

# Reclaiming our Value Ecosystems for a Joyful World: An Exploratory Study of Young People

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Received: 17 Mar., 2024

Revised: 22 May, 2024

Accepted: 02 June, 2024

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## ABSTRACT

One of the oft discussed concerns today in different fora and platforms is the steady erosion of human values. The fast expansion of digital technologies, the rise of individualism and materialism, coupled with a decline in value education right from the family level to a redefinition of moral norms are some of the critical challenges to value ecosystems in our society. The erosion of human values is seen right from the individual level to families and to institutions and the society at large. While many are conscious of human values within their realm of conscience, yet they think practicing these are impediments to their materialistic growth. Others think these as ancient notions with no practical relevance. This chapter will explore the varied perspectives of young people on human values and try to argue on the need to reclaim our value ecosystems for a more happier and joyful world.

**Keywords:** Human values, joyfultalisman, human dignity

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Meghna (name changed) and Joseph (name changed) are young people who work in the same office and are regular victims of their dignity being compromised by their senior. They are appalled at how individuals can be treated by a boss who wants them to work and give results at any cost. They realize how the boss intends to showcase their work and lobby for his own promotion.

Meghna and Joseph are not the only one who finds themselves in an ecosystem which is seeing erosion of human values; there are many others like them. While Meghna and Joseph are appalled at the erosion, there are others who take these as new normal in the contemporary world. They think such decline in ethics are something which cannot be reversed and try to get assimilated in such a crass ecosystem. However, there are many others who unlike Meghna and Joseph who are just appalled,

try to take on individuals who try to compromise their dignity or show their beastly values.

It can be argued that human values appropriately defines the qualities of a person, organization or society at large. However, when we talk of the erosion of value ecosystems today, it can explained in the context of the complex interplay of the different technological, societal and educational factors. The rapid advancement of technology has ensured unprecedented global connectivity offering unprecedented opportunities for networking. However, the rise of social media is having a transformative effect in our interpersonal

**How to cite this article:** Shah, M. (2024). Reclaiming our Value Ecosystems for a Joyful World: An Exploratory Study of Young People. *Int. J. Peace, Edu. Dev.*, 12(01): 33-37.

**Source of Support:** None; **Conflict of Interest:** None



relationships; it is increasing isolation and frozen communication. The relationships are determined based on likes and shares thereby reducing meaningful and heart-to-heart communication.

Further, human values historically have been seen rooted in familial ethics and in the framework of an egalitarian society. But the advent of modern technology, rise of materialism and individualism are pushing individuals and institutions to recrafting their moral compasses according to their own convenience which can be deviation from the established framework of ethics and morality.

When we think of assimilating human values that helps us to live a life of ethics and morality, we reflect back to our learnings from our families and in the schools and colleges. In this context, the educational institution an individual attends is the greatest laboratory of learning and practicing human values. A guideline of the University Grants Commission on human values in educational institutions (2023) notes:

*“Education is undoubtedly the most important pillar of a civilized and dignified society. The structure of a society or nation depends primarily on the strength of this pillar. If this pillar is strong, society remains humane and prospers. If, on the other hand, this pillar develops cracks, then society may enter a subhuman phase. Unlike motor skills which once mastered remain with us forever, human values and ethics belong to the domain of subtler understanding and practice. It is vital to keep emphasizing the importance of human values in educational institutions.”*

The guideline beautifully describes human values and ethics as camphor which can evaporate if not preserved carefully. It points out (2023), “Human values are mankind’s deepest moral aspirations and the foundation of human culture as epitomized in individuals and societies. All individuals need to inculcate and consciously practice them to be good human beings, so that they can realize their potential. Values are learnt first by listening and observation, then reflection, and finally with practice.”

A discursive readings of different literature point out the different human values that epitomizes a

‘good individual’ or a ‘good society’. Some of these includes: deep respect for each other, respect for human dignity, truth, nonviolence, righteousness, compassion, empathy, loving kindness, gratitude, service and volunteerism, simplicity, self-discipline, self-restraint, honesty, and deep listening skills.

With these understanding and essence of assimilating and practicing human values, this chapter will delve on how to reclaim our value ecosystems through the perspectives of young people, the challenges and opportunities. It would then try to argue that how by nurturing and practicing these transcendental human values, individuals and institutions can contribute towards a happier and joyful world. A limited study of 30 youth through unstructured questionnaire which encompassed the different reasons of decline of human values, the need to reclaim these values and how these can be reclaimed was carried out for this study. Convenience sampling method was used by the authors.

## The Study

The majority of the youth who were approached for the study described the ‘unprecedented pressure’ to perform and achieve goals as an important reason for erosion of human values. The hunger to acquire luxuries even though one do not need them or at the cost of others was another critical element in the decline of values. The lure of gizmos and luxuries are reaching unprecedented heights and there is no end to the greed to acquire more. The lure of luxuries is linked to constant desire for self-exhibition and self-promotion which can lead young people to take to immoral behaviour and habits.

Another important reason that was attributed was the decline of family values due to the breakdown of joint family systems. The integration of different media tools and communication technologies means that individuals in a family whether parents or children are spending more time over smartphones and social media. It means less time devoted to inculcation of human values amongst family members. Further, as parents push to acquire more, they increasingly are able to devote less time with their children and they are likely to fall prey to

the toxicity of smartphones and other disturbing elements. The effects of exposure to violent and immoral videos and films amongst young people are manifold and these gets reflected in their attitude and behaviour.

This leads to the problem evoked by the proliferation of digital technologies. Based on their study, Kundu and Shah (2024a) point out in this regard, "The incessant use of communication tools are resulting in growing distances in families. When all members of the families are hooked to their smart phones or involved in some social media, where is the space for genuine conversation to take place? Many of the family members are suffering from Internet addiction which not only blocks genuine conversations but also is having a toll on the mental health of the members.

Many of the modern day pressures are leading young people to loneliness which could push them to wrongful behaviour. Kundu and Shah (2024b) discusses the causes and effects of loneliness. Using different case studies, Kundu and Shah discusses how 'loneliness makes one feel isolated, unconnected, insecure, estranged, and alienated and empty'. They through these case studies note how many who simply by their desire to acquire what their peers might have already achieved actually start becoming lonely.

Many of the youth contented how continuing strengthening of patriarchal attitudes and double standards of morality based on gender were important reasons of degradation of moral values in the society. Gender stereotypes continue to be impediment to value ecosystems.

Attempts to redefine moral and ethical norms in contemporary societies which deviates from established ethical conventions are also reasons of compromising human values. For instance, one youth talking on the traditional statement of 'honesty is the best policy' argued otherwise. He said it was a subjective statement as if one's interests was compromised by 'straight and simple honesty', it was not worth. Even though they felt dealing with others dishonestly was inherently a bad thing, yet some felt that if it helped their own cause and advancement, they would not shy away from it.

Most of the respondents agreed how education and educational institutions were no longer sites of nurturing inherent human values. There was a general feeling that the superficiality of education and knowledge on one hand, and the relentless barrage of half-truths, fake narratives, and manipulated information on the other were important reasons for the erosion of human values.

As in the case of Meghna and Joseph, there were some respondents who did not find it wrong to browbeat others in their surge for promotions etc. Some said the traditional understanding of evoking deep respect for others was changing and it did not matter much in a fiercely competitive world.

For most of the respondents, the human values as enumerated above were essentially abstract ideas and subjective, there was no concrete understanding of the degree of values an individual could inculcate to live their lives.

## Reclaiming our Value Ecosystem

In the backdrop of different social dimensions, technological and educational parameters which contributes to decline of human values, the respondents were asked on how to reclaim the value ecosystems- whether at individual level, family level or institutional level. Quite a number of the respondents confessed that though they were swimming with the flow, they were concerned at the systematic moral decay in institutions. While individuals' especially young people could probably gain in short-term, it definitely cannot contribute to their long-term wellbeing or real happiness. For instance, Kumar and Subramanian (2012) in their study found out that hedonistic values provide significantly lesser psychological well-being. They noted that self enhancement values were negatively and self-transcendence values were positively correlated with psychological well-being.

Bharadwaj (2017) points out the different dimensions of happiness which includes a range of positive and pleasant emotions like joy, pride, contentment, gratitude and living with ethics. While taking a path which could comprise values aimed at short-term hedonistic pleasures and happiness, it may not be

able to offer any long-term eudemonic happiness. Eudemonic happiness entails assimilation and practice of certain values, doing service to people and finding the true meaning and purpose of life. It involves inculcation of those values, ethics and moral compasses which contributes towards sustainable and long-term happiness, joy and inner satisfaction.

Meanwhile majority of the respondents underlined the need to reclaim family value ecosystems. In this context, Kundu and Shah (2024a) in their paper on family values and nonviolent communication advocate the need of introducing cyber fasting amongst family members so that they can spend quality time with each other. They talked on the need for encouraging family dinner time and development of empathetic connections amongst members.

Expressing superficiality in the education system, the respondents felt the over emphasis on results and how education can be just a platform for advancing career goals and financial prosperity need to change. Values and ethics in not only the educational institutions but also as an important dimension of a holistic educational approach was critical in reclaiming the value ecosystem.

One of the critical areas which the respondents pointed out which could help reclaiming the value system was enhanced dialogues and conversations on these values in different platforms. In a world which is seeing increasing dialogue deficit, the goal should be how different institutions should be sites of dialogues on human values. The respondents felt dialogues should start at the family level, then to schools, colleges, other institutions and the society at large. Different ideas and dimensions of human values could be important themes of discussions and interactions in these institutions.

For reclaiming our value system, an essential foundational framework is by encouraging a culture of respecting each other no matter what one's background is. It is linked to the essential unity of all human beings. In this context, Gandhi had aptly taught the world on the need to promote tolerance and respect for all, "In spite of the differences of

races and religions, we shall learn to tolerate and respect one another and consider all human beings as children of one God and, therefore, brothers and sisters of one another. God is the Creator of all life; all His creatures are, therefore, equal in His eyes. Humanity is a gigantic tree having innumerable branches and leaves, and the same life throbs through them all" (Harijan, December 1, 1933).

In this backdrop, Kundu and Shah (2024c) in their conversation on the need for practicing deep reverence for all life argue, "We need to create awareness that by identifying the '*human*' in others, we are promoting our own human values and hence helping ourselves in our well-being and happiness. We all must realize that when we recognize the dignity of an individual it results in mutual recognition and mutual respect." Such conversations and discussions are needed to take the significance of value ecosystems to a larger sections of the society was discerned from the interactions with the respondents.

## CONCLUSION

In lieu of the emergent need to create awareness on the significance of reclaiming our value systems and encouragement of human values across all cross-sections of the society, the author along with Vedabhyas Kundu, an expert in nonviolent communication has initiated a framework of conversations, the Joyful Talisman. Through this framework of Joyful Talisman, the aim is to trigger conversations, dialogues, and deep discussions not only at local level but also at global level on essential human values that needs to be nurtured and practiced in right earnest. The Joyful Talisman offers unique and innovative platform for experiential learning on how different human values contributes to the humanization of our relationships. This framework is like a lighthouse which provides us with the ethical and moral compass on the direction we would like to live our life. The overarching goal is to highlight the fact that reclaiming our value ecosystems and practicing these are a sure way forward for a joyful world. The Joyful Talisman is also an avenue to self-introspect on our own values and whether they contribute towards not only our

own well-being but also our collective well-being. The detailed interactions with the respondents revealed the important role the framework of the Joyful Talisman can contribute towards promoting the essential human values in our societies.

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