry
7. Russia
8. Facebook
9. Truth decay
10. Finland

## Assignments

1. Explain the difference between fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, with suitable global and historical examples.
2. Analyse the role of deepfakes in modern propaganda and warfare, with reference to the Zelensky incident.
3. Discuss how media manipulation affects democratic processes, using Brexit and the 2016 U.S. elections as case studies.
4. Evaluate the consequences of media manipulation on public discourse, trust in institutions, and social harmony.
5. Critically examine the significance of media literacy education as a defence against misinformation, with reference to Finland's model.
6. How can critical thinking skills help individuals overcome cognitive biases like confirmation bias in today's media environment?

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# Ethical Considerations in Technology

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

On completion of this unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ understand the repercussions of unequal access to technology and digital resources
- ◆ assess the ethical considerations in technological innovation and development
- ◆ understand ethical dilemmas in emerging technologies: AI and biotechnology

### Prerequisites

Technology has always been a double-edged sword, capable of propelling human progress while also introducing complex social, ethical, and economic challenges. In the twenty-first century, the pace of technological innovation has accelerated, with breakthroughs in artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, nanotechnology, robotics, and communication systems fundamentally altering how societies function. This acceleration has not occurred in a vacuum; it is embedded in a global context marked by inequalities in wealth, power, education, and access to resources.

Ethical considerations in technology are not limited to the obvious dangers of misuse or harmful intent. They also encompass questions of fairness, equity, responsibility, transparency, and long-term societal well-being. As technology becomes more deeply entwined with daily life—from algorithms influencing political discourse to genetic editing altering the course of biological evolution—it is imperative to examine these developments through an ethical lens. This unit will explore the ethical implications of technological progress, focusing on the digital divide and social inequality, the responsible development of innovations, the balancing of technological advancement with societal well-being, and the ethical dilemmas posed by emerging fields such as AI and biotechnology.

## Keywords

Digital divide, Biotechnology, Artificial intelligence, Technology, Ethics, Innovation, Ethical dilemmas, Media manipulation, Planned obsolescence, Consumer electronics

## Discussion

### 3.3.1 Unequal Access to Technology and Digital Resources: The Digital Divide and Social Inequality

The term digital divide refers to the gap between individuals, communities, and nations in terms of access to modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the internet, computers, and mobile devices. While some parts of the world enjoy high-speed internet, advanced digital literacy, and constant connectivity, others face limited or no access to these resources.

The digital divide is multidimensional; it is not only about physical access to devices but also about quality of connectivity, affordability, and the skills required to use technology effectively. The divide can exist between rural and urban areas, between high and low-income groups, and between developed and developing nations.

In India, for instance, the *BharatNet* project has aimed to bridge rural internet access gaps; disparities persist, with urban internet penetration exceeding rural penetration by over 25% (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2023). Globally, according to the International Telecommunication Union (2022), approximately 2.7 billion people remain unconnected to the internet, with the majority living in developing countries. This gap reinforces existing social inequalities. Access to technology directly impacts educational opportunities, employment prospects, political participation, and healthcare access. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital divide became starkly visible: students from economically disadvantaged households lacked devices or stable connections for online learning, leading to significant learning losses and widening educational inequality.

From an ethical perspective, the digital divide raises questions of distributive justice: Should access to the internet and digital tools be considered a basic right, akin to access to clean water and electricity? If technology is central to economic and social participation, then the lack of equitable access risks creating “second-class” citizenship for those excluded. Addressing the digital divide requires coordinated policy interventions, public-private partnerships, and infrastructure investment, but also a recognition that inclusion is not only a technical challenge; it is an ethical imperative.

### 3.3.2 Ethical Considerations in Technological Innovation and Development

Technological innovation does not occur in isolation from social contexts, power structures, and human values. From the early days of industrial machinery to contemporary AI algorithms, each wave of technological change has been shaped by human priorities, economic interests, and political decisions. Ethical innovation requires considering the

potential impacts, both intended and unintended, of new technologies before and during their development. This involves anticipating possible harms, ensuring inclusivity in design processes, and promoting transparency in how technologies function and are governed.

One pressing issue is the bias embedded in algorithms. AI systems trained on historical data can reproduce and even amplify existing prejudices in areas such as hiring, lending, policing, and healthcare. The case of COMPAS, a risk assessment tool used in the U.S. criminal justice system, is a telling example; its algorithm was found to disproportionately label Black defendants as higher risk, revealing how technological systems can perpetuate systemic bias (Angwin et al., 2016). Another ethical concern is planned obsolescence the practice of designing products with a limited lifespan to encourage frequent replacements, as seen in certain consumer electronics. This approach maximises profit but contributes to environmental degradation and electronic waste.

The process of innovation often privileges voices from economically and technologically advanced societies, marginalising the needs and perspectives of communities in the Global South. Ethical innovation, therefore, demands participatory design processes, where diverse stakeholders particularly those historically excluded from decision-making can shape technologies that affect their lives.

International frameworks such as the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) highlight principles including fairness, accountability, sustainability, and respect for human rights. Embedding such principles into innovation cycles ensures that technology serves the collective good rather than narrow corporate or geopolitical interests.

### **3.3.3 Balancing Technological Advancement with Societal Well-being and Ethical Values**

The history of technology reveals a recurring tension between rapid innovation and societal readiness to absorb and regulate new developments. While technological breakthroughs can bring extraordinary benefits improved healthcare, greater connectivity, increased productivity they can also disrupt economies, erode privacy, and destabilise cultural norms.

Societal well-being involves more than economic growth; it encompasses quality of life, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of human dignity. Striking the right balance between technological advancement and these broader ethical values requires deliberate governance, public engagement, and policy oversight. Consider the example of automation and artificial intelligence in the labour market. While these technologies can increase efficiency and reduce costs, they also risk displacing millions of workers, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, logistics, and clerical work. The ethical challenge is to ensure that such transformations do not lead to structural unemployment and social instability. Policy responses such as retraining programmes, social safety nets, and universal basic income reflect attempts to mitigate these disruptions while embracing technological progress.

Environmental considerations also form a crucial part of this balance. The tech sector's carbon footprint, from data centre energy use to e-waste, must be addressed through

sustainable design and responsible consumption. For instance, initiatives like the Green Cloud aim to reduce the energy intensity of digital infrastructure through renewable energy sources and efficiency improvements. Philosophically, this balancing act can be framed through the concept of technological stewardship the idea that technological progress should be guided by ethical reflection and collective responsibility rather than driven solely by market forces or political competition. This requires asking not only, “Can we build it?” but also, “Should we build it?” and “For whose benefit will it exist?”

### **3.3.4 Ethical Dilemmas in Emerging Technologies: AI and Biotechnology**

Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology present unprecedented ethical dilemmas. Their transformative potential raises questions about autonomy, accountability, identity, and even the definition of what it means to be human.

#### **3.3.4.1 Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

AI systems have expanded from narrow applications like spam filtering to complex decision-making in healthcare, law enforcement, finance, and creative industries. These systems raise concerns about opacity the so-called “black box” problem, where even their creators cannot fully explain how an algorithm arrives at a given decision. Lack of transparency undermines accountability, particularly when AI is used in high-stakes contexts. The rise of deep fakes realistic but fabricated audio-visual content threatens trust in media and can be weaponised for political manipulation, harassment, or misinformation campaigns.

Another dilemma concerns autonomous weapons systems, which could make life-and-death decisions without human intervention. This raises profound moral and legal questions: Who is responsible if such a system causes harm? Should such systems be banned outright, as some international advocacy groups demand? International initiatives like the OECD Principles on AI (2019) emphasise human-centred values, transparency, and accountability, but enforcement mechanisms remain weak.

The rise of artificial intelligence has fundamentally reshaped the misinformation ecosystem, enabling the rapid production and spread of false or misleading content. Generative AI models now create highly realistic text, images, audio, and deepfakes that are difficult to distinguish from authentic content, allowing malicious actors to impersonate trusted figures or fabricate events. Studies have shown that AI-generated explanations often make false information appear more credible, undermining public trust in journalism, science, and democratic processes (Danry et al., 2024). The scale and speed of AI-driven misinformation are unparalleled, as algorithms can generate massive volumes of content and deploy bots to spread it across social platforms before fact-checkers or regulators can respond.

A key driver of this ecosystem is personalisation: AI uses behavioural data to tailor misinformation to individuals or groups, exploiting existing biases and increasing its persuasive power. This practice is closely linked to surveillance capitalism, a term popularised by Shoshana Zuboff to describe how corporations harvest and monetise user data (Britannica, 2024). The same data infrastructure that fuels targeted advertising also

enables the micro-targeting of misinformation, blurring the line between commercial profit and social manipulation. As a result, users are exposed to echo chambers that reinforce polarization while remaining vulnerable to exploitation based on their digital footprints.

The social and ethical consequences are far-reaching. AI-enabled misinformation erodes trust in institutions, intensifies political and cultural polarization, and disproportionately harms vulnerable populations with low levels of digital literacy. Issues of accountability and transparency are central, as responsibility is often diffused between AI developers, platform owners, and regulators. Much like in predictive policing, where algorithms forecast crime using biased historical data, the use of AI in misinformation raises questions about fairness, bias, and the reinforcement of structural inequalities (Ford School, 2023). Both practices illustrate how AI, when coupled with mass data extraction, can perpetuate harmful feedback loops.

Countermeasures include the development of detection tools to identify manipulated media, watermarking AI-generated content, strengthening regulatory frameworks such as GDPR and AI ethics guidelines, and promoting digital literacy. International initiatives like UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (2021) emphasise transparency, accountability, and fairness, while national regulations seek to balance free expression with harm prevention. However, technology continues to evolve faster than regulation, leaving gaps in enforcement. Ultimately, combating AI-driven misinformation requires a multi-layered response that combines legal safeguards, ethical AI design, corporate accountability, and public awareness.

### **3.3.4.2 Biotechnology**

Advances in biotechnology, especially CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing, have enabled precise alterations to DNA with far-reaching implications for medicine, agriculture, and environmental conservation. While such technologies hold promise for curing genetic diseases, they also pose risks of unintended consequences and misuse.

The 2018 case of a Chinese scientist announcing the birth of genetically edited babies sparked global outrage, illustrating the ethical perils of moving ahead with technologies before global consensus or adequate safety measures are in place. Such interventions raise concerns about “designer babies,” genetic inequality, and the possibility of altering the human germline in ways that could have irreversible effects on future generations.

Biotechnology has revolutionised medicine, agriculture, and industry, but its rapid advances raise profound ethical dilemmas. Cloning remains one of the most contested issues, with debates surrounding reproductive cloning of humans, animal welfare, and the moral status of embryos. While therapeutic cloning for disease treatment shows promise, concerns persist about identity, dignity, and possible misuse (Kfoury, 2007). Similarly, stem cell research offers opportunities to treat degenerative diseases, yet the use of embryonic stem cells has been criticised for destroying potential human life, making it a deeply polarising ethical question (Lo & Parham, 2009).

The issue of biopatents reflects the tension between innovation and justice. Patenting genes, organisms, or biotechnological processes grants commercial incentives but also

restricts access to life-saving treatments and seeds, raising concerns of biopiracy and the exploitation of indigenous knowledge (Shiva, 2001). Genetically Modified (GM) crops have been promoted as solutions to food insecurity, yet they trigger debates about ecological risks, farmer dependency on multinational corporations, and long-term health effects. Ethical questions also arise regarding consumer rights and labelling transparency (ISAAA, 2021).

Biosurveillance, the monitoring of populations for pathogens, genetic traits, or health data, has expanded through biotechnology and AI integration. While it supports pandemic preparedness and public health, it raises ethical issues about privacy, consent, data security, and potential misuse for discrimination or state surveillance (Lyon, 2020). These dilemmas highlight the need for robust ethical frameworks, global governance, and inclusive public dialogue to balance innovation with human rights, justice, and ecological sustainability.

Biotechnological innovation also interacts with socioeconomic disparities: high-cost therapies may only be accessible to the wealthy, creating new forms of biological inequality. Furthermore, the patenting of genetic material raises questions about ownership over elements of life itself.

Ethical considerations in technology require ongoing, interdisciplinary dialogue involving technologists, ethicists, policymakers, and the public. The digital divide and persistent inequalities remind us that access is the foundation for equitable participation in the digital age. The process of innovation must be guided by principles that prioritise fairness, sustainability, and inclusivity. Balancing technological advancement with societal well-being is not merely a policy challenge but a moral obligation. Emerging technologies such as AI and biotechnology demand vigilance, transparency, and global cooperation to ensure they serve the common good.

Technology will continue to evolve at a pace that challenges traditional ethical frameworks. The task before society is to develop adaptive, forward-looking approaches that harness technological potential while safeguarding human dignity and planetary health.

## Recap

- ◆ Digital divide refers to the gap between individuals, communities, and nations in terms of access to modern information and communication technologies (ICTs).
- ◆ The digital divide is multidimensional.
- ◆ The digital divide is not only about physical access to devices but also about the quality of connectivity, affordability, and the skills required to use technology effectively.
- ◆ Technological innovation does not occur in isolation from social contexts.
- ◆ In India, for instance, the BharatNet project has aimed to bridge rural internet access gaps.

- ◆ According to the International Telecommunication Union (2022), approximately 2.7 billion people remain unconnected to the internet.
- ◆ Access to technology directly impacts educational opportunities, employment prospects, political participation, and healthcare access.
- ◆ The digital divide raises questions of distributive justice.
- ◆ Addressing the digital divide requires coordinated policy interventions, public-private partnerships, and infrastructure investment.
- ◆ Technological innovation does not occur in isolation from social contexts, power structures, and human values.
- ◆ The bias embedded in algorithms.
- ◆ Generative AI enables the creation of deepfakes and synthetic content that makes misinformation more convincing.
- ◆ Personalisation and targeting of false content rely on surveillance capitalism's extraction and monetisation of user data.
- ◆ The scale and speed of AI allow misinformation to spread rapidly before fact-checking can intervene.
- ◆ Ethical concerns include the erosion of trust, polarisation, vulnerability of marginalised groups, and lack of accountability.
- ◆ Countermeasures range from detection tools, watermarking, and regulation (GDPR, UNESCO AI Ethics) to media literacy and public awareness.
- ◆ Planned obsolescence is the practice of designing products with a limited lifespan to encourage frequent replacements, as seen in certain consumer electronics.
- ◆ Societal well-being involves more than economic growth; it encompasses quality of life, environmental sustainability, and the preservation of human dignity.
- ◆ Striking the right balance between technological advancement and these broader ethical values requires deliberate governance, public engagement, and policy oversight.
- ◆ The ethical challenge is to ensure that such transformations do not lead to structural unemployment and social instability.
- ◆ Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology present unprecedented ethical dilemmas.
- ◆ The transformative potential of AI raises questions about autonomy, accountability, and identity.
- ◆ AI systems have expanded from narrow applications like spam filtering to complex decision-making in healthcare, law enforcement, finance, and creative industries.

- ◆ Lack of transparency undermines accountability, particularly when AI is used in high-stakes contexts.
- ◆ Advances in biotechnology, especially CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing, have enabled precise alterations to DNA.
- ◆ Biotechnological innovation also interacts with socioeconomic disparities.
- ◆ Ethical considerations in technology require ongoing, interdisciplinary dialogue involving technologists, ethicists, policymakers, and the public.
- ◆ The digital divide and persistent inequalities remind us that access is the foundation for equitable participation in the digital age.
- ◆ Dilemmas in biotechnology include cloning, stem cell research, biopatents, GM crops, and biosurveillance.
- ◆ Cloning raises concerns about human identity, dignity, and animal welfare; therapeutic cloning offers medical benefits but remains ethically contested.
- ◆ Stem cell research promises treatments for degenerative diseases but faces opposition due to the destruction of embryos in embryonic stem cell use.
- ◆ Biopatents encourage innovation but can restrict access to medicines and seeds, raising issues of equity, biopiracy, and exploitation of indigenous knowledge.
- ◆ GM crops offer solutions for food security but pose risks of ecological disruption, corporate control over agriculture, and health uncertainties.
- ◆ Biosurveillance helps in disease monitoring and pandemic preparedness but sparks debates on privacy, consent, and potential state misuse.

## Objective Questions

1. What does the digital divide signify?
2. What is affordability in relation to ICT access?
3. Name one government project in India addressing the connectivity gap.
4. Which global organisation reported that 2.7 billion people remain unconnected?
5. During the pandemic, which sector highlighted learning inequality?
6. What does bias in algorithms reproduce?

7. Give an example of obsolescence in technology.
8. Which principle emphasises fairness in AI ethics (UNESCO)?
9. What concept highlights stewardship in technology use?
10. Which tool in the US justice system exemplifies algorithmic discrimination?
11. Who popularised the term surveillance capitalism?
12. Which controversial practice in biotechnology involves creating genetically identical organisms?
13. Which type of research faces ethical opposition due to the destruction of embryos?
14. Which agricultural innovation raises debates about ecological risks and farmer dependency?

## Answers

1. Gap
2. Cost
3. BharatNet
4. ITU (International Telecommunication Union)
5. Education
6. Prejudice
7. Electronics
8. Human rights
9. Responsibility
10. COMPAS
11. Shoshana Zuboff
12. Cloning
13. Stem Cell
14. GM Crops

## Assignments

1. Discuss the multidimensional aspects of the digital divide with examples from India and globally.
2. Analyse the ethical implications of bias in algorithms, using the case of COMPAS as a reference.
3. Critically examine the role of artificial intelligence in the spread of misinformation. Evaluate existing countermeasures and suggest ways to strengthen ethical communication in the digital age.
4. Explain how planned obsolescence impacts both consumers and the environment.
5. Evaluate the challenges of balancing technological advancement with societal well-being.
6. Critically examine the ethical dilemmas posed by AI and biotechnology, with a focus on accountability, transparency, and human dignity.
7. Discuss the ethical dilemmas associated with modern biotechnology, focusing on cloning, stem cell research, biopatents, GM crops, and biosurveillance.

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**BLOCK**

# State, Sovereignty, and Citizenship



# Theories of State and Sovereignty

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ describe the meaning and core features of the state and sovereignty
- ◆ explain the historical evolution of states from ancient to modern times
- ◆ compare theories on the origin and function of the state
- ◆ understand the ethical significance of state power and sovereignty

### Prerequisites

*“Sovereignty, after all, does not reside in any formula but in the people themselves.”*

—Woodrow Wilson

Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the fourteenth-century Sultan of Delhi, is remembered for his grand vision and bold ambition. Determined to strengthen and unite his kingdom, he moved his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad in the far south, believing it would improve governance over his vast empire. The plan, however, became a burden for the people, causing hardship, confusion, and loss. In another daring reform, he introduced coins made from cheaper metal to promote trade and support the poor, but without safeguards, counterfeiting spread rapidly. The result was economic instability and public distrust. His story reminds us that good intentions and strong authority are not enough. Sovereignty is not just the power to rule; it is the responsibility to govern with wisdom, foresight, and a genuine commitment to the well-being of the people.

### Keywords

State, Sovereignty, Social Contract, Nation-State, Justice

## Discussion

The idea of the state has been central to human society for centuries. It represents an organised community living under a system of governance that establishes laws, maintains order, and protects the rights of its people. Sovereignty, on the other hand, refers to the supreme authority of the state to govern itself without interference from external forces. Together, state and sovereignty form the foundation of the political system.

From the ancient city-states of Greece to the modern nation-states of today, the state has evolved in structure, purpose, and scope. Philosophers such as Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau debated what gives the state its legitimacy and how sovereignty should be exercised. In social ethics, these debates are not just about power and authority but about justice, human dignity, and the common good. A state's legitimacy depends not only on its legal authority but also on its ability to uphold ethical principles, protect citizens' freedoms, and ensure fairness in its governance.

Understanding state and sovereignty in the context of social ethics invites us to ask important questions. What gives a government the moral right to rule? How should power be distributed between the people and their rulers? Can sovereignty be absolute, or must it always be balanced by the rights of individuals and communities? As we explore these questions, we begin to see that the state is not simply a political machine but a moral institution that shapes the lives of its citizens.

### 4.1.1 State and Sovereignty

A state can be regarded as the central structure of political life. It is the body that holds authority over a defined piece of land and the people who live there. Its job is to make and enforce laws, maintain peace and order, and manage the essential tasks that keep society running, such as collecting taxes, issuing money, and providing public services. A state is not simply a set of buildings or offices. It is a system of power with fixed borders, a permanent population, and a government to guide its affairs. The sociologist Max Weber famously described it as *a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory*. In simpler terms, only the state can lawfully use or permit the use of force, usually through its police or military. The Montevideo Convention of 1933 sums this up by stating that a true state must have a permanent population, a defined territory, a functioning government, and the ability to form relationships with other states.

Sovereignty is what gives a state its full and independent authority. It means the state has the highest power to make decisions about everything within its borders—whether it is creating laws, managing education and policing, or conducting trade and diplomacy with other countries. No outside power can interfere unless the state allows it. Sovereignty has four important qualities. Supreme authority means no one inside the territory has more legal power than the state. Independence means the state can act without being controlled by others. Territoriality sets the clear boundaries of its authority, and recognition by other states strengthens its role in the international community, allowing it to sign treaties, join global organisations, and build peaceful relationships.

Although the words “state,” “government,” “nation,” and “nation-state” are often used together, they mean different things. A government is simply the leadership team running the state at a given time. It can change through elections or other processes, but the state itself remains. A nation is a group of people connected by shared culture, language, history, or identity, which may or may not have a state of its own. A nation-state combines both ideas: it is a state governed by a single nation within clear borders. However, this is rare in today’s world, as most modern states are home to many cultures, languages, and communities.

### How the State Keeps Us in Line!



Louis Althusser, a French philosopher, said the state uses two clever ways to stay in power. One is the *Repressive State Apparatus*, which includes the police, army, and courts that can use force if needed. The other is the *Ideological State Apparatus*, which includes schools, families, media, and religion that quietly teach people to believe the system is fair and normal. One works through fear and the other through ideas, but together they keep society running the way those in power want it.

State and sovereignty are more than political definitions; they are the foundation of a fair and ethical society. A sovereign state is trusted to protect rights, uphold justice, and promote the common good. It has the moral responsibility to care for the vulnerable, ensure equality, and safeguard freedoms for all. Sovereignty also brings legitimacy, meaning people are more likely to respect and follow laws when they know these laws come from an independent and fair authority. On the world stage, sovereign states are expected to respect one another, follow international rules, and work for peace and cooperation. When a state welcomes refugees, supports fair trade, or speaks out against injustice, it demonstrates that sovereignty is not just about power; it is also about moral leadership. In this way, state and sovereignty create the framework for protecting human dignity and building a society that is peaceful, just, and united.

### 4.1.2 Historical Perspectives on the Development of Political Entities

The development of political entities reflects humanity’s long journey from small, kin-based groups to complex, sovereign states. Early governance emerged as humans transitioned from nomadic lifestyles to settled farming communities, particularly in fertile river valleys such as the *Nile*, *Tigris-Euphrates*, and *Indus*. These first states, like Sumer and ancient Egypt, concentrated authority under kings or priest-kings, blending religious and political power to manage resources, enforce laws, and protect territory. Writing systems and legal codes laid the groundwork for structured administration, creating the essential features of the state: defined territory, permanent population, centralized control, and codified law.

In the classical era, diverse political models emerged, notably in ancient Greece’s city-states. Athens pioneered early democracy rooted in civic participation, while Sparta

embodied a disciplined, militaristic oligarchy; these are two contrasting systems that profoundly influenced Western political thought. The medieval period saw fragmented power shared among monarchs, nobles, and religious authorities, gradually evolving towards centralized sovereignty through early modern political theories. The 19th century brought the rise of nation-states, fuelled by nationalism, industrialisation, and shared cultural identity, while the 20th and 21st centuries introduced globalisation and supranational governance, challenging traditional notions of sovereignty.

#### **4.1.2.1 Ancient and Medieval Political Entities**

Ancient and medieval political entities took many forms, reflecting the diversity of human societies and their approaches to governance. In the ancient world, political organisation ranged from small tribal communities to vast empires. Tribal systems were often based on kinship ties and collective decision-making, while kingdoms and empires relied on centralized authority under a monarch. City-states emerged as independent political units, each with its own government, laws, and military, often competing for influence and resources. In medieval times, political power was frequently intertwined with religious authority, feudal relationships, and hereditary rule, creating complex hierarchies that shaped everyday life.

One of the most remarkable examples of ancient political organisation was the *Greek city-state, or polis*, which served as both a political and cultural unit. Athens and Sparta provide two contrasting models of governance within this framework. Athens is remembered for its early experiments with democracy, where citizens could participate directly in decision-making through public assemblies. Political life in Athens encouraged debate, public service, and civic responsibility, though participation was limited to free male citizens. Sparta, by contrast, was a militaristic oligarchy focused on discipline, unity, and military preparedness. Power was shared between two kings and a council of elders, and the entire society was organised to support a strong army. These two models illustrate the diversity of governance even within a single cultural sphere, influencing political thought far beyond Greece.

In many other ancient and medieval societies, political authority was legitimised through divine kingship and theocratic justifications. Rulers were often seen as chosen by the gods or even as divine themselves, giving their commands moral and spiritual authority. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was considered the earthly embodiment of a god, responsible for maintaining cosmic order. In medieval Europe, the divine right of kings reinforced the belief that monarchs ruled by the will of God, making their authority unquestionable. In parts of Asia, emperors were regarded as the “Son of Heaven” or as possessing a sacred mandate to govern. This blending of spiritual and political power not only strengthened a ruler’s legitimacy but also shaped laws, rituals, and the social hierarchy.

#### **4.1.2.2 Modern States and Nation Building**

Modern states are defined by distinct characteristics that separate them from earlier forms of political organisation. They possess clearly defined territories with recognised borders, exercise full sovereignty internally and externally, and claim legitimacy through national identity, democratic representation, or legal procedures. In earlier times, legitimacy often came from tradition or charismatic leadership, but in the modern era, it is usually

grounded in rational-legal authority. A professional bureaucracy forms the backbone of the modern state, ensuring the implementation of laws, the collection of revenue, and the provision of public services. The main purpose of these states is to maintain order, promote development, and deliver justice within a structured legal and administrative framework.

### **Sovereignty in the Hands of a Dictator**

Adolf Hitler's rule in Nazi Germany shows how sovereignty can be concentrated in a single leader with dangerous consequences. After becoming Chancellor in 1933, he used the Enabling Act to bypass parliament, giving himself absolute power over the state. In his hands, sovereignty was exercised through authoritarian control, suppression of opposition, and aggressive expansionism. This unchecked concentration of power turned the state into a tool for war, persecution, and genocide, underscoring why democratic systems place limits on sovereign authority to protect rights and prevent abuse.

Nation building is the process through which a state works to create a unified national identity among its people. This involves developing strong institutions such as schools, courts, the military, and public infrastructure, all of which help foster a shared sense of belonging. Cultural tools like a common language, official symbols, national holidays, and state-endorsed history strengthen emotional connections among citizens. Education plays a central role by transmitting shared values and shaping young minds to embrace national ideals. Citizenship laws, often based on birth or descent, define who belongs to the national community. However, building national unity is not always smooth, particularly in postcolonial societies with diverse ethnic, linguistic, or religious groups. In a globalised world, migration, international media, and economic changes further complicate the task of achieving social cohesion.

The modern idea of state sovereignty owes much to the Westphalian system established in 1648 after the Thirty Years' War. The Peace of Westphalia introduced the principle that each state has full authority over its territory, laws, and governance without interference from outside powers. It affirmed the legal equality of states, regardless of size or strength, and promoted the idea of clearly defined borders to reduce territorial disputes. This settlement also encouraged secular governance by separating religious authority from political power. These principles, including territorial sovereignty, legal equality, and non-interference, continue to shape international relations today, even as globalisation, humanitarian intervention, and international organisations challenge their absolute application.

Modern state formation has also been shaped by Enlightenment thought, which emphasised reason, scientific inquiry, and the rule of law over tradition or divine authority. Thinkers like Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu argued that governments derive legitimacy from the consent of the governed and must protect natural rights such as life, liberty, and property. They promoted constitutionalism, separation of powers, and merit-based governance to prevent tyranny. Enlightenment ideas inspired revolutions and the creation of democratic systems grounded in justice, equality, and human dignity. In the context of nationalism, these principles remind us that the pursuit of self-determination should

be inclusive, rights-based, and respectful of diversity. Ethical nation building must avoid exclusion or discrimination, ensure the protection of minority rights, and be guided by universal principles of justice and equality. While nationalism can strengthen identity and solidarity, it must never be used to justify marginalisation or conflict. Instead, modern states should aim to align governance with a shared sense of belonging, creating societies where all individuals feel represented and respected.

#### 4.1.2.3 Colonialism and Postcolonial States

Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique, offered one of the most influential ethical critiques of colonialism. In works such as *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, he described colonialism as not only political or economic domination but also a violent assault on the minds, cultures, and identities of the colonised. Fanon explained how it fostered feelings of inferiority, inflicted deep psychological wounds, and forced colonised peoples to internalise the belief that they were less human. This violence was present in laws, language, and everyday life. For him, resisting colonialism through revolutionary struggle could be an ethical act to reclaim dignity and humanity. He rejected the idea that colonialism brought civilisation, showing instead how it caused lasting trauma and eroded moral values in both colonised peoples and colonisers.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, one of India's foremost jurists and social reformers, also offered a powerful ethical critique of colonialism alongside his condemnation of caste-based oppression. He denounced British rule for worsening poverty, intensifying famines, and denying basic rights to the Indian majority. For Ambedkar, political freedom from colonialism was incomplete without social transformation and economic justice. He extended his critique to the caste system, which he saw as equally oppressive, destroying the public good and tying morality to birth and status. He demanded equality, education, and distributive justice for all, especially the most marginalised, and refused to glorify India's past, insisting instead on building a just and inclusive future.

After independence, postcolonial states faced serious challenges in establishing legitimacy. Boundaries and institutions created under colonial rule often ignored local cultural and political realities, leading to states that enjoyed international recognition but lacked public trust. Inherited bureaucracies and legal systems often clashed with indigenous governance, while deepened ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions complicated nation-building. Limited resources, fragile institutions, and the inability to provide essential services weakened internal legitimacy, and political elites frequently prioritised their own interests over the common good. Strengthening legitimacy required building inclusive institutions, respecting local traditions, and encouraging broad participation in governance.

In the postcolonial context, justice, reparations, and sovereignty are closely linked. Justice involves addressing structural inequalities, cultural erasure, and the psychological trauma left by colonialism. Reparations may take the form of land restitution, institutional reforms, restoration of cultural heritage, or public acknowledgment of past wrongs. Sovereignty extends beyond legal independence to genuine control over political, cultural, and economic life, free from external domination. While nationalism helped secure independence, it sometimes created new exclusions by narrowly defining national identity.

Ethical postcolonial governance must embrace diversity, restore indigenous knowledge systems, and promote environmental and social justice. In countries like India, this includes returning cultural artefacts, confronting colonial legacies, and reforming colonial-era laws to create a more equitable society.

Fanon's call for revolutionary struggle and Ambedkar's insistence on social justice together highlight that true postcolonial liberation cannot end with the mere transfer of power. It requires deep structural reforms that dismantle inherited hierarchies, heal the psychological and cultural wounds of colonialism, and establish systems of equality and dignity. Only when political freedom is joined with social and economic transformation can postcolonial states achieve genuine sovereignty and legitimacy.

### **4.1.3 Theories Regarding the Emergence and Evolution of the State**

The emergence and growth of the state have been an important topic in political thought and social ethics, showing how human societies have organised power, authority, and common life over time. Different theories explain this process in different ways. The *Divine Right Theory* posits that rulers are chosen by God and must be obeyed as a religious duty, while the *Force Theory* sees the state as created through conquest and domination. The *Patriarchal* and *Matriarchal Theories* trace political authority to early family leadership, and the *Social Contract Theory*, developed by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, suggests that people agreed to form a state for safety and order. The *Evolutionary Theory* sees the state as slowly developing from institutions like family, religion, and economy, while the *Marxist Theory* views it as a tool to protect the ruling class. Other ideas, such as Voluntary, Economic, Cultural, and Institutional Theories, point to cooperation, shared beliefs, and traditions in shaping political systems. Together, these views show that the state is not the same everywhere or at every time but has grown in different ways depending on history, society, and culture.

#### **4.1.3.1 Organic Theories**

The Organic Theory of the State is a political idea that compares the state to a living organism. This theory suggests that just as the organs of a body must work together to keep a person healthy, all the different parts of a state, such as its citizens, government institutions, and social groups, must cooperate to ensure the stability, growth, and well-being of the whole society. It presents the state not as a collection of separate individuals but as one unified entity that has its own life, purpose, and the ability to change and develop over time. The theory highlights how each part of the state depends on the others. If one part becomes weak or fails, it can affect the health of the entire system. This interconnectedness is seen as necessary for the survival of the state. In this view, the goal of the state is not just to protect individual freedoms but to promote the common good and ensure that all parts of society can thrive together.

Several important thinkers contributed to the development of this theory. Johann Friedrich Herder introduced the idea that a state's unity is shaped by its culture and the shared identity of its people. G. W. F. Hegel believed that the state is the realisation of ethical life, where individual freedom is achieved through participation in the larger community. Herbert Spencer compared the state to a biological organism that evolves over

time and cautioned against too much interference by the state. Friedrich Ratzel expanded the theory by applying it to geography and politics, arguing that states need room to grow and may compete for land to survive. While the theory offers a powerful way to understand the cooperative nature of social and political life, it also raises concerns. Some critics warn that it can be used to support authoritarian rule by placing too much power in the hands of the state. Others point out that it may ignore conflicts and inequalities between different groups and reduce the importance of individual rights.

Even today, the Organic Theory influences how we think about governance. Concepts such as checks and balances, cooperation between branches of government, and working for the public good all reflect aspects of this theory. However, it stands in contrast to other political theories like the Social Contract Theory, which views the state as the result of a mutual agreement among individuals. Organic Theory offers a holistic way to understand the state as a system where all parts are connected. It provides useful insights for promoting collective welfare and stability but must be balanced with respect for individual autonomy and diversity.

#### **4.1.3.2 Mechanistic Theories of the State**

Mechanistic theories explain the state as a deliberate and artificial creation by human beings, much like a machine built to serve specific purposes. These theories suggest that the state did not grow naturally out of society but was consciously designed to meet practical needs such as protecting individual liberty, securing life and property, and maintaining social order. Enlightenment thinkers helped popularise this idea by comparing the state to a device made of different parts. These parts, such as laws, institutions, and governing bodies, are all carefully arranged to function together for the common good. Just like a machine, if any part of the state stops working properly, it can be fixed or even replaced by its creators.

An important feature of mechanistic thinking is the emphasis on individual purpose and consent. Individuals are seen as the original source of political power. Through agreement or a social contract, they come together to create the state as a means to safeguard their interests. Thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke provided different versions of this idea. Hobbes described the state as an “artificial man” created to prevent the chaos of the natural world, while Locke argued that people form governments to protect their life, liberty, and property. In both cases, the authority of the state comes from the consent of the governed. If the state fails to uphold its responsibilities, individuals have the right to modify or even abolish it.

Mechanistic theories are deeply rooted in liberal and rationalist traditions. They place the individual at the centre of political life and see the state as a servant rather than a master. The role of the state is therefore limited; it exists only to help individuals live freely and safely in society. This approach is very different from organic theories of the state, which see the state as a natural, living body that grows and evolves with society. In contrast, mechanistic theories stress logic, reason, and human decision-making. The state is not above society but is created by people for their own benefit.

#### 4.1.3.3 Marxist and Critical Perspectives on the State

Marxist thinkers argue that the state is not a neutral institution but one that arose alongside the division of society into social classes. For Marx and Engels, the state exists mainly to protect private property and preserve the dominance of the ruling class, which in capitalist society is the bourgeoisie, or owners of capital. From this perspective, legal systems, policies, and public institutions do not equally serve everyone but work to maintain an economic order that benefits the few while controlling the working class. A central concept in Marxist theory is the relationship between the economic base, which includes the mode of production and class relations, and the superstructure, which consists of political, legal, and cultural institutions. Two main approaches explain this link. The instrumentalist model sees the state as a direct tool of the capitalist class, while the theory of relative autonomy, developed by scholars such as Nicos Poulantzas, holds that the state may act independently but still ultimately safeguards the capitalist system and social hierarchies.

Marxists also maintain that the state suppresses class struggle both through coercion and by creating the illusion of democratic equality. They describe bourgeois democracy as appearing fair and inclusive while, in reality, protecting elite interests. Revolutionary Marxism calls for the working class, or proletariat, to overthrow the capitalist state and establish a new form of governance that would lead to a classless and stateless society. This transitional phase, known as the dictatorship of the proletariat, is seen as essential for achieving genuine equality and freedom.

Critical perspectives build on and expand the Marxist approach by examining how the state also sustains power through race, gender, colonialism, and global inequality. Postcolonial scholars point out that many modern nation-states continue the logic of colonialism, erasing indigenous governance systems and suppressing cultural diversity. Thinkers such as Partha Chatterjee and James C. Scott focus on the everyday experiences of ordinary people, showing how they resist and negotiate with the state in creative ways. Philip Abrams and other theorists argue that the state's legitimacy comes not only from its capacity to use force but also from how it presents itself as real and necessary in the minds of citizens. Both Marxist and critical perspectives encourage us to question how state institutions operate, whose interests they serve, and how they might be transformed to build a more just and inclusive society.

#### 4.1.4 Social Contract Theory and Its Ethical Justifications

Social Contract Theory holds that moral and political authority is legitimate only when it is based on the free and rational agreement, whether actual or hypothetical, among individuals to form a society and accept certain constraints in exchange for security, justice, and the benefits of cooperative life. At its ethical core, the theory rests on several justifications. First is consent and legitimacy, which asserts that the state's power is morally valid only when grounded in the consent of the governed, distinguishing legitimate authority from mere coercion. Second is mutual benefit and reciprocity, where individuals give up some natural freedoms for the shared advantages of peace, security, and order. The contract is seen as reciprocal: duties are balanced by rights and benefits of social membership. A third justification is justice as fairness, notably articulated by John

Rawls, who argued that social principles are just only if individuals would accept them without knowing their social status, ensuring fairness from all perspectives. Fourth, the theory emphasises the protection of rights and responsibilities, as seen in Locke's view that the contract exists to secure life, liberty, and property through impartial laws and institutions. Fifth is the principle of accountability and moral reason, which holds that authority must be justified to those who live under it, and that citizens retain the right to reform or replace unjust governments. While this theory has informed modern liberal democracies, critics, including feminist and anti-racist thinkers, argue that many actual contracts have been historically exclusive and unequal. Contemporary contractarians thus stress the need for real inclusion and fairness, especially for vulnerable groups. In essence, social contract theory ethically justifies political power by grounding it in mutual agreement, equality, public reason, and a commitment to justice and rights for all.

#### 4.1.4.1 Hobbes' Leviathan

Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) is a foundational work in modern political philosophy, written during the turmoil of the English Civil War. Hobbes begins by imagining a *state of nature*, a pre-political condition where there is no government or authority. In this natural state, all individuals are equal in power and equally driven by fear, self-interest, and the instinct to survive. Without a common authority, people fall into endless conflict, which is a "war of every man against every man," making life miserable, dangerous, and short. To escape this brutal existence, people use reason and mutual fear to enter into a *social contract*, agreeing to surrender certain freedoms to a central authority in exchange for peace, security, and protection. This collective agreement gives rise to the *Leviathan*, a metaphorical sovereign empowered to rule with absolute authority. For Hobbes, this powerful state is not only necessary but the only way to avoid chaos.

##### Hobbes' Monster of Order!

Thomas Hobbes drew the title of his famous 1651 work *Leviathan* from a powerful sea creature described in the Bible's Book of Job. In scripture, the Leviathan is fierce, untamable, and beyond human control. Hobbes used this image as a metaphor for a strong and unified state, capable of rising above personal quarrels and preventing society from sliding into chaos. In his view, granting such authority to the "Leviathan" was not a threat but a necessity, because without it, life in the state of nature would be ruled by fear, conflict, and mere survival.

The Leviathan represents a commonwealth where the sovereign acts as the head of a political body, and its citizens function like organs supporting the whole. Hobbes insists that this authority must be absolute to prevent society from falling back into disorder. Obedience to the sovereign is justified not by tradition or religion but by rational self-interest and the shared need for safety. Hobbes also addresses the role of law, religion, and civil peace, emphasising that divided loyalties, especially between church and state, must be avoided to maintain unity. Hobbes' vision of government is deeply rooted in fear, reason, and the logic of survival. He offers both a diagnosis of political instability and a bold justification for centralised, unquestioned authority as the only path to lasting peace. Leviathan remains a powerful and influential argument for the modern state and its ethical foundations in consent, order, and the prevention of violence.

At the same time, Hobbes' metaphor of the Leviathan has important limits. By presenting the state as a single body with one sovereign head, it assumes unity while overlooking the realities of pluralism, diversity, and the power struggles that shape every society. The context of the English Civil War is also crucial. Hobbes' deep fear of disorder strongly influenced his theory, making it less a universally valid model and more a response to the turmoil of seventeenth-century England. For this reason, his vision is both historically significant and ethically controversial, as it places absolute authority above diversity, participation, and dissent.

#### **4.1.4.2 Locke's Social Contract Theory**

John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, written in 1690, is a foundational work in political thought and the basis of modern liberal democracy. Locke's social contract theory presents a hopeful view of human nature, believing people can live peacefully guided by reason and moral responsibility. He begins with the idea of a state of nature, where individuals live freely and equally without formal government, possessing natural rights to life, liberty, and property. These rights are inherent and not granted by governments. However, without an authority to enforce laws or resolve conflicts, disputes may arise, threatening freedom and security. To overcome this, individuals consent to form a society through a social contract, agreeing to surrender only the right to enforce laws themselves in exchange for a stable government that protects their rights.

Locke insists that this government must operate with the consent of the governed, with power limited by the trust placed in it by the people. If the government fails to protect rights or abuses its power, the people have a moral right to change or overthrow it. This principle forms the foundation of popular sovereignty and governmental accountability. Locke also stresses the broad protection of property, including life and liberty, as a primary reason for leaving the state of nature. Ethical limits exist, such as not taking more than one can use and leaving enough for others, which balances individual rights with fairness. Locke supports majority rule and representative institutions as essential for a just society.

#### **4.1.4.3 Rousseau and Beyond**

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762) marked a significant shift in political thought by focusing on the relationship between individual freedom and collective authority. Rousseau began with the striking claim that although humans are born free, society often places them in chains. Unlike Hobbes, who emphasised fear, or Locke, who focused on property, Rousseau argued that legitimate political authority must arise from the active and equal participation of citizens. He introduced the idea of the "general will," a collective desire aimed at the common good. According to Rousseau, true freedom is achieved when individuals obey laws they have helped create, becoming both rulers and subjects. This transforms natural liberty into civil liberty, allowing people to act as moral agents within a community.

### Redefining Sovereignty Through Dharma

Emperor Ashoka showed that sovereignty does not have to rely solely on military power and fear. After the Kalinga War, he used his authority to promote Dharma, or moral governance, across one of the largest empires in ancient India. By focusing on welfare, justice, and religious tolerance, Ashoka demonstrated that a sovereign can maintain stability and unity not just through force, but by earning the loyalty of the people through compassion and ethical leadership.

Rousseau rejected authority based on heredity, force, or historical contracts with kings. Instead, sovereignty always remains with the people, who have the right to revise or replace governments that betray the common interest. Equality was essential to his concept of freedom; he insisted that laws must apply equally and that social justice requires actively addressing inequalities. Rousseau envisioned a society governed by collective decision-making and mutual respect, replacing domination and privilege with shared responsibility.

Rousseau's ideas influenced the French Revolution and continue to shape modern debates on democracy and justice. Movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter echo his emphasis on equality and direct participation. However, Rousseau has also faced criticism; some worry that the general will might justify forcing individuals to conform for the sake of the group, while others question the feasibility of true participatory democracy in complex societies. Still, his vision of a political community based on freedom, equality, and shared responsibility remains powerful. Later thinkers, including Karl Marx and critical theorists, built on or challenged his legacy, demonstrating that the struggle to balance individual liberty with the collective good is ongoing.

#### 4.1.5 State Sovereignty vs. Individual Rights

The relationship between state sovereignty and individual rights remains one of the most important and contested questions in political theory and international relations. State sovereignty refers to the supreme authority a state exercises within its territorial boundaries, granting it the exclusive right to govern without external interference. Traditionally, following the Westphalian model, sovereignty was considered absolute and indivisible. In contrast, individual or human rights are universal and inalienable, belonging to every person regardless of their government, and have been reinforced by global frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). While sovereignty protects a state's independence, human rights safeguard individuals from abuse, discrimination, and arbitrary power. Tensions arise when states invoke sovereignty to shield themselves from criticism or intervention, even in the face of severe rights violations.

Modern developments, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, challenge the idea of unconditional sovereignty. When states commit atrocities like genocide or ethnic cleansing, they may lose some protections, opening the door to legitimate international action. This shift reflects an emerging understanding that sovereignty and rights are interdependent. A state's legitimacy increasingly rests on its capacity to protect fundamental rights, while effective human rights protection depends on a stable

and functioning state. Current debates centre on who decides when rights violations outweigh sovereignty and how to ensure such interventions are not misused. In today's world, neither sovereignty nor rights is absolute; both must be upheld together to preserve state authority, human dignity, and international legitimacy.

#### **4.1.5.1 Legal Foundations of Sovereignty**

The legal foundations of sovereignty rest on the principle that a state holds ultimate authority to govern its territory, make and enforce laws, and engage in international relations without being subject to a higher legal power. This authority includes internal jurisdiction over individuals and institutions, the right to regulate domestic affairs, and protection from foreign interference. Territorial integrity secures control over boundaries and resources, while recognition by other states grants sovereign status in international law, enabling participation in treaties, international organisations like the United Nations, and access to global legal protections. Sovereignty takes various forms, including internal (domestic control) and external (freedom from outside influence), as well as distinctions between *de jure* (legal right) and *de facto* (actual control) sovereignty. While sovereignty grants exclusive decision-making power, it is often shaped by constitutional norms, ethical principles, and obligations under human rights and humanitarian law.

Historically, thinkers like Jean Bodin argued that sovereignty should be absolute and indivisible, though bound by divine, natural, or constitutional laws, while Max Weber emphasised the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force. In the modern era, sovereignty still signifies legal independence, but it operates within an interconnected world where international law treats states as equals and requires mutual respect for sovereignty. Today, the exercise of sovereignty is influenced by treaties, global governance, and shared ethical commitments, making it both robust and adaptable. Anchored in historical doctrines yet responsive to modern realities, sovereignty balances legal independence with cooperative responsibilities in the international community.

#### **4.1.5.2 Human Rights and Civil Liberties**

Human rights and civil liberties are foundational to modern democratic societies, though they differ in origin, scope, and enforcement. Human rights are universal and inherent, meaning that every person has them simply by being human, regardless of nationality, gender, religion, or ethnicity. These rights include the right to life, freedom from torture and slavery, and access to education, food, and shelter. Human rights are based on natural law and moral principles. They are recognised and protected through international legal documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948. These rights hold states responsible for protecting the dignity and well-being of all individuals, not just their own citizens.

On the other hand, civil liberties are specific legal protections provided within the framework of a country's constitution or legal system. These include freedoms such as speech, religion, assembly, press, the right to privacy, and the right to a fair trial. Although many civil liberties reflect the values of human rights, their form and application depend on the political and legal context of individual countries. Civil liberties act as safeguards against the misuse of government power and ensure equal treatment under the law. When a country includes human rights in its legal framework, they function as civil liberties

for its people. Human rights are generally enforced through international agreements and moral responsibility, while civil liberties are upheld through national courts and constitutional mechanisms. Despite their differences, both human rights and civil liberties aim to promote human dignity, protect individual freedoms, and prevent injustice.

## 4.1.6 Sovereignty, Freedom, and International Norms

The relationship between sovereignty, freedom, and international norms is central to understanding modern global politics and international law. Traditionally, sovereignty referred to a state's absolute right to govern itself without external interference. This included the power to create laws, choose leaders, and manage internal affairs within its own borders. The classical idea of sovereignty emphasised autonomy, both in domestic matters and international relations, and was strongly tied to the principle of non-interference, as outlined in the United Nations Charter and customary international law.

However, over time, the meaning of sovereignty has evolved. International norms, especially those related to human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, have reshaped how sovereignty is viewed and practised. Today, the freedom of a state is not just about independence but also about meeting the needs and rights of its people. This reflects the principle of self-determination, where peoples have the right to decide their political and cultural future. Democratic values now suggest that a state gains legitimacy through the consent and welfare of its citizens. Sovereignty is no longer seen as absolute but as subject to certain responsibilities, such as protecting human rights and participating in global cooperation. International norms help guide and sometimes limit state actions. For example, global standards against genocide, the functioning of the International Criminal Court, and the expectation of free and fair elections all demonstrate how international law can influence domestic governance.

In this changing global order, sovereignty now rests on dual foundations: constitutional legitimacy within the state and compliance with international norms. A state's right to sovereignty is increasingly judged by how well it protects freedoms, upholds justice, and respects international obligations. Sovereignty today means more than just independence; it also includes accountability and responsibility to the global community. This balance between state autonomy and international standards is one of the defining features of the modern world.

### 4.1.6.1 Globalization and Sovereignty

Globalization, marked by the swift movement of goods, capital, people, information, and ideas across borders, has significantly transformed how we understand and practise state sovereignty. In the traditional Westphalian model, sovereignty meant a state's absolute authority over its territory, laws, and borders. However, this idea has been reshaped by global flows that are increasingly difficult to control. Economic interdependence, international trade rules, and financial markets often require governments to align with global standards, even when these conflict with domestic preferences. Moreover, powerful non-state actors, such as multinational corporations, global institutions, NGOs, and even criminal networks, influence decision-making and sometimes bypass or weaken state authority. International and regional organisations, such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund, also contribute to this shift by setting binding norms and policies that reshape national governance.

Despite these constraints, globalization does not eliminate sovereignty; rather, it redefines it. States continue to play a central role in regulation and law enforcement, especially within their own borders. Many states have responded to globalization by transforming sovereignty into a more flexible and adaptive concept. In some cases, this means sharing authority through trade blocs or regional alliances—a process often described as pooled sovereignty. Others invoke national sovereignty to protect cultural identity or ensure democratic control. This evolving landscape shows that sovereignty today is no longer an absolute shield but a dynamic process shaped by negotiation, collaboration, and global engagement. While globalization may limit state autonomy in certain areas, it can also offer new opportunities for prosperity, effectiveness, and legitimacy when states learn to navigate and shape the global environment rather than resist it.

#### **4.1.6.2 International Law and Humanitarian Intervention**

Humanitarian intervention refers to the use of force by a state or group of states, without the consent of the affected state, to stop severe human rights violations such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, or crimes against humanity. While the ethical need to prevent mass atrocities is widely recognised, the legal status of such interventions remains deeply contested. The United Nations Charter, particularly Article 2(7), emphasises state sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs. This principle, confirmed by the International Court of Justice in the Nicaragua case, is considered part of customary international law. However, Chapter VII of the UN Charter allows the Security Council to authorise the use of force in cases of threats to peace or breaches of peace, and humanitarian concerns have increasingly been cited in justifying such interventions, as seen in the cases of Somalia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. Legally, only Security Council-authorised interventions are clearly valid under international law, aiming to prevent the misuse of humanitarian justifications for political or strategic gain.

Despite this, a growing body of scholars and some states argue for a doctrine of humanitarian intervention that allows collective or unilateral action in extreme situations, even without Security Council approval. This position remains controversial, with critics warning that it threatens state sovereignty and could be manipulated for neocolonial or self-interested motives. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework emerged to bridge this divide, proposing that when a state fails to protect its population from mass atrocities, the international community has a duty to act through peaceful means first and, if necessary, through force with Security Council approval. It is important to distinguish this from humanitarian assistance, which involves neutral aid efforts by organisations such as the Red Cross and does not amount to intervention under international law. In summary, the legal and ethical debate around humanitarian intervention reflects the ongoing challenge of balancing state sovereignty with the international responsibility to uphold human dignity and prevent large-scale human suffering.

## Recap

- ◆ A state is a political organisation that governs people and territory, recognised by its ability to make laws and use legitimate force.
- ◆ Sovereignty gives a state independence and the highest authority within its borders, essential for justice, law, and international relations.
- ◆ The historical development of political entities from city-states to empires reflects different models of governance and ethical values.
- ◆ The Westphalian model introduced the modern idea of non-interference and equal sovereignty among states.
- ◆ Enlightenment thinkers advocated for rational, secular, and rights-based governance rooted in public consent and the rule of law.
- ◆ Theories of the state, such as social contract, Marxist, organic, and mechanistic views, offer diverse ethical lenses to understand authority and legitimacy.
- ◆ Ethical critiques by Fanon and Ambedkar show how colonialism and internal hierarchies violated dignity and justice.
- ◆ Postcolonial states face challenges like weak institutions, lack of inclusion, and struggles over identity and nationhood.
- ◆ Globalization and international norms reshape how sovereignty is practised, linking it to human rights, accountability, and cooperation.
- ◆ The balance between state authority and individual freedom remains a central ethical concern in both domestic governance and international law.

## Objective Questions

1. Who defined the state as having a monopoly over the legitimate use of force?
2. What treaty established the concept of modern territorial sovereignty?
3. Which thinker introduced the concept of the “general will”?
4. What system justified monarchs as divinely appointed rulers?
5. Which Indian thinker strongly criticised both colonialism and caste?
6. What term describes cooperation and mutual obligation in society?

7. What term refers to the legal recognition of a state's independence?
8. Which Greek city-state valued debate and philosophy?
9. What do you call the merging of national identity with state structure?
10. Which modern theory views the state as an artificial creation designed to serve specific functions like securing liberty and property?

## Answers

1. Max Weber
2. Westphalia
3. Rousseau
4. Divine Right
5. Ambedkar
6. Social Contract
7. Sovereignty
8. Athens
9. Nation-State
10. Mechanistic Theory of the State

## Assignments

1. Define the term 'state' and explain its main characteristics using examples.
2. Describe the concept of sovereignty and discuss its importance in the modern world.
3. Compare and contrast Athenian democracy and Spartan oligarchy.
4. What are the ethical justifications for social contract theory? Discuss with reference to Hobbes and Locke.
5. How did the Enlightenment influence the idea of the rational state?

6. Explain the main features of the Westphalian system and its relevance to state sovereignty.
7. Discuss the critiques of colonialism offered by Frantz Fanon and B. R. Ambedkar.
8. What challenges do postcolonial states face in maintaining legitimacy?
9. Outline the main differences between organic and mechanistic theories of the state.
10. Examine the ethical dilemmas involved in balancing sovereignty and individual human rights.

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# Citizenship and Civic Virtue

## UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ describe the legal, ethical, and social dimensions of citizenship and civic virtue
- ◆ explain the role of ethical responsibilities in strengthening democratic systems
- ◆ understand the importance of civic education in promoting justice, equality, and active participation
- ◆ recognise ways to protect democratic values and institutions through active citizenship

### Prerequisites

*“However good a Constitution may be, if those who are implementing it are not good, it will prove to be bad.”*

-Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

Being a citizen means belonging to something larger than ourselves. It is about feeling connected to our community and caring for the people around us. Citizenship is built on the deep roots of struggle and sacrifice by many who fought for fairness, dignity, and justice. Yet many of us forget this when we act carelessly, spitting on the road, littering, or treating others without respect. These small actions quietly weaken the foundation of our community, like a tree losing its roots. True citizenship is more than a legal status; it is a living bond that calls us to act with kindness, fairness, and responsibility every day. It asks us to care for our surroundings, honour others, follow laws, and actively work to build a just society.

Many barriers make it difficult for people to fulfil these responsibilities. Poverty, lack of education, social discrimination, fear, and distrust often silence voices and

create feelings of isolation. Think of the millions who cannot vote or speak up because they feel powerless or ignored. These barriers weaken the strong roots needed for a healthy democracy and leave many feeling unheard. Civic education plays an important role in opening our eyes to our rights and duties, reminding us that our voice matters whether we speak against injustice or help our neighbours. Consider the story of a small town where a group of young people decided to clean up a neglected park. Despite challenges, their persistence transformed the space into a wonderful community place. This shows how ethical citizenship, like tending a precious garden, needs care, courage, and commitment to flourish. When we live up to this promise, we build a society where everyone feels safe, valued, and truly at home.

## Keywords

Citizenship, Civic Virtue, Ethical Responsibilities, Civic Education, Democratic Values

## Discussion

Being a citizen means more than just living in a country or having a legal document that says you belong there. It means being part of a community and helping to make it a better place for everyone. In a democracy, citizens have a special role. They must respect each other, follow fair rules, and take part in making decisions that affect their lives and the lives of others. This is called *ethical citizenship*. It means doing what is right and fair, not just for yourself but for everyone. To be a good citizen, people need to learn about their rights and duties. This learning is called *civic education*, and it helps people understand how democracy works and why their involvement matters. Citizens have the responsibility to protect democratic values like freedom, equality, and justice. They should also help their community and ensure leaders are honest and fair. When citizens act with care and fairness, they demonstrate *civic virtue*, which helps democracy grow strong and just for all.

### 4.2.1 Citizenship and Civic Virtue

Citizenship means being officially recognised as a member of a country. It is a legal relationship between a person and the state that grants specific rights and responsibilities. These rights include voting in elections, being protected by the law, and having access to a passport, while the responsibilities may involve following laws, paying taxes, and showing loyalty to the country. Citizenship gives individuals both a legal identity and a role in the functioning of their nation.

People can become citizens in different ways, depending on the laws of each country. A common method is citizenship by birth (*jus soli*), where a person gains citizenship simply by being born in a country. Another is citizenship by descent (*jus sanguinis*), where children inherit citizenship through their parents or even grandparents. Naturalisation is

another route, where someone who has lived in a country for a number of years and meets certain conditions, such as language skills and legal residency, can apply for citizenship. Other ways include marriage to a citizen, economic investment, ancestry, or adoption. In some cases, individuals may even hold dual citizenship, legally belonging to two countries at once, although this can involve special rules. Refugees or asylum seekers may also gain citizenship after being legally resettled. In India, the Citizenship Act of 1955, along with its amendments like the *Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019*, outlines the main legal pathways to citizenship: by birth, descent, registration, and naturalization.

### **Digital Citizenship**

Today, being a good citizen is not just about what you do in your community but also how you act online. Digital citizenship means using the internet responsibly and respectfully, showing civic values while connecting, sharing, and participating in the digital world.

While citizenship is a legal status, civic virtue refers to the values, habits, and behaviours that help a society work well. It involves putting the common good above self-interest and acting with responsibility, fairness, cooperation, and respect. Citizens show civic virtue when they vote, follow laws, participate in community service, and engage in public issues with a sense of care and duty. These actions are not just about fulfilling legal roles but about creating a society where everyone feels included and heard.

Civic virtue also includes everyday practices that build trust and unity, such as helping neighbours, supporting justice, and learning about civic rights and duties. Promoting fairness, encouraging others to be informed citizens, and respecting different voices all contribute to creating inclusive, democratic communities. Together, citizenship and civic virtue strengthen the bond between individuals and the state. While citizenship grants people the legal tools to participate in society, civic virtue inspires them to use those tools in ways that serve the public good and foster a more just, respectful, and compassionate nation.

## **4.2.2 Ethical Responsibilities of Citizenship**

Ethical responsibilities of citizenship refer to the moral duties and obligations that individuals are expected to follow in order to contribute meaningfully to society and support the common good. These responsibilities go beyond what the law requires and focus on building a respectful, just, and peaceful community. They include treating all people with dignity and fairness regardless of their background, following the laws and constitutional principles that protect everyone's rights, and participating in civic life through voting, public discussion, and community service. Ethical citizens are expected to be honest and trustworthy, to care about the welfare of others by protecting the environment, conserving resources, and supporting social causes, and to value diversity while promoting peaceful coexistence. They are also called to exercise their freedoms in a responsible way that considers the well-being of others. Ethical citizenship is based on the idea that each person's actions affect the larger society and that a strong, fair, and united community depends on individuals who act with respect, responsibility, and concern for others.

#### **4.2.2.1 Voting and Participation**

Voting and participation are the lifeblood of a healthy democracy, serving as powerful expressions of civic virtue. Through voting, citizens choose leaders who represent their values and influence laws that affect everyday life. But democracy is more than just casting a ballot. It requires active engagement, such as attending meetings, joining community efforts, staying informed, and voicing opinions. This ongoing participation ensures that governments listen to diverse voices and respond to the needs of all people. When citizens take part in these ways, they help build a society based on shared responsibility, fairness, and the common good.

Voting is not only a right but also a vital civic duty that strengthens democracy. When people see voting as a responsibility, like paying taxes or serving on a jury, they help create governments that truly reflect the collective will. High voter turnout promotes equality by including voices from all communities, especially marginalised groups, ensuring their needs are heard. By voting, citizens hold leaders accountable and influence policies that benefit society. Treating voting as a duty encourages informed participation, counters apathy, and helps build democratic institutions that respect justice and fairness.

However, democracy faces serious ethical challenges when citizens become apathetic or when democratic rights are misused, such as through vote buying. Apathy weakens democracy because it limits who participates and reduces accountability, allowing corruption and unfair practices to flourish. Vote buying, where votes are exchanged for money or favours, undermines the freedom to choose leaders based on merit and breaks trust between people and government. These problems erode the moral foundation of democracy and harm social cohesion. Therefore, ethical citizenship requires active, informed engagement and a commitment to justice, equality, and the common good, ensuring democracy remains strong and fair for all.

#### **4.2.2.2 Civil Disobedience**

Civil disobedience is a deliberate, peaceful, and public refusal to obey certain laws or commands considered unjust, aiming to bring about social or political change by appealing to the conscience of the community. This form of protest involves consciously breaking the law without violence, often through marches, sit-ins, or boycotts, and accepting legal consequences to show respect for the rule of law while challenging specific injustices. History offers examples, such as Henry David Thoreau's tax refusal, Gandhi's Salt March, Rosa Parks' stand against segregation, Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights leadership, and modern climate activism by youth like Greta Thunberg. Breaking the law is morally justified when laws violate human rights, cause suffering, or perpetuate discrimination, as seen in struggles against slavery, segregation, or apartheid. Such actions must be thoughtful, peaceful, and undertaken after legal options have been exhausted, emphasising moral responsibility and social accountability to promote justice and the common good.

The philosophies of Gandhi's Satyagraha and Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent protest embody the highest ideals of civil disobedience, rooted in truth, courage, and respect for human dignity. Satyagraha teaches resistance through love, self-suffering, and appealing to the oppressor's conscience without causing harm. King adapted these principles to fight racial injustice in America, promoting active nonviolent resistance

marked by compassion and a vision of a “beloved community” based on equality and respect. Ethical protest differs clearly from violence by its commitment to non-harm, respect for all individuals, and willingness to accept consequences peacefully. Violence, by contrast, undermines legitimacy, escalates conflict, and often harms vulnerable groups, detracting from the cause. True social change is achieved when protest balances justice with nonviolence, moral persuasion, and dialogue, showing that lasting transformation depends on the strength of ethical conviction rather than force.

#### **4.2.2.3 Environmental and Social Responsibilities**

Environmental and social responsibilities are fundamental to ethical citizenship because they promote the well-being and sustainability of society for present and future generations. Environmental responsibility calls on individuals, communities, organisations, and governments to protect natural resources by practising sustainable development, conserving air, water, soil, and biodiversity, and reducing carbon footprints through wise consumption and clean energy use. Simple actions like recycling, saving water, and supporting green initiatives demonstrate a moral commitment to global stewardship that goes beyond legal obligations. At the same time, social responsibility involves respecting diversity, promoting inclusion and justice, participating in community service, obeying laws, paying taxes, and holding leaders accountable. Together, these responsibilities foster social harmony, protect ecological balance, and build stronger democracies grounded in fairness and collective welfare. Citizens act as stewards of the environment and public goods by voluntarily caring for shared resources such as parks, clean air, and cultural heritage, engaging in local initiatives such as clean-ups and tree planting, and monitoring ecological violations. This stewardship nurtures transparency, democratic participation, and intergenerational equity, proving that collective care leads to lasting positive change.

Everyday ethical choices such as waste segregation, energy conservation, and water saving reflect this broader commitment by protecting shared resources and promoting fairness in access. Actions like sorting waste properly, fixing leaks, using energy-efficient appliances, and raising community awareness contribute to a more sustainable and just society. Volunteering and community care further embody civic virtues by addressing unmet social needs, supporting vulnerable populations, and strengthening social bonds through mutual aid and collective responsibility. These acts of service foster empathy, leadership, and inclusion while enhancing the resilience and justice of communities, especially during crises like pandemics or natural disasters. By turning abstract ideals into tangible actions, environmental and social responsibilities combined with volunteering and community engagement help build compassionate, equitable, and sustainable societies where every individual contributes to the common good.

#### **4.2.3 Importance of Civic Education**

Civic education is essential because it teaches people how to become active and responsible members of society. It helps individuals understand their rights and duties, the workings of government, and the importance of democracy. When people grasp these concepts, they are better equipped to participate in voting, speak out against injustice, and engage in activities that improve their communities. Civic education also encourages critical thinking, respect for different opinions, and peaceful collaboration. It motivates

individuals to question unfairness and contribute to building a more just and equal society. By teaching shared values such as honesty, respect, and fairness, civic education unites people from diverse backgrounds and ensures that everyone has the opportunity to be involved in society. When young people learn these lessons early, they grow into confident and caring leaders who understand the value of working together for the common good.

Democratic societies have a responsibility to actively teach civic values to ensure that citizens understand and uphold principles such as justice, equality, participation, and respect for rights. Schools play an important role by integrating these values into the curriculum through engaging methods like debates, role plays, and mock parliaments, while drawing on inspiring historical figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. At home and in communities, parents and leaders model democratic behaviour through civility, tolerance, and collective action. Opportunities for participation in student governments, town halls, and public forums allow people to experience democracy directly and develop skills in listening, discussion, and consensus-building. Media literacy and awareness campaigns strengthen understanding by promoting informed decision-making and appreciation for diversity. Legal protections like freedom of speech and anti-discrimination laws support the daily practice of civic values, creating a culture of reflection, responsibility, and resilience.

By fostering debate, recognising ethical actions, and encouraging active citizenship, democratic societies prepare individuals to be thoughtful participants in democracy. This education not only helps people face today's challenges but also empowers them to shape a just, inclusive, and vibrant future. Civic education builds the foundation for a society where every person understands their role and responsibility in upholding democratic principles and contributing to the common good.

#### **4.2.3.1 Role in Democracy**

In a healthy democracy, citizens must be both informed and ethical, and education has a vital role in shaping such individuals. Understanding democratic values, rights, and duties enables people to participate actively in public life, make responsible decisions, and hold leaders accountable. Ethical education encourages individuals to think beyond personal interests and focus on the common good. Citizenship is not passive but an active commitment that includes following laws, paying taxes, voting, and respecting diverse views. Young people especially need civic education that builds trust in democratic institutions and inspires them to engage as responsible members of society. Democracy depends not only on rules and institutions but also on the values and habits of its people.

Building informed and ethical citizens requires more than learning facts about government; it involves nurturing responsibility, fairness, and care for others. A strong civic education curriculum covers constitutional rights and duties, ethical reasoning, and current issues such as climate change and digital literacy. Critical thinking and respectful debate prepare individuals to evaluate information and engage thoughtfully with others. Role models like teachers and community leaders demonstrate honesty, service, and justice, while volunteering and community activities foster empathy and shared responsibility. Encouraging young people to participate in student councils or local civic events helps them gain real-world experience and a sense of ownership in democratic processes.

Today, democracies face challenges like fake news, polarisation, and populism that threaten social cohesion. Combating these problems requires cooperation between citizens, institutions, media, and technology companies. Digital literacy helps people recognise misinformation, while fact-checking and ethical journalism build trust in information. Social media platforms can limit false content, and promoting dialogue, empathy, and exposure to diverse perspectives helps reduce divisions. Addressing populism involves tackling root causes such as inequality and poor representation through inclusive governance and positive political narratives. Throughout all efforts, protecting free expression and encouraging ongoing civic engagement remain essential. Strong civic education builds resilient citizens capable of safeguarding democracy from manipulation and division.

#### **4.2.3.2 Civic Education in Schools**

Civic education in India, especially through the efforts of SCERT, NCERT, and CBSE, places constitutional values such as justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity at the core of the school curriculum. From early childhood to higher secondary levels, students learn important principles like sovereignty, secularism, democracy, and socialism, along with their fundamental rights and duties. These lessons are made meaningful through stories, case studies, and class discussions that connect with real-life experiences and community engagement. Activities such as debates, mock parliaments, and school elections provide practical experience in democratic participation and civic responsibility. A special emphasis is placed on fundamental duties, encouraging care for national symbols, public property, and civic obligations. Teachers have a crucial role not only as knowledge facilitators but also as role models who embody constitutional values through their conduct, helping to nurture a generation that is ethically aware and committed to India's democratic ideals.

Value education and moral science strengthen this civic understanding by building essential ethical principles such as empathy, honesty, responsibility, and fairness. Through stories, real-life dilemmas, and collaborative exercises, students reflect on moral choices and community values. Active learning methods like role plays, debates, and service-based projects develop critical thinking and communication skills, making abstract values relatable and applicable to everyday life. Teachers shape young minds not only through lessons but also through their behaviour, promoting respect, inclusion, and justice. They encourage students to question injustice and care for the environment while fostering a classroom culture of fairness and mutual respect. Influential thinkers like Dr Radhakrishnan and Rabindranath Tagore have emphasised the vital role of teachers in shaping ethical citizens. By helping learners understand their rights and responsibilities, teachers contribute to building a just and inclusive society where civic education becomes a lived experience grounded in India's democratic and ethical values.

#### **4.2.4 Upholding Democratic Values**

Upholding democratic values requires a continuous and ethical commitment from individuals, institutions, and society to protect and strengthen principles such as liberty, equality, justice, pluralism, and the rule of law. At the heart of democracy lies an ethical foundation that respects the intrinsic dignity and equal rights of every person, along with a moral duty to pursue justice and protect the vulnerable. Ethics guides citizens and institutions to resist injustice not through violence but through peaceful protest, advocacy,

and legal means that uphold life and solidarity. Strengthening democratic institutions depends on integrity, transparency, and accountability from public officials, as well as the active involvement of ethical citizens who support free expression and pluralism.

Civic education and the cultivation of virtues like responsibility, mutual respect, and service to the common good prepare individuals to think critically and act ethically. Ethical engagement also means challenging disinformation, resisting corruption, promoting equality, and participating actively in democratic processes such as voting and public dialogue. Remaining silent or neutral in the face of injustice risks democratic decline, while ethical action rooted in duty and solidarity reinforces democracy. Democracy thrives when both individuals and institutions act with courage, uphold the rule of law, and foster a culture of justice, inclusion, and respect for all members of society.

#### **4.2.4.1 Equality and Inclusiveness**

At the heart of democracy lies a profound moral principle: every human being possesses intrinsic dignity and equal worth. This principle forms the ethical foundation of democratic values, institutions, and civic life. Democracy affirms that everyone, regardless of race, religion, gender, or social status, deserves respect, protection, and the full enjoyment of universal human rights such as freedom of speech, equality before the law, political participation, and protection from discrimination. A democratic society values pluralism and diversity by ensuring that all voices are heard and that no one is left behind in access to justice, education, resources, or opportunities. Civic virtue calls citizens not only to claim their rights but also to honour the dignity of others through empathy, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. Institutions such as the judiciary, free press, and electoral bodies serve as guardians of dignity by holding power accountable, while ethical governance requires leaders to act with integrity and reject authoritarianism, discrimination, and corruption.

India's constitutional vision of dignity and equality demands proactive measures to address deeply rooted discrimination based on caste, gender, disability, and religion. Caste discrimination is prohibited and criminalised through various laws and affirmative action policies, yet enforcement gaps and social stigma often obstruct justice. Gender discrimination is addressed through legislation and policies promoting women's rights and political participation, but gaps in literacy, employment, safety, and leadership persist. Disability rights are protected by laws ensuring non-discrimination and accessibility, yet barriers remain in infrastructure and implementation. Religious discrimination is countered by constitutional freedoms and hate speech laws, though certain policies have raised concerns of institutional bias, highlighting the need for judicial oversight and civil society advocacy. Eliminating these inequalities requires not only legal protections but also inclusive policies, stronger enforcement, public education to reduce stigma, and the empowerment of marginalised communities through active participation in decision-making.

Affirmative action in this context is not a special privilege but an ethical necessity grounded in justice, fairness, and respect for human dignity. It seeks to correct historical and systemic inequalities that block equal access to education, employment, and public life. The Indian Constitution upholds both equality and the legitimacy of affirmative

action as a legal and ethical obligation, ensuring real inclusion rather than charity. By acknowledging that treating everyone the same does not erase inherited disadvantages, affirmative action promotes equity, enriches diversity, and strengthens democracy. Measures such as reservations and targeted support programmes help dismantle barriers created by social bias and exclusion, restoring dignity and self-worth. While critics argue that affirmative action compromises merit, true merit cannot thrive without justice and equality. As long as inequality persists, affirmative action remains a continuing commitment to fairness, human dignity, and equal opportunity for all.

#### **4.2.4.2 Protecting Democratic Institutions**

Protecting democratic institutions requires a comprehensive approach focused on safeguarding the rule of law, ensuring free and fair elections, upholding civil liberties, combating disinformation, and promoting civic engagement. Strengthening institutional independence is essential, including protecting judicial and regulatory agencies from political influence and supporting public servants with training to respond to threats. Transparent and resilient election mechanisms must be maintained to prevent interference, including from foreign actors. Civic education plays a crucial role in building a well-informed electorate that values participation and democratic principles. Citizens should be encouraged to engage in policymaking, which strengthens the relationship between institutions and the public. Protecting media freedom through legal safeguards ensures journalists can operate without fear, supporting open debate and public awareness. Globally, democratic values are reinforced through international cooperation, dialogue, and support for inclusive governance, especially in fragile states. Concrete policy measures and partnerships illustrate how countries can provide effective support for democracy. Defending democracy requires constant vigilance, innovation, and a shared commitment to justice, participation, and institutional integrity.

Vigilance is critical to preserving core democratic institutions such as an independent judiciary, a free press, and an autonomous Election Commission. These institutions uphold constitutional rights, ensure checks and balances, and maintain democratic legitimacy. An independent judiciary must interpret laws fairly without political pressure, holding the executive and legislature accountable under the rule of law. A free press promotes transparency and informed public participation by exposing abuses of power, and its freedom must be protected against censorship and harassment. The Election Commission safeguards electoral integrity by overseeing transparent and fair elections, and preventing interference in its work is vital to sustaining citizens' trust. However, threats such as authoritarianism, disinformation, and polarization require constant vigilance from civil society, legal experts, media, and engaged citizens. Active citizenship strengthens these institutions, making them resilient to internal and external challenges. The survival of democracy depends not only on these institutions but also on the public's firm commitment to defend their independence and integrity.

Citizens play an essential role in holding power accountable beyond voting. They must actively monitor government actions, demand transparency in public spending, and question officials when promises are broken or rights violated. Tools such as public data, media reports, and the Right to Information laws enable citizens to critically assess policies and seek corrective measures through public interest litigation, complaints,

or petitions. Supporting independent journalism, participating in civil society, and organising collective action further enhance accountability. Civic virtues like honesty, respect for the law, and commitment to justice underpin this engagement. Promoting constitutional and civic education empowers communities to understand their rights and responsibilities. Resisting authoritarianism is an ethical duty grounded in defending human rights, justice, and dignity. Ethical resistance emphasises nonviolent methods like protest, civil disobedience, and civic participation to challenge oppression while minimising harm. Remaining silent or neutral enables authoritarianism to grow, whereas moral courage and solidarity strengthen resistance and democratic values. Drawing on historical lessons and global alliances helps societies build just and participatory futures where dignity and freedom are protected for all.

While these measures are essential, protecting democratic institutions is never easy. In practice, judicial independence may be undermined by political appointments, delays in justice, or corruption. Media freedom faces challenges from censorship, corporate control, and the spread of disinformation through digital platforms. Election commissions often struggle with limited resources, political pressure, or distrust from polarised electorates. Citizens themselves may disengage due to apathy, misinformation, or economic insecurity, weakening the culture of participation. These contradictions show that defending democracy requires not only strong laws and institutions but also a deep social commitment to democratic values that can withstand the pressures of power and conflict.

## Recap

- ◆ Citizenship is a legal identity granting rights (e.g., voting, legal protection) and responsibilities (e.g., paying taxes, obeying laws).
- ◆ Civic virtue goes beyond legality, focusing on behaviours that serve the common good, such as fairness, cooperation, and community participation.
- ◆ Ethical responsibilities include honesty, justice, environmental care, and respect for diversity.
- ◆ Voting and participation ensure democratic accountability and inclusion.
- ◆ Civil disobedience is a nonviolent way to protest unjust laws, historically used by Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and others.
- ◆ Environmental and social responsibilities promote sustainable and just societies.
- ◆ Civic education builds the knowledge, values, and skills needed for active democratic participation.
- ◆ Democratic values like equality, inclusiveness, and human dignity must be upheld through citizen vigilance and institutional integrity.

## Objective Questions

1. What is the term used for citizenship acquired by birth?
2. What do we call the process through which a non-citizen becomes a citizen?
3. What name is given to Gandhi's philosophy of peaceful resistance?
4. Which Indian law provides the framework for governing citizenship?
5. Equal worth and dignity for all citizens are fundamental principles of which system of government?
6. The right to vote is considered which type of civic responsibility?
7. What is the practice of peacefully breaking an unjust law called?
8. Protecting natural resources such as air, water, and biodiversity is part of which responsibility?
9. Which body is responsible for ensuring free and fair elections in India?
10. What principle involves treating everyone equally while also recognising historical disadvantages?

## Answers

1. Jus soli
2. Naturalisation
3. Satyagraha
4. Citizenship Act
5. Democracy
6. Duty
7. Civil disobedience
8. Environmental responsibility
9. Election Commission
10. Affirmative action

## Assignments

1. Explain the concept of citizenship and distinguish it from civic virtue with examples.
2. Discuss the main legal pathways to citizenship in India, referencing the Citizenship Act of 1955.
3. Describe the ethical responsibilities of citizenship and explain why they go beyond legal obligations.
4. Evaluate the role of voting and participation in strengthening democracy.
5. Analyse the moral justifications for civil disobedience, citing historical examples.
6. Discuss the importance of environmental and social responsibilities in ethical citizenship.
7. Examine the role of civic education in shaping active and responsible citizens.
8. Critically assess how equality and inclusiveness strengthen democratic values.
9. Explain the role of citizens in protecting democratic institutions.
10. Suggest measures to counter apathy and corruption in a democratic society.

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SGOU



## Accountability and Democracy

# UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ explain how transparency, accountability, and the rule of law uphold democracy
- ◆ analyse democracy and the challenges of majority rule
- ◆ assess the links between democracy, development, and local governance in India
- ◆ recognise the role of ethics and citizen participation in democracy

### Prerequisites

*“The test of good governance is not whether we do things right, but whether we do the right things.”*

– Peter Drucker

During the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln faced criticism for suspending certain civil rights to manage the crisis. Instead of avoiding difficult questions, he spoke openly to the public and explained his decisions to Congress. He believed the government should be *“of the people, by the people, for the people,”* always accountable to those it serves. Even in war, Lincoln demonstrated that true leadership means addressing criticism with honesty and providing clear reasons for every action.

A democracy without accountability is like a ship without a compass. It may move forward, but without direction, it risks drifting into danger. Accountability, transparency, and the rule of law are the ethical lifelines that keep democracy fair and strong. Democracy is more than casting votes; it is a living relationship between citizens and leaders, built on honesty, participation, and shared responsibility. Ethical governance requires constant care, much like a garden that must be tended and

nurtured. Decentralisation strengthens this bond by bringing decision-making closer to the people and ensuring governance reflects their needs and values.

## Keywords

Transparency, Accountability, Rule of Law, Democratic Legitimacy, Decentralisation

## Discussion

Accountability and democracy are not just political terms; they are about fairness and trust in how we live together. Imagine a society where leaders are open about their actions, where they take responsibility for their decisions, and where laws apply equally to everyone. That is the essence of transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Democracy goes beyond merely casting a vote; it is about respecting every person's voice and rights. When democracy is guided by strong ethical values, it helps build a community where people trust their leaders and feel included in decisions that affect their lives. This trust encourages growth, better development, and the sharing of power so that decisions are made closer to the people they impact. Together, these concepts help create a fair and caring society where everyone's dignity matters.

### 4.3.1 Accountability and Democracy

Democracy is a way of governing where power belongs to the people. Citizens can make decisions directly or elect leaders to represent them. Democracy is based on important principles such as everyone having an equal voice, decisions made by majority, and protecting the rights of minority groups. It ensures free and fair elections where all adults can vote. In a democracy, laws apply equally to everyone, and power is shared among different branches, including the government, the parliament, and the courts. Basic rights like freedom of speech, the right to assemble peacefully, and a free press allow people to express their views and participate in public life. Democracy encourages diverse opinions and supports many groups, such as political parties and community organisations, to engage. Countries like India, the United States, and the United Kingdom employ representative democracy, where elected leaders make decisions on behalf of the people. Democracy is essential because it is based on the consent of the people, allows peaceful changes of government, and includes all groups in society. However, democracy faces challenges such as corruption, undue influence from popular leaders, restrictions on freedoms, and misinformation.

Accountability is a crucial component of democracy. It means that leaders and officials must explain and take responsibility for their actions. In a democracy, people can question their leaders and have mechanisms to rectify wrong actions. This helps prevent corruption and ensures the government operates more honestly. Accountability builds trust between the people and those in power. It also enables governments to learn from mistakes and make better decisions. Without accountability, democracy cannot function effectively or endure.

There are different ways accountability manifests in democracy. Political accountability occurs during elections when citizens choose to retain or remove leaders based on their performance. Legal accountability involves laws and courts overseeing public officials to ensure they adhere to the rules. Courts, special reviews, and ethics codes all contribute to keeping leaders honest. Administrative accountability occurs within government offices, where officials such as auditors and ombudsmen review processes and address complaints. Transparency is also vital. When governments share information openly, people can understand what is happening and engage in discussions through the media, civil society, and public meetings.

We can think of accountability in two ways: vertical and horizontal. Vertical accountability is when citizens hold the government responsible through voting and public actions. This is the “bottom-up” way that people check their leaders. Horizontal accountability occurs within the government, where different parts, such as parliament, courts, and auditors, monitor each other to prevent abuses of power. These checks happen continuously, not just during elections. Both types of accountability work together to keep democracy strong, fair, and honest.

### **4.3.2 Transparency, Accountability and Rule of Law**

Transparency, accountability, and the rule of law are three interconnected pillars that uphold democratic governance and ensure that governments function with legitimacy, effectiveness, and public trust. Transparency means that government decisions, actions, and processes are open, accessible, and understandable to the public. It allows citizens to see how decisions are made and how public resources are used. This visibility enables them to detect wrongdoing, participate meaningfully in governance, and hold leaders accountable for their actions. Accountability ensures that public officials are answerable for their conduct through mechanisms such as elections, legal processes, public audits, and civil oversight. However, accountability depends on transparency, as citizens can only question and challenge actions when information is made available. Together, these principles promote trust in democratic institutions and help prevent the misuse of power.

The rule of law completes this framework by ensuring that all individuals and institutions, including those in government, are bound by laws that are clear, stable, and applied equally. It guarantees that legal systems can investigate, prosecute, and address misconduct, supporting both transparency and accountability through independent courts and oversight bodies. These three principles work in close coordination. Transparency reveals what public officials are doing. Accountability provides the means to respond when something goes wrong. The rule of law ensures fairness and legal enforcement. Without these principles in place, democracy weakens, corruption thrives, and citizens lose confidence in governance. For instance, when a public official misuses public funds, transparency ensures that financial records are accessible, accountability allows for public audits and investigations, and the rule of law ensures that proper legal action is taken. These pillars are essential to ensure that democracy remains just, ethical, and responsive to the needs of the people.

### Voices in Local Democracy

In Kerala, local assemblies called *gram sabhas* give citizens a direct voice in shaping decisions about schools, health centres, and public works. One member of the women's empowerment network Kudumbashree captured the spirit of this participation, saying, *"For the first time, my voice is part of the decision, not just the echo after it is made."* This approach shows how decentralisation can turn democratic principles into everyday reality.

#### 4.3.2.1 Mechanisms for Transparency

In a democracy, government openness and honesty are essential for building trust and fairness between the state and its citizens. Mechanisms such as the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, legally empower Indian citizens to access government information, promoting transparency by requiring officials to share documents and decisions promptly. Open data policies further enhance this by making government data readily available for public use, encouraging participation and innovation. Citizen Charters clearly explain the services people can expect from government offices, including timelines and complaint procedures, while e-governance tools use technology to make services faster and more transparent, especially for those in remote areas. Together, these tools help citizens know their rights and hold officials accountable.

Media and civil society groups serve as watchdogs by reporting on corruption, amplifying marginalised voices, and protecting whistleblowers, thus defending democratic values and fostering public trust despite challenges such as censorship. In essence, openness is an ethical imperative in democracy, promoting fairness, trust, and justice. When governments share information freely, citizens can make informed decisions and engage fully in governance. This transparency respects individual dignity, supports well-being, and encourages honest leadership. Conversely, keeping information secret without good reason breaks the trust that sustains democracy and weakens the accountability of public officials.

#### 4.3.2.2 Ethics of Whistleblowing

A whistleblower is a person, often working within an organisation, who exposes illegal, unethical, or unsafe actions that could harm the public or violate the law. They may report these issues internally or to outside authorities when internal systems fail to respond. Whistleblowers demonstrate great moral courage by speaking out despite risks such as losing their jobs, facing legal trouble, or being socially isolated. Their actions help uncover corruption, fraud, or dangers to health and safety, promoting openness and justice. Notable examples include Edward Snowden, who revealed large-scale government surveillance, and Satyendra Dubey, an Indian engineer who exposed corruption in a highway project but lost his life for it. These cases illustrate the vital role whistleblowers play in holding institutions accountable and the urgent need for strong laws and a culture that supports transparency and protects those who speak out.

### WikiLeaks and Whistleblowing in the Digital Age

Founded in 2006 by Julian Assange, WikiLeaks is one of the most well-known whistleblowing platforms in the world. It publishes leaked documents that reveal government and corporate secrets, aiming to promote transparency and accountability. Its work has sparked important global discussions on ethics, the public's right to know, and national security.

Whistleblowers often face serious ethical dilemmas and challenges. They must balance loyalty to their employer with a higher duty to the public and justice. Reporting wrongdoing may involve breaking confidentiality or laws, raising difficult questions about what is right. They risk retaliation such as harassment, job loss, or threats to their safety. Deciding whom to inform adds to their challenge, especially when official channels are ineffective. Many whistleblowers suffer long-term consequences even when legal protections exist. For public servants, balancing loyalty and accountability is a central ethical challenge. Loyalty builds trust within institutions, but accountability ensures actions follow laws and serve the public good. A healthy balance requires organisations to encourage ethical thinking, support responsible dissent, and protect those who expose wrongdoing. Loyalty must be guided by conscience and democratic values rather than blind obedience. When both loyalty and accountability are embraced, public service becomes a foundation of justice, trust, and good governance.

#### 4.3.3 Democracy as an Ethical Principle

Democracy is not only a political system but also an ethical principle grounded in values such as human dignity, equality, freedom, mutual respect, and responsibility. Democracy affirms the inherent worth of every individual and insists that each person deserves equal concern and respect in the institutions that govern collective life. It is rooted in the belief that freedom of conscience, expression, and self-direction are essential ethical goods, and that individuals must have the autonomy to make choices about their own lives. Democratic ethics also uphold mutual respect, ensuring that everyone has an equal voice in shaping decisions that affect the community. This ethical foundation protects minority rights and promotes social equality, even as majority rule is recognised. However, democracy ethically requires that majority decisions never violate the basic rights and dignity of others, rejecting any form of tyranny, whether by one or by the many.

Democracy relies on integrity, responsibility, and accountability from both leaders and citizens, emphasising transparency and public trust. It embraces pluralism and tolerance, recognising diversity as a strength and encouraging a spirit of coexistence. An impartial rule of law further supports this ethical order, ensuring that justice remains above political interests. As an ethical ideal, democracy goes beyond procedures and institutions to embody a collective way of life that aspires towards fairness, empowerment, hope, and unity. Though no society perfectly fulfils this vision, the ethical direction it provides remains clear and deeply compelling. It calls on public institutions, civil society, and education systems to nurture these values in everyday life so that democracy is not merely practised through elections but lived through mutual care, respect, and the pursuit of the common good.

#### 4.3.3.1 Majoritarian vs. Consensus Democracy

Majoritarian and consensus democracies represent two different approaches to how power is shared and decisions are made. Majoritarian democracy relies on majority rule, often characterised by single-party governments, winner-takes-all elections, and centralised authority. This system promotes clear and decisive governance but risks ignoring minority voices and allowing the majority to dominate unfairly. On the other hand, consensus democracy emphasises inclusion, power-sharing, and coalition-building among multiple parties. It protects minority rights and encourages cooperation, fostering social harmony and legitimacy. However, this model can slow decision-making and make policy changes more complex. Ethically, democracy must balance majority rule with inclusive participation, ensuring that decisions reflect not only the will of the majority but also respect the rights and voices of minorities. This balance strengthens democratic fairness, representation, and stability.

The danger of the tyranny of the majority is a serious concern in democratic governance. When the majority consistently overrides minority rights, it can lead to discrimination, social unrest, and weakened democratic institutions. Examples from history, such as racial segregation in the United States and communal tensions in India, illustrate how unchecked majoritarianism harms equality and dignity. Protecting democracy requires strong safeguards like constitutional rights, independent courts, pluralistic institutions, and an active civil society. Jürgen Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy highlights the ethical ideal of consensus, where legitimacy arises from fair and open dialogue that includes everyone affected by decisions. This approach sees democracy not just as majority rule but as a shared commitment to reasoned discussion, respect, and mutual understanding, promoting laws and policies that all can accept.

India and Scandinavian countries provide contrasting examples of how multi-party democracies function differently. India's system reflects its vast diversity, with many parties representing religious, ethnic, and regional groups. This leads to coalition governments that require negotiation but may face instability and delayed policies. India uses a first-past-the-post system, which strengthens regional representation within its federal structure. Scandinavian democracies, by contrast, have fewer parties that cooperate closely through coalition governments supported by proportional representation. Their political culture emphasises consensus, inclusion, and social welfare, resulting in stable governments and strong social cohesion. These differences show how history, culture, and institutions shape democratic governance, with India focusing on broad representation and Scandinavia on consensus and social equality.

#### 4.3.4 Legitimacy and Governance

Legitimacy is a foundational idea in governance that refers to the recognised right and public acceptance of a government or authority to rule, create laws, and implement policies. It reflects the collective belief that those in power are acting in a rightful and just manner, in alignment with the values and interests of the society they serve. This sense of legitimacy is rooted in the consent of the governed, which may be expressed through democratic participation or shaped by shared traditions, charismatic leadership, or legal-rational institutions. Legitimacy strengthens the moral and social foundation

of governance, helping governments to function without relying primarily on force or fear. When people believe in the fairness and appropriateness of their government's authority, they are more likely to follow laws voluntarily, trust public institutions, and engage constructively in civic life.

The presence of legitimacy enhances the effectiveness and stability of governance by promoting cooperation, reducing conflict, and fostering long-term public trust. It supports the rule of law by ensuring that laws are seen as just and by reinforcing accountability among public officials. Transparency and responsiveness are important to maintaining legitimacy, as they show that governments respect and address the concerns of their citizens. Legitimacy is dynamic and evolves with society's expectations. A government that consistently upholds justice, delivers public services effectively, and remains attuned to people's changing needs will likely enjoy greater legitimacy. On the other hand, when legitimacy weakens due to corruption, injustice, or neglect, it can lead to public unrest, non-compliance, and a crisis of authority. Therefore, nurturing legitimacy through lawful, ethical, and inclusive governance is essential for democracy, peace, and sustainable development.

#### **4.3.4.1 Sources of Democratic Legitimacy**

Democratic legitimacy rests on several foundations that make citizens accept democracy as just, representative, and rightful. At the core is popular consent, where people believe democracy is the best form of governance. This belief grows from a political culture that values participation, tolerance, and civil liberties, along with early socialisation into democratic norms. Legitimacy also depends on government performance. When democratic systems deliver economic progress, quality public services, reduce corruption, protect rights, and respond to people's needs, they build trust and support. Institutions like free elections, independent courts, and accountable legislatures uphold fairness and transparency, forming the pillars of institutional legitimacy. Emotional factors such as patriotism and national identity add to this support, helping democracy endure even in times of crisis.

##### **The World's Longest-Running Modern Democracy**

The United States is often regarded as the world's longest-running modern democracy, with its Constitution adopted in 1787. In its early years, it was a limited democracy that excluded many groups, including women and enslaved people, reflecting how democratic rights have expanded over time.

Procedural legitimacy focuses on fair and transparent processes, ensuring that authority is accepted not only because of outcomes but because decisions follow impartial and consistent rules. Free and fair elections, overseen by neutral bodies, allow citizens to trust results, even in disagreement. Similarly, courts gain legitimacy when they are transparent, accountable, and provide equal access to justice. These procedures reflect democratic values of accountability and participation and build public consent and cooperation. Substantive legitimacy complements this by emphasising just and fair outcomes. Citizens support democracy when governments protect rights, promote equality, and improve welfare through policies that ensure access to education, healthcare, and

social protection. Democracy gains moral strength when it delivers fairness both in process and result, recognising that following rules alone is not enough without caring for people's well-being.

Trust in institutions and the moral authority of leaders form the ethical heart of democracy. Trust grows when people believe institutions act fairly and transparently, protecting everyone's interests. Leaders earn moral authority through honesty, fairness, and a commitment to the public good. Their ability to inspire confidence depends on ethical conduct and responsiveness. Yet challenges such as voter apathy, corruption, and populism threaten legitimacy. Low participation weakens accountability, corruption damages fairness, and populist leaders often undermine institutions while claiming to represent the people. Rebuilding legitimacy requires transparent governance, ethical leadership, civic education, and active citizen engagement. Strengthening these pillars is essential to keeping democracy resilient and true to its core values of justice, equality, and welfare for all.

### **4.3.5 Democracy, Development, Decentralisation**

The relationship between democracy, development, and decentralisation is deeply interconnected, with each influencing governance, social outcomes, and political empowerment. Democracy fosters development by promoting accountability, rule of law, and institutions that protect rights and encourage citizen participation. In turn, development through education, economic growth, and social equality helps sustain democracy by reducing conflict and empowering people. Democracies typically support stable economic policies, reduce corruption, and improve public services, contributing to more equitable outcomes. Decentralisation, which transfers authority and resources from central governments to local bodies, plays a crucial role by bringing governance closer to communities. It enhances participation, responsiveness, and accountability at the grassroots level, improving service delivery and resource allocation. However, decentralisation also poses risks such as elite capture and regional disparities, making the design of power devolution and fiscal autonomy critical for success.

Ethical values provide the moral foundation for participatory governance by guiding how power is exercised, decisions are made, and citizens engage in democracy. Respect for human dignity and equality ensures that all individuals have the right to participate, which is supported by inclusive electoral systems and universal suffrage. Autonomy and freedom are protected through laws guaranteeing free speech, access to information, and open media, enabling citizens to deliberate and make informed choices. Transparency and openness are institutionalised through mechanisms like the Right to Information, citizen charters, and e-governance tools, allowing public scrutiny and accountability. Public officials carry the ethical responsibility to justify their actions through formal accountability channels such as free elections, ombudsman offices, and checks and balances. Justice and fairness uphold minority rights and reduce inequality, while deliberation and mutual respect foster inclusive dialogue and consensus-building.

Together, these ethical commitments ensure that participatory governance goes beyond voting to include ongoing citizen engagement in oversight and policymaking. They promote legitimacy, trust, and social cohesion, which are essential for sustained democratic

participation. Institutions and leaders must act with integrity and honesty to maintain public trust, supported by anti-corruption measures and whistleblower protections. By embedding these values within governance structures, democracy becomes more inclusive, just, and responsive. This integrated approach is especially important in diverse societies like India, where decentralisation through local governance bodies strengthens grassroots democracy and development, creating a virtuous cycle that deepens democratic quality and improves institutional performance.

#### **4.3.5.1 Decentralisation and Local Governance**

Decentralisation and local governance are essential components of democratic governance and development. They involve transferring authority, resources, and responsibilities from central governments to regional, municipal, or village administrations, bringing decision-making closer to the people. This proximity makes governance more participatory, responsive, and accountable. Political decentralisation allows citizens to elect local representatives, administrative decentralisation empowers local bureaucracies to function independently, and fiscal decentralisation provides local control over public budgets. Together, these mechanisms foster grassroots democracy by empowering citizens and amplifying marginalised voices. Local governments, being closer to community realities, better understand and address specific needs in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and welfare. This closeness enhances public oversight, reduces corruption, and encourages innovation in policy implementation. However, successful decentralisation depends on clear legal frameworks, sufficient fiscal autonomy, and coordination with central authorities. Without these supports, local elites may capture power, capacities may be limited, and inequalities may deepen. When implemented fairly, decentralisation can reduce social conflicts by granting autonomy to diverse communities and strengthening peace and cohesion.

##### **The Iron Law of Oligarchy**

Sociologist Robert Michels noticed that in many democracies, a small group of leaders slowly gains most of the power. He called this the “*Iron Law of Oligarchy*.” It means that to keep democracy fair, people must always watch their leaders and make sure power is shared.

In India, the Panchayati Raj system and Urban Local Bodies form the backbone of local self-government. Established through constitutional amendments in 1992, the Panchayati Raj governs rural areas through a three-tier structure that includes village, block, and district levels. These bodies manage local development, implement government schemes, and promote social justice with regular elections and mandated reservations for women and marginalised communities. Urban Local Bodies govern towns and cities through various institutions responsible for sanitation, housing, water supply, health, and infrastructure. Both systems aim to make governance accountable and participatory by empowering communities to influence decisions affecting their lives. Despite challenges such as capacity gaps and elite capture, their constitutional status enhances their legitimacy and role in promoting inclusive development and grassroots democracy within India’s federal framework.

The ethical value of proximity in democratic governance shows the importance of bringing power and decision-making closer to those affected by policies. Proximity fosters meaningful participation, strengthens accountability, and amplifies diverse community voices. When citizens can easily access local councils, attend meetings, or engage through digital platforms, they feel respected and empowered as co-authors of public decisions. This closeness supports democratic dialogue based on shared experiences and affirms human dignity. Local officials become more visible and responsive, making it harder for arbitrary power to prevail and enhancing mechanisms like grievance redressal. Proximity is especially important for marginalised groups whose voices are often overlooked in centralised systems. Local governance institutions embody this ethical commitment by decentralising power and promoting inclusion, justice, and equity. They reduce bureaucratic distance and nurture a culture of mutual recognition, ethical stewardship, and shared responsibility, ensuring that citizens actively shape policies rather than passively receive them.

Gender and caste-based reservations represent critical ethical measures to address historic injustices and systemic exclusion. These policies are rooted in the democratic values of justice, equality, and inclusion. Women and lower caste groups in India have faced discrimination that denied them education, employment, and political participation. Reservations serve as corrective justice by creating real opportunities and ensuring substantive equality. They help dismantle structural barriers and strengthen the democratic foundation by giving marginalised communities a voice. Beyond reducing inequality, reservations promote social cohesion and democratic stability by affirming human dignity and valuing diversity. Rooted in constitutional guarantees, these policies must be thoughtfully implemented to foster genuine empowerment and avoid tokenism. Until equality is fully realised, reservations remain vital tools for making democracy more participatory, responsive, and just for all citizens. Case studies like Kerala's People's Plan and Gram Sabhas in tribal areas illustrate how decentralisation and participatory governance enhance inclusion, empowerment, and ethical responsiveness in democratic societies.

## Recap

- ◆ Democracy rests on ethical commitments to dignity, equality, freedom, pluralism, and accountability; it is more than elections and requires inclusive participation and protection of minorities.
- ◆ Transparency, accountability, and the rule of law are mutually reinforcing: transparency reveals actions, accountability enables answerability and correction, and the rule of law ensures impartial enforcement.
- ◆ Accountability operates through multiple channels: political (elections), legal (courts, ethics codes), administrative (audits, ombudsmen), and via transparency mechanisms (RTI, open data), supported by media and civil society.

- ◆ Vertical accountability (citizens holding leaders to account) and horizontal accountability (state institutions checking each other) must work in tandem to prevent abuse and corruption.
- ◆ Whistleblowing is an ethical imperative of public interest but entails risks; robust legal protection and organisational cultures of responsible dissent are essential.
- ◆ Democracy as an ethical principle requires balancing majority rule with minority rights; deliberative ideals (Habermas) emphasise legitimacy through inclusive, reasoned dialogue.
- ◆ Majoritarian systems offer decisiveness but risk exclusion; consensus systems foster inclusion and stability but may slow decision-making. Institutional safeguards prevent the tyranny of the majority.
- ◆ Democratic legitimacy has procedural (fair rules, free elections, independent courts) and substantive (rights protection, welfare outcomes) dimensions; trust and ethical leadership are critical and vulnerable to corruption and populism.
- ◆ Development, democracy, and decentralisation reinforce each other: accountable, rights-based institutions foster better services and equity; educated, empowered citizens sustain democracy.
- ◆ Decentralisation brings power closer to people, enhancing proximity, participation, and responsiveness (Panchayati Raj, Urban Local Bodies), while requiring clear legal frameworks, fiscal autonomy, capacity building, and anti-elitist capture safeguards.
- ◆ Reservations for women and marginalised castes are ethically grounded corrective measures advancing substantive equality and democratic inclusion when designed to ensure real empowerment.
- ◆ Overall, embedding ethical values into institutions and practices creates a virtuous cycle of trust, legitimacy, and effective, just governance.

## Objective Questions

1. Which principle ensures laws are applied equally to all?
2. Accountability driven by citizen elections is called what type?
3. Internal checks among state institutions are known as which accountability?
4. Which 2005 Indian law empowers citizens to access public information?
5. Which democratic model emphasises power-sharing and coalition-building?

6. Ethical disclosure of wrongdoing by insiders is termed what?
7. Making government data routinely accessible is called what policy approach?
8. The core ethical value affirming equal respect for all persons is what?
9. Local self-government in rural India is called what system?
10. Legitimacy grounded in fair procedures rather than outcomes is called what?

## Answers

1. Rule of Law
2. Vertical
3. Horizontal
4. RTI
5. Consensus
6. Whistleblowing
7. Open Data
8. Dignity
9. Panchayati Raj
10. Procedural

## Assignments

1. Critically examine the interrelationship between transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, illustrating with a recent governance case.
2. Compare vertical and horizontal accountability with examples; discuss their complementarities and limits.
3. Evaluate the ethics of whistleblowing: duties, risks, and protections. Use two cases (e.g., Satyendra Dubey and one contemporary case).

4. Democracy as an ethical ideal vs. a procedural system: defend a position with reference to minority rights and deliberation.
5. Majoritarian versus consensus democracy: analyse trade-offs in effectiveness, inclusion, and legitimacy using India and a Scandinavian country.
6. Assess sources of democratic legitimacy (procedural and substantive). Argue which source is most fragile in contemporary democracies and why.
7. Discuss how decentralisation can improve development outcomes while risking elite capture. Propose design safeguards.
8. Explain the ethical value of proximity in local governance. Support with evidence from Gram Sabhas or Kerala's People's Plan.
9. Analyse gender and caste reservations as instruments of corrective justice and democratic inclusion; address the risk of tokenism and how to avoid it.
10. Design an accountability reform package for a state department: include RTI/open data, citizen charters, ombudsman, audits, and grievance redressal, with measurable indicators.

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SGOU



## Ethics and Power

# UNIT

### Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the unit, the learner will be able to:

- ◆ describe the ethical use and abuse of power in society
- ◆ explain the main forms of corruption and their impact on justice
- ◆ understand the role of ethics in public policy and governance
- ◆ recognise the importance of civil society and ethical leadership

### Prerequisites

*“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.”*

— Michel Foucault (1976)

Imagine a spider spinning its web in a quiet corner. To the spider, the web is a work of art, a source of survival, and a tool of control. But to the fly, that same web is a trap, a place of fear, and the beginning of the end. As the saying goes, *what is good for the spider is not good for the fly*. This simple image reveals an important truth about power. In the real world, power is often held by a few, and their decisions can shape the lives of many. What benefits the powerful may end up harming the powerless.

Consider how government policies sometimes work. A large dam may promise economic progress and energy for cities, but the people in remote villages often lose their homes, lands, and livelihoods. The dam is seen as a symbol of development by those in power, but for the displaced, it is a story of loss. Or think about laws that ban street vending in urban areas. City officials may argue that it brings order and cleanliness, but for poor vendors, it takes away their only source of income. These are not just issues of policy; they are deeply ethical questions about whose voices matter and whose lives are protected.

Power can be used to protect or to control. It can serve justice or deepen inequality. Ethical reasoning helps us ask difficult but necessary questions: Who benefits? Who is left behind? Are rules being made to promote fairness, or only to protect those who already have influence? When power goes unchecked, it can justify almost anything, even injustice. That is why social ethics asks us to look beyond appearances and to judge power by how it affects those with the least.

## Keywords

Ethical Governance, Corruption, Public Policy, Civil Society, Power and Responsibility

## Discussion

Most of the Indian population believes that corruption is one of the greatest threats to our democracy. In a diverse and vibrant state like Kerala, where community, governance, and culture meet every day, power plays an important role in shaping lives. Power, whether political, social, or economic, is not inherently good or bad. What truly matters is how it is used. When power is guided by ethics, it becomes a force for inclusion, fairness, and justice. But when misused, it leads to exploitation, inequality, and loss of trust. Leaders who act with honesty and responsibility help build strong communities, protect rights, and ensure that no one is left behind.

In this chapter, we will explore the many ways in which power operates in society. We will look at corruption, decision-making, policy choices, and the responsibilities of those who hold authority. Most importantly, we will ask how ethics can guide power toward justice, dignity, and inclusion for all.

### 4.4.1 Ethics and Power

Ethics and power are deeply intertwined, as the ability to influence others brings serious moral responsibilities. Power, whether held by individuals or institutions, is not inherently good or bad; it becomes ethical or unethical based on how it is used. Ethical leadership involves more than simply giving orders or enforcing rules; it means using one's influence to serve the common good, protect the dignity of others, and support those with less power. Ethical power is exercised through inspiration, trust, fairness, and shared responsibility, rejecting manipulation, favouritism, and domination. Instead, it encourages openness, accountability, and justice in all actions and decisions.

The responsible use of power requires self-awareness and a genuine commitment to collective welfare. Ethical leaders regularly reflect on how their decisions affect others, remain open to feedback, and ensure that power is not used for personal gain or exclusion. They strive to create inclusive spaces where everyone's voice matters and justice prevails. When power is guided by ethics, it strengthens social trust, supports democratic values, and builds legitimacy for governance. In contrast, unethical power

weakens institutions, deepens inequality, and erodes the very moral foundation that a just society depends on.

### **Ethical Leadership and Voter Participation in Kerala**



Kerala is one of India's most active states in voting, with more than 77% of the population participating in recent elections. This demonstrates that people care about their role in democracy. When leaders are honest and fair, they earn the trust of citizens and encourage more people to vote. Ethical leadership helps to maintain this trust.

## **4.4.2 Abuse of Power and Corruption**

Abuse of power and corruption are serious threats to democracy, development, and social justice. These problems arise when people in authority use their position for personal gain or to benefit a select few. Common forms include bribery, embezzlement, nepotism, and fraud. Such actions weaken the trust between citizens and institutions, distort decision-making, and deprive society of essential services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. The individuals who suffer most are often the poor and marginalised, who rely on public systems that are meant to support them but are undermined by corruption.

To address this issue, both awareness and action are necessary. Citizens must demand transparency, promote ethical leadership, and support the protection of whistleblowers and journalists who expose wrongdoing. Laws must be enforced fairly, and public participation should be encouraged at all levels. Speaking up, questioning decisions, and supporting youth movements for justice can help create a more equal and trustworthy society. If we wish to build a future based on dignity and fairness, we must challenge corruption and the misuse of power wherever it occurs and work together to create a democracy that serves everyone equally.

### **4.4.2.1 Forms of Corruption**

Corruption takes many forms, each involving the abuse of entrusted power for personal or group benefit, and it significantly damages trust, justice, and good governance. Among the most common types is bribery, where money, gifts, or favours are offered or received to influence official actions, from securing promotions to manipulating decisions. Embezzlement involves the theft or misuse of funds entrusted to someone's care, often hidden through falsified records. Fraud includes deceptive practices such as scams, electoral manipulation, or false accounting aimed at securing unfair advantages. Extortion and blackmail use threats or coercion to extract money or favours, while nepotism and favouritism grant privileges or jobs to friends or family regardless of merit, undermining fairness.

### **Ethical Dilemma – Personal Gain vs. Public Interest**



A village council leader is offered a lucrative personal deal by a contractor in exchange for approving a poorly planned road project. Should they accept the offer to personally benefit or reject it to safeguard the public interest?

Other forms include graft, where public funds intended for development projects are siphoned off for private gain, and trading in influence, where personal or political connections are used to sway decisions in exchange for benefits. Kickbacks are secret payments made after a service is performed as a reward for favourable treatment, functioning much like bribes. Access money refers to legal or illegal incentives offered to officials to secure privileged access, such as through campaign donations or revolving-door appointments. These practices, whether in public institutions or private organisations, often overlap and together erode social trust, hinder economic development, and undermine democratic values. Addressing corruption demands strong legal frameworks, transparent institutions, accountability mechanisms, and engaged citizens committed to upholding integrity in public life.

#### **4.4.2.2 Consequences for Justice**

Abuse of power and corruption have profound and far-reaching consequences for justice, striking at the heart of fairness, equality, and the rule of law in any society. When those in power misuse their authority, decisions and resources are often skewed in favour of wealth and influence, sidelining merit and need. This creates deep social and economic inequalities, where marginalised and vulnerable communities are denied their rights and access to justice. Legal systems are manipulated or circumvented to protect the powerful, weakening the rule of law and fostering selective justice. Corruption clogs judicial systems with favouritism, bribery, and intimidation, leading to delays, wrongful judgements, and even denial of justice. These practices damage institutional integrity and rob citizens of the timely recourse and protections to which they are entitled.

Corruption erodes public trust in institutions such as the courts, police, and governance structures, breeding disillusionment and social unrest. When impunity becomes common, it discourages whistleblowing and civic engagement, allowing abuses and rights violations to persist unchecked. Public resources meant for welfare, education, and health are siphoned off, undermining people's social and economic rights and worsening the conditions of those already disadvantaged. In this context, justice loses its meaning, and the ethical foundations of society are shaken. Addressing these challenges requires firm action to strengthen transparency, ensure accountability, protect judicial independence, and empower citizens to uphold justice as the foundation of a democratic and peaceful society.

#### **4.4.3 Ethics in Public Policy**

Ethics in public policy refers to the moral values and principles that guide decision-makers as they create, implement, and evaluate policies that affect individuals and communities. Ethical policymaking seeks to balance competing interests, anticipate consequences, and promote justice, fairness, and the common good. In essence, ethical public policy is concerned with advancing human well-being, protecting rights, and ensuring dignity and equality for all. Various philosophical perspectives guide these aims. For instance, utilitarianism emphasises the greatest good for the greatest number, while deontological ethics stresses the importance of duties and rights. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, focuses on the character and integrity of those who hold the responsibility to govern. These frameworks help policymakers assess the ethical implications of their decisions beyond technical or economic calculations.

In practice, ethical public policy involves facing complex challenges, such as managing the tension between individual and collective needs, resolving conflicts among diverse stakeholders, and considering both short-term and long-term impacts. To be ethical, policies must be formed through transparent, participatory processes that reflect core societal values like justice, equality, freedom, and solidarity. Ethical policymaking also requires aligning ideals with political realities, maintaining honesty, and balancing loyalty to leadership with the broader public interest. Democratic participation enriches the ethical quality of public policy by integrating diverse viewpoints and fostering social trust. Embedding ethics in public policy builds legitimacy, nurtures public confidence, and helps create fair, inclusive, and sustainable policies that serve both present and future generations.

#### **4.4.3.1 Policy Making and the Pursuit of Public Good**

Policymaking in the pursuit of the public good focuses on designing, implementing, and evaluating policies that enhance societal welfare, promote justice, and ensure the fair distribution of resources. The public good refers to benefits that are available to all without exclusion or competition, such as clean air, public health systems, education, national defence, and infrastructure. Unlike the private sector, which primarily seeks profit, governments and civil services are driven by the need to solve social problems that markets alone cannot address. This involves strategic resource allocation, identifying major priorities, and ensuring that public investments serve the needs of the most vulnerable and benefit society at large. Policymakers must ground their actions in evidence, involve diverse stakeholders, and follow transparent procedures that allow public participation. Ethical considerations, such as fairness, accountability, and long-term sustainability, are essential to guide decisions, especially when balancing conflicting interests or anticipating unintended consequences.

Effective policymaking for the public good also draws from economic and ethical theories, particularly those highlighting market failures and the moral necessity of collective action. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, underscored the importance of coordinated public health measures and robust welfare systems. National examples such as the UK's National Health Service, Singapore's public transport, and China's infrastructure investments illustrate how public policy can significantly improve quality of life, connectivity, and economic growth. On a global level, frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals provide a shared vision for addressing poverty, health, education, and environmental sustainability. Policymaking for the public good is about ethical governance that goes beyond short-term politics to build a just, inclusive, and resilient society through effective planning, responsible use of resources, and continuous adaptation to evolving social challenges.

#### **4.4.3.2 Justice, Fairness, and Equity in Policy Choices**

Justice, fairness, and equity are foundational ethical principles that guide policy choices to ensure that public resources and opportunities are distributed and administered in ways that are morally sound and socially just. Justice generally refers to giving each person their due, encompassing principles such as distributive justice (fair sharing of goods and burdens), retributive justice (just punishment), and compensatory justice

(correcting past wrongs), and requires that policies respect rights and apply moral and legal standards. Fairness emphasises impartiality, unbiased decision-making, and context-sensitive treatment where individuals feel acknowledged and respected.

Equity, distinct from strict equality, recognises that people face different barriers and therefore may require tailored support to achieve comparable outcomes, such as targeted education or healthcare interventions. In policy terms, equity versus equality is a major tension, where equity seeks outcome-based fairness and equality promotes uniform distribution. John Rawls' theory of "justice as fairness" blends liberty and equality, allowing inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged. Procedural justice shows the importance of fairness in policymaking processes through transparency, consistency, and inclusive participation. Understanding social and historical contexts is essential, especially when addressing systemic injustices rooted in race, gender, or class, which may demand structural reforms and equity-oriented policies like progressive taxation, affirmative action, or targeted investments. Moreover, public trust in fairness also depends on whether people perceive policies as respectful and just. Ethically grounded policies that integrate justice, fairness, and equity not only promote inclusive outcomes but also build a more dignified, cohesive, and equitable society.

#### **4.4.4 Challenges in Policy Decision-making**

Policymaking involves navigating a range of complex challenges that affect the development, implementation, and overall success of public policies. One major difficulty is the fragmentation across government departments, which often operate in isolation. This siloed approach weakens coordination and makes it difficult to address cross-cutting social problems, especially those affecting marginalized communities. The growing complexity of modern societies adds to the challenge, as diverse populations and interconnected issues require solutions that are both inclusive and adaptable. A significant hurdle also lies in the gap between policy formulation and actual implementation. Even well-designed policies may be delayed or poorly executed due to rigid institutions, lack of coordination, limited accountability, or bureaucratic inefficiencies. Political short-termism, where leaders prioritise immediate gains over long-term solutions, further undermines sustained social progress. Policymakers also face practical constraints such as inadequate financial, human, or technological resources, which are especially common in developing countries.

Corruption and bureaucratic red tape not only slow down policy execution but also erode public trust. Political and social polarization often lead to disagreements that delay or dilute important policy measures. Weak mechanisms for monitoring and accountability allow inefficiencies and poor outcomes to go unchecked. External pressures like economic crises, climate change, public health emergencies, and global interdependence further complicate the policy landscape. Even with good intentions, policies can sometimes produce unintended consequences in complex systems where all outcomes are hard to predict. In many developing nations, additional structural vulnerabilities like social inequality, environmental degradation, and unstable governance make policy reform even more difficult. To overcome these challenges, a more ethical and effective policymaking process must prioritise long-term thinking, inclusive dialogue, adaptive learning, and investment in robust governance systems that serve the public good with justice, fairness, and accountability.

#### 4.4.4.1 Ethical Dilemmas in Governance and Resource Allocation

Ethical dilemmas in governance and resource allocation are a pressing concern for public administrators, policymakers, and leaders. These dilemmas often involve navigating competing moral principles in environments marked by limited resources, political pressure, and diverse stakeholder expectations. In governance, common ethical dilemmas include conflicts of interest, where officials may prioritise personal or familial gain over public responsibility, and tensions between transparency and confidentiality, particularly when sensitive information is involved. Leaders frequently encounter political pressure to compromise ethical standards in pursuit of short-term gains or partisan interests. Nepotism and favouritism can undermine merit-based appointments and weaken public trust. Another challenge is finding the right balance between strict rule compliance and practical flexibility. Following rules too rigidly can hinder responsiveness to complex or exceptional cases, while excessive discretion may reduce accountability. These tensions are further intensified by the rapidly changing nature of social and political environments, where decisions often carry long-lasting consequences.

Resource allocation presents another set of ethical challenges, especially when fairness, equity, and overall benefit seem to conflict. Decision-makers must sometimes choose between maximising total societal benefit and ensuring just treatment for disadvantaged or marginalised groups. For instance, in a health emergency, deciding which patients receive limited life-saving equipment such as ventilators raises deep moral concerns about the value of life and the principles of distributive justice. A focus on equal distribution may appear fair on the surface, but it can ignore the greater needs of vulnerable communities. In contrast, equity requires differentiated approaches to achieve truly fair outcomes. Allocating funds or services to immediate needs may produce visible results, yet can come at the cost of long-term development goals. Public officials must ensure that all decisions are made transparently and guided by clear ethical standards to maintain fairness and prevent bias or discrimination. These challenges frequently arise in areas such as disaster response, public budgeting, and the ethical obligations involved in whistleblowing.

Resolving such ethical dilemmas calls for a principled and inclusive approach rooted in sound ethical reasoning, open communication, and broad stakeholder engagement. The application of ethical theories such as deontology, utilitarianism, and the principles of justice can guide decision-makers through complex choices. Involving affected communities in the decision-making process strengthens both legitimacy and trust. Public institutions must also put in place strong accountability measures, ensure the protection of ethical whistleblowers, and allow for ongoing public review of policies. Ultimately, the ethical challenges in governance and resource allocation underscore the moral responsibility of leadership to uphold justice, fairness, and public trust in both thought and action.

##### Ethical Dilemma – Courage vs. Consequences



A government employee discovers that officials are stealing money meant for public projects. If they report it, they might lose their job and face harassment. If they stay silent, the theft will continue and the public will suffer. *What is the right thing to do?*

## 4.4.5 Combating Corruption

Combating corruption is a major priority for governments and organisations around the world because it deeply affects governance, economic development, and social justice. Effective anti-corruption strategies must be comprehensive, involving legal reforms, institutional mechanisms, cultural change, and technological tools. Transparency and accountability are vital, as they ensure decision-making is open and accessible to the public. Legal frameworks that criminalise corrupt practices, along with independent oversight bodies, help deter misconduct and enforce responsibility. Prevention also plays an important role through the promotion of ethical behaviour and strong professional standards. Ethical values in both the public and private sectors build a culture of integrity. Technological innovations like digital governance systems, e-procurement platforms, and open-data tools reduce opportunities for corruption by minimising human discretion and increasing oversight.

Engaging the public and protecting whistleblowers are also essential in the fight against corruption. Civil society participation, citizen monitoring, and anonymous reporting mechanisms all contribute to detecting wrongdoing and promoting accountability. Political leadership must demonstrate a strong commitment to anti-corruption measures, ensuring consistent enforcement and support for institutions. International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption offer practical guidance, while best practices like merit-based appointments, public audits, and fair wage systems contribute to cleaner governance. When these legal, institutional, and cultural efforts are combined with technological innovation and active civic engagement, societies are better equipped to prevent corruption, build public trust, and promote sustainable development.

### 4.4.5.1 Institutional Reforms and Ethical Governance

Institutional reforms and ethical governance are deeply connected processes that aim to build a public administration system rooted in transparency, accountability, fairness, and resistance to corruption. When public institutions are guided by ethical principles, such as integrity, rule of law, and openness, they create a climate of trust and justice. Ethical governance promotes moral behaviour among officials, ensures laws are fairly applied, and allows citizens to hold institutions accountable. Transparency enables public scrutiny, while accountability ensures that those in power justify their decisions and remain responsible for their actions. These principles are not abstract ideals but the foundation for sound governance, where decisions are made in the public interest and not for personal gain.

Institutional reforms help embed these ethical values into the functioning of government. This involves strengthening anti-corruption bodies, enforcing codes of conduct, ensuring transparency laws are implemented, and using technology to reduce discretion and human error. Reforms must also empower citizens through mechanisms like public consultations and social audits. However, challenges such as systemic corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and lack of capacity persist. Addressing them requires legal reform, merit-based appointments, regular ethics training, and a commitment to citizen engagement. Civil society plays a vital role by educating people, monitoring institutions, and advocating for reforms. When ethical values are consistently integrated into institutional frameworks,

the result is a governance system that serves all citizens with fairness, honesty, and a sense of shared responsibility.

#### **4.4.5.2 Role of Civil Society and Ethical Leadership**

Civil society and ethical leadership are essential pillars for promoting ethical governance. Civil society organisations such as non-governmental organisations, labour unions, media houses, and grassroots networks play a critical role in holding governments accountable. These organisations work to expose corruption, monitor the misuse of power, and demand transparency from public officials. They also raise public awareness about democratic rights and ethics in governance through civic education, awareness campaigns, and public forums. By educating citizens, civil society empowers them to participate meaningfully in governance and demand accountability. Moreover, civil society plays an inclusive role by representing marginalised groups and creating platforms where diverse voices are heard. Their active engagement in policy discussions, social audits, and stakeholder consultations ensures that governance is more representative, just, and people-centred.

Ethical leadership complements the work of civil society by promoting integrity, responsibility, and justice within public institutions. Ethical leaders set high moral standards by demonstrating honesty, fairness, and commitment to the public good. Their decisions are guided by principles of justice and equity, even in difficult circumstances or under political pressure. Ethical leaders reject favouritism and corruption, choosing instead to promote transparency and fairness in policy-making and administration. They also build trust by being accountable, honouring their promises, and encouraging participatory dialogue. Leaders with strong ethical values support structures that promote accountability, including clear reporting systems, performance evaluations, and protection for whistleblowers. In doing so, they shape an institutional culture where ethics becomes part of everyday governance rather than just a formal requirement.

When civil society and ethical leadership work together, they create a powerful synergy that supports meaningful reforms and genuine public participation. Civil society can bring attention to issues on the ground and push for change, while ethical leaders can listen to these demands and implement just solutions. This collaboration leads to stronger institutions, improved service delivery, and a greater focus on public welfare. By working together, they transform governance from a system focused only on power to one that reflects shared ethical values and collective responsibility. Ethical governance becomes possible when leaders are committed to justice and when citizens are empowered to demand it.

In this way, civil society and ethical leadership contribute not only to holding power accountable but also to creating a more transparent, inclusive, and morally grounded society. Their partnership is essential for achieving sustainable development, protecting human dignity, and ensuring that reforms lead to real and lasting change in the lives of all people.

## Recap

- ◆ Power in society can be used ethically to serve justice and inclusion or misused to cause inequality and harm.
- ◆ Ethical leadership requires responsibility, transparency, and a commitment to collective welfare and dignity.
- ◆ Corruption, in forms like bribery, nepotism, and embezzlement, severely undermines democracy, development, and trust.
- ◆ Ethics in public policy ensures decisions uphold justice, equity, and fairness through participatory and inclusive governance.
- ◆ Challenges in policy implementation include institutional inefficiencies, political short-termism, and ethical dilemmas in resource allocation.
- ◆ Combating corruption needs strong legal frameworks, transparent institutions, digital tools, civic participation, and ethical leadership.
- ◆ Civil society and ethical leadership together create accountable, people-centred governance that protects rights and fosters inclusion.

## Objective Questions

1. Which form of corruption involves offering money or gifts to influence decisions?
2. What ethical theory focuses on consequences and the greatest good for the greatest number?
3. Which form of corruption refers to the misuse of funds entrusted to someone?
4. What term is used for fairness in distributing benefits and burdens in society?
5. What is the term for government systems that reduce corruption through transparency?
6. Which stakeholder group plays a watchdog role in ethical governance?
7. What do we call the abuse of power for personal gain?
8. Who is responsible for creating policies for the public good?
9. What is the ethical term for being answerable for one's actions in governance?
10. What kind of leadership prioritises justice, integrity, and public responsibility?

## Answers

1. Bribery
2. Utilitarianism
3. Embezzlement
4. Justice
5. E-governance
6. Civil society
7. Corruption
8. Policymakers
9. Accountability
10. Ethical

## Assignments

1. Explain how ethics can positively influence the use of power in democratic governance.
2. Discuss the major forms of corruption and their impact on public institutions.
3. How does corruption affect marginalised communities in India? Give examples.
4. Describe the ethical principles involved in public policymaking.
5. Evaluate the importance of justice, fairness, and equity in framing public policies.
6. What are some of the major challenges in policy decision-making and implementation?
7. Examine ethical dilemmas in governance with reference to resource allocation.
8. Discuss the role of civil society in promoting ethical governance.
9. Define ethical leadership and illustrate its importance in combating corruption.

10. How do institutional reforms contribute to building a transparent and accountable government?
11. Illustrate with examples how ethical governance can reduce corruption and promote social justice.

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## Suggested Reading

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## MODEL QUESTION PAPER SETS



# SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

## Model Question Paper - SET A

QP CODE: .....

Reg. No: .....

Name: .....

THIRD SEMESTER EXAMINATION  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY COURSE  
**SGB24PH101MD - SOCIAL ETHICS**  
(2023–24 Admission Onwards)

Time: 2 Hours

Maximum Marks: 45

### SECTION A

**Answer any five questions in one word or a sentence each.**

**(5 × 1 = 5 Marks)**

1. What kind of science is ethics considered?
2. What is the goal of moral life according to Aristotle?
3. What does UDHR stand for?
4. Which article ensures equality before law in India?
5. What is the term for stealing online data?
6. Who introduced the Social Contract Theory
7. What does AI stand for?
8. Who is a citizen?

### SECTION B

**Answer any five questions in two or three sentences each.**

**(5 × 2 = 10 Marks)**

9. What is meant by autonomy?
10. Write a short note on virtue ethics.
11. Explain the ethical issue of data privacy.
12. What is intellectual property?
13. State two basic human rights.

14. What is the difference between moral and legal obligation?
15. Mention two duties of a citizen.
16. Explain the right to freedom of expression.

### **SECTION C**

**Answer any four questions in about 100 words each.**

**(4 × 5 = 20 Marks)**

17. Explain the importance of ethics in daily life.
18. Write a note on Aristotle's concept of virtue.
19. How does equality promote ethical living?
20. What are the moral responsibilities of users in cyberspace?
21. Write a note on the concept of sovereignty in modern political thought.
22. Explain the role of social ethics in promoting justice and fairness in society.

### **SECTION D**

**Answer any one question in about 300 words.**

**(1 × 10 = 10 Marks)**

23. Critically analyse the role of social ethics in protecting human dignity.
24. Examine the ethical dimensions of state, sovereignty, and citizenship.



# SREENARAYANAGURU OPEN UNIVERSITY

## Model Question Paper - SET B

QP CODE: .....

Reg. No: .....

Name: .....

THIRD SEMESTER EXAMINATION  
MULTI-DISCIPLINARY COURSE  
**SGB24PH101MD - SOCIAL ETHICS**  
(2023–24 Admission Onwards)

Time: 2 Hours

Maximum Marks: 45

### SECTION A

**Answer any five questions in one word or a sentence each.**

**(5 × 1 = 5 Marks)**

1. Who is known as the father of Western ethics?
2. What does the term ‘ethos’ mean?
3. State two basic human rights.
4. What does IPR stand for?
5. Mention any one duty of a citizen.
6. Who coined the term “social contract”?
7. What does democracy mean?
8. Who is a citizen?

### SECTION B

**Answer any five questions in two or three sentences each.**

**(5 × 2 = 10 Marks)**

9. Write a short note on virtue ethics.
10. Explain the principle of nonmaleficence.
11. Define discrimination.
12. What is the significance of the right to education?
13. Define cybercrime.

14. What is digital divide?
15. Explain the concept of sovereignty.
16. What are political rights?

### **SECTION C**

**Answer any four questions in about 100 words each.**

**(4 × 5 = 20 Marks)**

17. Explain the role of social ethics in promoting justice and fairness in society.
18. What are the challenges to ensuring human rights today?
19. Write a short note on the right to privacy in the digital age.
20. Describe the ethical implications of social media usage.
21. How does democracy uphold ethical values?
22. Describe the responsibilities of a citizen in a welfare state.

### **SECTION D**

**Answer any one question in about 300 words.**

**(1 × 10 = 10 Marks)**

23. Discuss the scope of ethics in relation to psychology, sociology, biology, and political science.
24. Critically discuss the ethical challenges arising from technological advancement

## സർവ്വകലാശാലാഗീതം

വിദ്യയാൽ സ്വത്രന്തരാക്കണം  
വിശ്വപ്രഭരായി മാറണം  
ഗ്രഹപ്രസാദമായ് വിളങ്ങണം  
ഗുരുപ്രകാശമേ നയിക്കേണ

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നീതിവെജയയന്തി പാറണം

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ബോധരശ്മിയിൽ തിളങ്ങുവാൻ  
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**DON'T LET IT  
BE TOO LATE**

**SAY  
NO  
TO  
DRUGS**

**LOVE YOURSELF  
AND ALWAYS BE  
HEALTHY**



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The State University for Education, Training and Research in Blended Format, Kerala

# Social Ethics

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