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Index

Sr. No.	Topic of Research Paper / Name of Authors	Page No.
1.	Navigating Global Uncertainty: An Analysis of India's Growth, Inflation, Trade and Labour Market Resilience in Q1 FY2026-27 by <i>Sreehari A S</i>	1-14
2.	How Families Shape Student Moral Values by <i>Ligy PK & Dr Rakhi</i>	15-23
3.	Digital Culture and Identity: A Conceptual Review of Self-Presentation, Algorithmic Mediation, and Cultural Hybridity in Networked Publics by <i>Maneesha. C</i>	24-32
4.	Integrating Climate Literacy into Indian School Curricula through Open, Distance, and Digital Education: An Illustrative Multiple-Case Analysis by <i>Amitabha Datta</i>	33-49
5	F A Decade of GST: A Theoretical Evaluation of Its Successes and Challenges in Commerce by <i>Sajeeshlal P P</i>	50-60
6	Impact of Microplastic Pollution on Marine Fauna of the Malabar Coast: A Review of Current Evidence, Ecological Risks, and Research Directions by <i>Shahina Showkath</i>	61-71
7	Psychological Well-being, Mindfulness and Character Building in Education by <i>Manisha Yadav & Dr Archana Yadav</i>	72-82
8	From Cascading Taxes to 'One Nation, One Tax': A Theoretical Review of GST in India by <i>SINI. S & Limija Simon</i>	83-92
9	The Role of Emerging Technologies in Empowering Women and Youth for Inclusive Development by <i>Jasleen Kaur Kohli & Dr. Amita</i>	93-106



How Families Shape Student Moral Values

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Abstract

This article makes the case that adolescents' moral views are mostly established in their families, which are viewed as moral ecosystems. Based on a doctoral study of 300 Class IX students in the Chhatrapati Sambhaji nagar District of Maharashtra, it demonstrates that adolescent moral orientation is consistently and strongly correlated with the relational quality of family life, with correlations ranging from 0.75 to 0.85 for each subgroup under investigation. The rural-urban gap was the only demographic axis that yielded significant differences, with rural students reporting both higher moral values and healthier family settings, while the larger dispersion of urban moral scores suggested a more fragmented moral ecosystem. There were no discernible variations in each variable based on gender or type of school administration. The National Education Policy of 2020's family-centered concept of value education is given empirical support by the pattern, which places the household - rather than the institution-as the primary determinant of character.

Keywords: Adolescent Growth, Family Environment, Moral Principles, Rural-Urban Disparity, and Value Education

Introduction

A quiet unease runs through much of the recent conversation about Indian secondary education. Examination results climb from one year to the next, yet by most honest indicators the ethical reasoning of adolescents has not kept pace with their measured attainment. Young people speak with fluency about careers and competitive advantage, but grow hesitant when the conversation turns to character, obligation, or the ordinary demands of conscience. Parents, absorbed by the precarities of contemporary livelihood, increasingly delegate to coaching



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institutes the very labour of moral conversation and modelled example that the household alone is positioned to perform.¹

The National Education Policy of 2020 responds to precisely this concern when it insists because moral principles and constitutional principles should be at the core rather than on the periphery, of schooling, and when it calls for a genuine partnership between the family, the community, and the school.² Yet policy aspiration outruns evidence. If the family is to be treated as a serious educational partner, it must first be shown, and not merely assumed, that the family is where moral formation actually happens. That is the question this article takes up: in what ways, and how does the family mold young people's moral values?

The evidence marshalled here comes from a doctoral investigation conducted in Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar District, in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, which examined the relationship between the family environment and the moral values of Class IX students, and asked whether that relationship varies across gender, locality, and the management type of the school.³ The argument that organises the discussion is that the family is best understood not as a background variable but as a *moral ecosystem*, and that the empirical pattern, once assembled, points unmistakably toward the primacy of the home.

The Family as a Moral Ecosystem

The family, understood as a *moral ecosystem*, is not merely a biological or legal unit but a living system of relationships in which values are practised before they are professed, modelled before they are taught, and absorbed before they are consciously understood.⁴ The formulation matters because it changes what one expects moral education to look like. A child does not first learn the concept of honesty and then resolve to practise it. The child inhabits a household in which honesty is enacted as a daily reality, in a parent's truthful dealings, in an elder sibling's transparent admission of error, in a family's collective refusal of petty deception, and internalises the disposition from that lived environment. Moral formation, in this sense, is fundamentally mimetic.

The insight has a respectable pedigree. Vygotsky observed that higher psychological functions appear first on the social plane, between persons, before they appear on the individual plane, within the child; applied to the moral domain, this means that conscience is a social inheritance before it becomes a private possession.⁵ Two further traditions converge on the



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same conclusion from different directions. The family systems perspective treats the household as a single emotional unit whose relational dynamics constitutively shape each member, so that a child's moral character cannot be read off from parental instruction alone but emerges from the whole affective field of the home. The ecological model locates the family within the *microsystem*, the innermost and most proximal layer of the developing person's world, and predicts that the quality of relationships at this closest layer will be the most powerful single influence on socio-moral outcomes.⁶ Social learning theory then supplies the mechanism of transmission: moral dispositions travel less through explicit precept than through observation, imitation, and the reinforcement of modelled behaviour.⁷

The developmental timing reinforces the point. Erikson identified the central task of adolescence as the resolution of identity against role confusion, and the moral consolidation of the teenager is inseparable from that broader work of forming a coherent self, work for which the family supplies the earliest and most trusted materials. Parsons and Bales, writing from a sociological vantage, described the family as the principal agency of primary socialisation, the setting in which cultural and ethical norms are first internalised before any secondary institution has the chance to act.⁸ That the systemic, ecological, developmental, and sociological accounts arrive independently at the same destination is itself worth noting: from several directions at once, the family reaches the centre of the analysis.

These frameworks acquire additional depth when set beside the Indian moral tradition, which supplies a vocabulary of considerable historical density. The category of *dharma*, with its fusion of duty, righteousness, and contextually appropriate moral order, has anchored Indian ethical reasoning for the better part of three millennia. Around it cluster *satya* (truthfulness), *ahimsa* (non-violence), *seva* (selfless service), and *daya* (compassion), which together constitute the foundational categories through which the moral life of the Indian person has long been understood.⁹ Gandhi's conception of education as the drawing forth of the best in body, mind, and spirit, Tagore's vision of education as the gradual cultivation of human personality, and Ambedkar's insistence that learning divorced from cultivated values becomes merely the sharpened instrument of self-interest, all locate moral formation within a tradition that has refused to separate the cognitive from the ethical.¹⁰



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The value of the *moral ecosystem* concept is that it holds these registers together. The Western frameworks explain the machinery of transmission; the Indian tradition supplies the moral substance transmitted; and the household is the system in which that substance is enacted, observed, and internalised. Crucially, the ecosystem is reciprocal rather than one-directional. Adolescents are not passive recipients of a fixed inheritance; they challenge, negotiate, and sometimes extend the moral understanding of their elders, which is why the family must be treated as a changing moral framework as opposed to a fixed background state.

What the Evidence Shows

Three hundred Class IX students were polled for the doctorate study that this article is based on. The students were selected using stratified random sampling across gender, location, and type of school management, using two standardised instruments, the *Family Environment Scale* of Bhatia and Chadha and the *Moral Values Scale* of Jacob and Bhagyalakshmi, supplemented by interviews with students, parents, and teachers.¹¹ The design detail need not detain the argument; what matters is the shape of the result, which is unusually clear.

The descriptive picture is quickly told. Family environment scores for the full sample produced a mean of 165.64 against a maximum of two hundred, and moral values a mean of 162.14, with both distributions approximately symmetric. When students were sorted into high, average, and low bands by the conventional procedure, the large majority fell into the average category on both measures, roughly sixty-nine per cent for family environment and about sixty-six per cent for moral values.¹² These are well-behaved, unremarkable distributions, which lends confidence to the inferential analysis that follows.

The central finding concerns the relationship between the two variables. In every subgroup analyzed, there was a statistically significant and highly favorable association between moral values and the familial environment, with coefficients of 0.77 for boys, 0.78 for girls, 0.75 for rural students, 0.77 for urban students, 0.85 for students in aided schools, and 0.81 for those in unaided schools.¹³ Two features of this pattern deserve emphasis. The first is its strength: adolescents who reported more cohesive, expressive, accepting, and well-organised family environments scored, with statistically reliable consistency, higher on the measures of moral internalisation. The second is its uniformity. The relationship does not weaken or strengthen appreciably as one moves between demographic categories; it holds



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everywhere. This is precisely what a family-systems and ecological account would predict, regardless of the adolescent's demographic identification, moral character develops within the affective ecology of the family rather than in a relational vacuum.

The qualitative material supplies the mechanism that the correlations imply. When students, parents, and teachers across the district's varied locales were asked to identify the formative influences on adolescent moral character, they returned with notable convergence to the same triad: warmth and demonstrated affection within the home, sustained communication between parents and children, and the everyday force of parental example.¹⁴ The relationship between family environment and moral values is therefore not a statistical abstraction. It is the accumulated effect of ordinary domestic practices, of conversation, attention, and modelled conduct, operating on the adolescent day after day. The determinants of moral development, on this evidence, are not exotic or specialised; they are, at their core, the unglamorous daily practices of attentive family life.

Why Rural Families Differ

If the correlation between family and moral values is uniform, the differences between demographic groups are selective, and this selectivity is itself the study's most instructive result. The rural-urban gap was the only axis that yielded substantial disparities. Rural students reported significantly healthier family environments than urban students, with a mean of 168.61 against 162.66, and their mean moral values were considerably higher (165.20 versus 159.08), both differences reaching significance well beyond the conventional threshold.¹⁵ The consistency of direction is telling. Rural students score higher on both the family measure and the moral measure, which is exactly what one would expect if the healthier family environment is doing the moral work.

The pattern is best read through the classical distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*.¹⁶ Rural communities in Marathwada, even in their contemporary transformation, retain something of the *Gemeinschaft* character: dense kinship networks, intergenerational co-residence, shared ritual life, and the informal moral surveillance of a community that knows its members. The rural adolescent grows up within what might be called a continuous moral atmosphere, observed by relatives, instructed by elders, embedded in shared festivals and life-cycle observances. Urban and industrial environments, by contrast, exhibit more of the



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Gesellschaft pattern: individuated households, dual-earner families with attenuated supervisory presence, the substitution of mediated entertainment for shared family activity, and the gradual erosion of the moral commons that traditional kinship once supplied.

A subtler feature hides in the dispersion of the scores. The variability of urban moral scores is markedly greater than that of rural scores. Urban moral orientations are therefore not merely lower on average; they are more variable, which suggests a greater heterogeneity of moral factors among urban homes and, as a result, an urban adolescent's moral trajectory is less predictable. This detail matters for policy, because it unsettles a common assumption. The belief that better-resourced, more cosmopolitan urban environments necessarily foster richer moral development is not supported by the evidence. If anything, the urban household in its current state reveals quantifiable moral weaknesses, and urban value education becomes more than just a rhetorical issue—it becomes a real educational goal.

What Does Not Matter: Gender and School Type

The remaining comparisons returned null results, and their nullity is quietly significant. Boys and girls' moral beliefs and familial environment ratings did not differ substantially; in both cases the girls' marginal numerical advantage fell well below the threshold of statistical reliability. School management type produced no significant difference either: the comparison of aided and unaided schools yielded values far below conventional thresholds for both variables.¹⁷ Whatever else distinguishes these groups, it does not translate into a measurable difference in the family environments or the moral orientations of their students.

The absence of a gender difference should be read with care. The ethics-of-care tradition, which focuses on the nature and register of moral reasoning rather than its overall amount, is not refuted by it; a scale that sums moral endorsement across dimensions may simply be insensitive to the qualitative asymmetries that Gilligan described.¹⁸ The prudent conclusion is that the present instrument detects no overall gender gap in this district, while leaving open the finer question of gendered moral style. The management null result is theoretically the more illuminating of the two. Moral values, unlike examination performance, are not principally produced by fee structures, institutional cultures, or the aided–unaided distinction. They are produced within the home and the surrounding community, and because both school types draw from broadly similar familial pools, the convergence of their students'



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moral scores is exactly what a family-centred theory would anticipate. The finding refutes any form of institutional determinism in moral education. If the aim is to influence the moral orientation of the young, the instrumental question of school type is close to the wrong question to ask; the right question concerns the family, and beyond it the community within which the family is embedded.

Implications for Practice and Policy

If moral formation is primarily a home-based phenomenon, the consequences for practice are direct. Schools that aspire to develop the moral character of their students cannot do so adequately while bracketing the family. Value-education programmes conceived as purely classroom interventions are pulling on a weak lever; any serious effort must treat the household as the principal site of moral formation and, wherever possible, engage the family as an active partner rather than a peripheral consideration.¹⁹ This points toward the structured school, family, and community partnerships that the National Education Policy of 2020 already commends and that the present evidence independently supports.²⁰ Such partnerships might take the form of parent dialogues focused on moral conversation at home rather than on marks alone, of guidance that helps parents recognise the formative power of their own modelled conduct, and of community-anchored activities that extend the moral commons of the neighbourhood into the life of the school.

The rural–urban finding carries a specific implication. Urban schools may need to assume a more compensatory role with respect to the relational nurture that rural homes still tend to provide, building deliberate structures of mentoring, pastoral care, and family engagement to supply what the thinner urban family ecology supplies less reliably. Rural schools, in turn, might prepare their students for the more atomised environments they are likely to encounter when they migrate for higher education and employment. For teacher education and guidance counselling the lesson is that family dynamics deserve to be treated as a central rather than incidental concern, and that Class IX, poised at the threshold of the more intensive identity work of late adolescence, is a sensitive window in which effort is likely to yield disproportionate long-term returns. None of this requires exotic resources. It asks, rather, for a reorientation of attention toward the ordinary practices of attentive family life that the evidence identifies as decisive.



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Conclusion

The evidence supports a single, reasonably firm conclusion: the family environment is the primary non-academic factor influencing teenage moral values. The relationship between the relational quality of family life and the moral orientation of the young is strong, and it holds with striking uniformity across gender, locality, and school type. Where the demographic categories do produce a difference, they produce it along the rural–urban axis, where the denser relational ecology of rural households appears to scaffold moral development more effectively than the thinner, more variable ecology of the urban home. The absence of any significant gender or because it demonstrates moral development, the management impact strengthens rather than confuses this picture to be a home-based phenomenon that institutional arrangements do little to alter once family-level dynamics are in play.

The larger implication is a matter of emphasis. Much educational reform directs its energy toward curricula, institutions, and management structures, on the tacit assumption that these are the levers of moral improvement. The findings assembled here suggest that the decisive influence lies elsewhere, in warmth, conversation, and example, in the daily practices of family life. To place the family at the centre of the discourse and practice of value education is therefore not a sentimental gesture but a conclusion that the evidence recommends. If Indian schooling is serious about the moral formation of its adolescents, it will have to take the household seriously as its indispensable partner, and to build the structures through which that partnership can be sustained.

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