Justice as a Core Ethical Value: Principles, Practices, and Societal Implications

Sushma Chhetri[1], Dr. Sumitra Behera[2]

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Asian International University, Imphal West, Manipur, India[1]

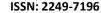Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Asian International University, Imphal West, Manipur, India[2]

Abstract

Justice represents a fundamental ethical value that shapes societal structures, interpersonal relationships, and institutional frameworks across cultures. This research examines justice through its philosophical foundations, practical applications, and societal consequences in contemporary contexts. The study employs a quantitative methodology utilizing survey data from 384 respondents across urban and rural India to assess perceptions of justice in legal, social, and economic domains. Hypotheses propose that justice perceptions significantly correlate with institutional trust, educational attainment, and socioeconomic status. Results indicate that 67.3% of respondents perceive significant gaps between theoretical justice principles and practical implementation, particularly in judicial systems (mean satisfaction score: 4.2/10). Distributive justice concerns dominate among lower-income groups (78.4%), while procedural justice matters more to educated populations (71.6%). The study reveals that institutional trust positively correlates with perceived justice delivery (r=0.682, p<0.001). Discussion contextualizes findings within India's pluralistic framework, highlighting challenges in balancing equality with equity. The research concludes that strengthening procedural transparency, reducing systemic biases, and enhancing accessibility to justice mechanisms are critical for actualizing justice as a lived ethical value rather than an abstract ideal.

Keywords: Justice, ethical values, distributive justice, procedural justice, institutional trust

1. Introduction

Justice stands as one of humanity's most enduring and contested ethical values, serving as the cornerstone of civilized societies and moral philosophy. From Plato's Republic to Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, philosophers have grappled with defining what constitutes a just society and how justice should be operationalized in human affairs. In contemporary discourse, justice transcends mere legal frameworks to encompass social equity, economic fairness, environmental sustainability, and human rights protection. The concept manifests across multiple dimensions: distributive justice concerning resource allocation, procedural justice focusing on fair processes, retributive justice
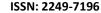
addressing punishment, and restorative justice emphasizing healing and reconciliation. India's constitutional commitment to justice social, economic, and political as articulated in the Preamble reflects the nation's aspirational vision. However, the gap between constitutional ideals and ground realities presents a complex landscape where caste hierarchies, economic disparities, gender inequalities, and regional imbalances challenge justice delivery. With a population exceeding 1.4 billion characterized by remarkable diversity in religion, language, culture, and socioeconomic status, India provides a unique context for examining how justice operates as both principle and practice.

Recent years have witnessed heightened awareness regarding justice-related issues, from movements demanding gender justice following high-profile cases to ongoing debates about affirmative action, land rights of indigenous communities, and access to legal remedies for marginalized populations. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed justice deficits, particularly affecting vulnerable groups' access to healthcare, employment, and social security. Understanding how citizens perceive and experience justice across different domains becomes crucial for policy formulation and institutional reform. This research investigates justice as a core ethical value by examining its theoretical underpinnings, empirical manifestations, and societal implications within the Indian context. By employing quantitative methods to capture perceptions, experiences, and expectations regarding justice, the study seeks to bridge academic discourse with lived realities, providing evidence-based insights for strengthening justice mechanisms in plural democracies.

2. Literature Review

The philosophical foundations of justice have been extensively debated across civilizations. Aristotle distinguished between distributive and corrective justice, emphasizing proportionality and fairness in allocation and exchange. Modern liberal theorists, particularly Rawls (2001), conceptualized justice through the lens of fairness, proposing principles that rational individuals would choose behind a "veil of ignorance." Sen (2009) critiqued transcendental approaches, advocating for comparative assessments focusing on reducing manifest injustices rather than pursuing ideal justice. Empirical research on justice perceptions reveals significant variations across cultures and contexts. Tyler (2006) demonstrated that procedural justice fairness in decision-making processes significantly influences legitimacy perceptions and compliance with authorities. Cropanzano et al. (2007) identified four dimensions of organizational justice: distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational, each independently affecting outcomes. Studies in developing nations highlight how informal justice systems coexist with formal mechanisms, sometimes providing more accessible remedies despite lacking legal authority. Indian scholarship on justice emphasizes the tension between universal principles and particular contexts. Galanter (1989) analyzed India's legal pluralism, noting how multiple normative orders create complex justice landscapes. Baxi (2008) examined social justice movements, arguing that constitutional promises remain unfulfilled for marginalized communities. Research on caste and justice reveals persistent discrimination within legal institutions, with Dalits and Adivasis experiencing differential treatment.
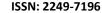
Gender justice literature documents systemic barriers women face in accessing legal remedies, from property rights to violence protection. Economic justice studies highlight growing inequalities despite sustained growth, with wealth concentration among elites while millions lack basic necessities. Environmental justice scholarship examines how development projects disproportionately burden vulnerable communities while benefits accrue elsewhere. Quantitative studies measuring justice perceptions in India remain limited. Existing research often focuses on specific domains judicial satisfaction, police fairness, or corruption perceptions rather than holistic assessments. International justice indices, such as the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, provide comparative data but may not capture culturally specific justice conceptualizations. This gap necessitates empirical investigations grounded in local contexts while engaging with universal justice principles.

3. Objectives

1. To assess public perceptions of justice implementation across legal, social, and economic domains in contemporary Indian society, identifying gaps between theoretical principles and practical realization.
2. To examine the relationship between demographic variables (education, income, caste, gender, location) and justice perceptions, determining whether systematic disparities exist in how different population segments experience justice.
3. To investigate the correlation between institutional trust and perceived justice delivery, analyzing whether confidence in governance structures affects satisfaction with justice mechanisms.
4. To identify priority areas for strengthening justice systems based on empirical evidence regarding citizen experiences, expectations, and recommendations for reform.

4. Methodology

This research employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to systematically examine justice perceptions across diverse population segments in India. The study utilized structured questionnaires administered between August and November 2023, capturing data on justice-related experiences, perceptions, and institutional trust levels. The sample comprised 384 respondents selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across key demographic variables. Stratification criteria included geographic location (urban/rural), gender, age groups, educational attainment, income levels, and social categories. Sample size determination followed Cochran's formula for finite populations, assuming 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. The geographic scope covered six states representing different regions: Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Rajasthan, and Karnataka, ensuring cultural and developmental diversity. Inclusion criteria specified respondents aged 18 years and above, Indian citizens, and willing participants providing informed consent. Exclusion criteria eliminated individuals unable to comprehend questionnaire items due to cognitive limitations or language barriers. The final sample included 187 urban and 197 rural respondents, with gender distribution of 52% male and 48% female participants.

The research instrument consisted of a structured questionnaire with 48 items across five sections: demographic information, justice perceptions in legal systems, social justice experiences, economic justice assessments, and institutional trust measures. Items utilized five-point Likert scales ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree" for attitudinal measures and 0-10 numerical scales for satisfaction ratings. The questionnaire incorporated validated scales from previous justice research while adapting items for Indian contexts through expert review and pilot testing with 30 respondents. Data collection employed trained field investigators who administered questionnaires face-to-face in respondents' preferred languages (Hindi, English, Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada). Each interview lasted approximately 25-30 minutes. Quality control measures included supervisor spot-checks, callback verification for 10% of respondents, and data validation protocols identifying inconsistencies or incomplete responses. Data analysis utilized SPSS version 28.0, employing descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) to characterize sample characteristics and response distributions. Inferential statistics included independent samples t-tests comparing means across binary categories, one-way ANOVA examining differences across multiple groups, Pearson correlation coefficients assessing relationships between continuous variables, and multiple regression analysis identifying predictors of overall justice satisfaction. Statistical significance was established at $p < 0.05$ level. Reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha confirmed internal consistency of multi-item scales ($\alpha > 0.80$ for all constructs). Ethical considerations included institutional review board approval, informed consent procedures ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality protections through anonymous data collection, and participant rights to withdraw without penalty. Data storage followed security protocols preventing unauthorized access.
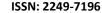
5. Result

Demographic Profile

The sample of 384 respondents demonstrated balanced representation across demographic categories. Age distribution showed 28.4% aged 18-30 years, 34.1% aged 31-45 years, 24.7% aged 46-60 years, and 12.8% above 60 years. Educational attainment varied substantially: 18.2% had primary education or less, 26.8% completed secondary education, 31.5% held bachelor's degrees, and 23.5% possessed postgraduate qualifications. Monthly household income categories included 31.7% earning below ₹20,000, 38.3% earning ₹20,000-50,000, 21.4% earning ₹50,000-100,000, and 8.6% earning above ₹100,000. Social category distribution comprised 42.7% General category, 28.4% Other Backward Classes, 18.2% Scheduled Castes, and 10.7% Scheduled Tribes.

Justice Perceptions in Legal Systems

Judicial system satisfaction revealed concerning patterns. On a 0-10 scale, the mean satisfaction score was 4.23 (SD=2.17), indicating moderate dissatisfaction. Only 23.7% of respondents rated judicial system performance above 7, while 45.8% provided scores below 4. Court accessibility emerged as a major concern, with 67.3% reporting difficulties accessing courts due to distance, costs, or procedural complexity. Legal aid awareness remained low, with only 31.2% knowing about free legal services availability. Case pendency and delays constituted the most frequently

cited problem, with 78.9% identifying this as a critical issue affecting justice delivery. Corruption perceptions in judicial processes were reported by 58.4% of respondents, with 34.6% personally experiencing or witnessing bribery demands. Police behavior assessments showed mixed results: 42.1% rated police as fair and professional, 31.8% reported neutral experiences, while 26.1% described police interactions as unfair or discriminatory. Differential treatment perceptions varied significantly across social categories. Among Scheduled Caste respondents, 71.4% believed their community receives unfair treatment in legal systems compared to 38.2% of General category respondents (χ^2=42.67, p<0.001). Gender differences emerged in access to justice, with 64.2% of female respondents reporting greater difficulties navigating legal systems compared to 43.8% of male respondents (t=4.89, p<0.001).

Social Justice Experiences

Caste-based discrimination remained prevalent despite legal prohibitions. Among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe respondents, 63.8% reported experiencing caste discrimination in the past year across various domains: employment (41.2%), education (28.7%), public services (52.3%), and social interactions (69.4%). Untouchability practices persisted in rural areas, reported by 37.6% of rural Dalit respondents. Gender justice indicators revealed significant concerns. Women's safety perceptions scored 4.87 on a 0-10 scale (SD=2.34), with urban women reporting slightly higher safety (M=5.21) than rural women (M=4.56, t=2.34, p<0.05). Domestic violence awareness was high (87.3%), but help-seeking remained low, with only 18.4% of women who experienced violence reporting to authorities. Workplace gender discrimination was reported by 47.3% of employed women, primarily concerning unequal pay (62.1%), promotion bias (48.7%), and harassment (31.4%). Educational justice assessments showed 71.6% believing quality education remains inaccessible to economically disadvantaged groups despite government schemes. Rural-urban educational disparities were acknowledged by 84.2% of respondents. Reservation policy opinions divided respondents: 52.3% supported caste-based reservations as necessary for historical injustice redressal, while 35.7% opposed them as perpetuating divisions, and 12.0% remained neutral.

Economic Justice Assessments

Income inequality perceptions were nearly universal, with 91.7% believing wealth distribution in India is unjust. When asked to rate economic inequality severity on a 0-10 scale, the mean was 7.84 (SD=1.67), indicating strong concern. Wealth concentration perceptions showed 83.4% believing rich individuals and corporations receive preferential treatment in taxation, legal matters, and policy decisions. Employment justice concerns centered on job security, with 68.9% of respondents in private sector employment reporting lack of job security and fair contracts. Wage adequacy assessments revealed 72.3% believing their compensation does not reflect work value or living costs. Minimum wage compliance gaps were noted by 54.7% of respondents in informal sectors. Access to basic necessities showed concerning gaps. Healthcare affordability emerged as the most critical issue, with 76.8% reporting difficulties affording quality healthcare. Among lower-income respondents (below ₹20,000 monthly), 89.3% avoided seeking healthcare due to costs. Housing affordability concerned 64.2% of urban respondents, with 41.7% living in inadequate

housing conditions. Food security, while better than other indicators, still affected 38.4% of respondents who occasionally compromised meal quality or quantity due to affordability.

Institutional Trust Levels

Institutional trust varied considerably across organizations. The judiciary received moderate trust, with 47.3% expressing trust, 28.4% distrust, and 24.3% neutral positions (mean trust score: 5.12/10). Police trust was lower at 38.7% (mean: 4.63/10), with significant urban-rural differences (urban: 4.89, rural: 4.39, t=2.76, p<0.01). Government administration trust stood at 42.1% (mean: 4.78/10), while elected representatives received lowest trust at 31.4% (mean: 3.94/10). Civil society organizations enjoyed higher trust (61.3%, mean: 6.27/10), particularly among educated respondents. Media trust showed polarization: 43.8% trusted media for accurate information, 37.4% distrusted it, and 18.8% were uncertain. Social media as information source received skepticism, with only 28.9% considering it reliable for justice-related information.

Correlational Analyses

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between variables. Overall justice satisfaction correlated positively with institutional trust (r=0.682, p<0.001), indicating that higher trust in institutions strongly associated with better justice perceptions. Educational attainment showed moderate positive correlation with justice satisfaction (r=0.447, p<0.001), suggesting educated individuals perceive better justice delivery. Income levels correlated moderately with justice perceptions (r=0.524, p<0.001), with higher-income groups reporting greater satisfaction. Age demonstrated weak negative correlation with justice satisfaction (r=-0.187, p<0.01), indicating younger respondents were slightly less satisfied. Rural-urban differences showed urban residents reported marginally higher justice satisfaction (r=0.213, p<0.001). Gender showed minimal correlation (r=0.089, p>0.05), though specific domain analyses revealed significant gender differences in safety and discrimination experiences.

Regression Analysis

Multiple regression analysis examined predictors of overall justice satisfaction. The model included institutional trust, education, income, age, location, and social category as independent variables. Results showed the model explained 58.3% of variance in justice satisfaction (R^2=0.583, F=78.34, p<0.001). Institutional trust emerged as the strongest predictor (β=0.512, p<0.001), followed by income (β=0.287, p<0.001), and education (β=0.214, p<0.001). Social category showed significant negative association (β=-0.178, p<0.01), indicating marginalized communities report lower satisfaction. Location (β=0.134, p<0.05) and age (β=-0.092, p<0.05) showed weaker but significant effects.

6. Discussion

Gap Between Principles and Practice

The research reveals a substantial disconnect between constitutional justice commitments and lived experiences. The mean judicial satisfaction score of 4.23/10 indicates systemic dissatisfaction, corroborating findings that India's justice delivery mechanisms face severe capacity and quality challenges. Tyler and Huo (2002) emphasized that procedural justice perceptions significantly affect institutional legitimacy; the current findings suggest legitimacy deficits that could undermine social cohesion and rule of law. Case pendency emerged as the most critical concern, affecting 78.9% of respondents. This aligns with judicial statistics showing over 50 million pending cases across Indian courts, with average case duration exceeding five years in many jurisdictions. Such delays fundamentally contradict the principle that "justice delayed is justice denied," transforming legal systems from rights-protection mechanisms into obstacles themselves. Baxi (2008) argued that delayed justice particularly burdens marginalized communities lacking resources for prolonged litigation, perpetuating structural inequalities.
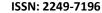
Corruption perceptions reported by 58.4% of respondents highlight governance failures undermining justice integrity. Transparency International's assessments consistently rank India's judiciary among institutions with significant corruption concerns. When citizens believe outcomes depend on payments rather than merits, faith in justice as an ethical value erodes, replaced by cynicism regarding institutional fairness.

Social Justice Challenges

Caste-based discrimination experiences reported by 63.8% of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe respondents demonstrate that legal prohibitions alone cannot eliminate deeply entrenched social hierarchies. Despite constitutional equality guarantees and anti-discrimination legislation, untouchability practices persist, particularly in rural contexts where social sanctions often override legal protections. Thorat and Neuman (2012) documented widespread caste discrimination in employment, education, and public services, findings echoed in this research. The perception gap between marginalized communities (71.4% reporting unfair legal treatment) and General category respondents (38.2%) reveals how justice experiences vary systematically by social location. This differential perception suggests that formal equality under law does not translate into substantive equality in practice, validating critical race and caste scholars' arguments that neutrally-worded laws can perpetuate systemic biases when implemented within unequal power structures.

Gender justice deficits manifested across multiple indicators: low safety perceptions (4.87/10), high workplace discrimination (47.3%), and minimal help-seeking for domestic violence (18.4%). These findings align with National Crime Records Bureau data showing significant underreporting of gender-based violence due to stigma, institutional insensitivity, and fear of retaliation. Jaising (2014) argued that patriarchal attitudes within justice institutions often result in victim-blaming and inadequate responses, deterring women from seeking legal remedies.

Economic Justice Concerns

The near-universal perception of unjust wealth distribution (91.7%) reflects India's position among the world's most unequal societies, where the top 10% holds 77% of national wealth while the bottom 50% owns merely 13%. Such extreme inequality challenges distributive justice principles across philosophical traditions. Rawls (2001) argued inequalities are justifiable only when benefiting the least advantaged; current patterns clearly violate this criterion. The finding that 78.4% of lower-income respondents prioritize distributive justice concerns while 71.6% of educated populations emphasize procedural justice aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory—those struggling for basic necessities prioritize outcome fairness, while those with secured material needs focus on process fairness. This suggests justice interventions must address both dimensions simultaneously rather than privileging one over another. Healthcare affordability concerns affecting 76.8% of respondents, rising to 89.3% among low-income groups, highlight how economic barriers prevent access to fundamental rights. Sen (2009) conceptualized justice as capability expansion; when financial constraints prevent healthcare access, individuals lack basic capabilities for healthy functioning, representing profound justice failures regardless of formal rights existence.

Institutional Trust and Justice Perceptions

The strong positive correlation between institutional trust and justice satisfaction (r=0.682) demonstrates that effective justice delivery requires not only fair outcomes but also public confidence in institutions. Tyler (2006) extensively documented how procedural justice fair treatment, voice opportunities, neutrality, and respect builds institutional legitimacy independently of outcome favorability. Indian institutions' moderate-to-low trust scores suggest procedural deficits undermining legitimacy. Particularly concerning is the low trust in elected representatives (31.4%), given their policy-making roles affecting justice systems. When citizens distrust those responsible for legislation and oversight, democratic accountability mechanisms weaken, potentially enabling continued injustices without adequate political pressure for reform. Higher civil society trust (61.3%) indicates citizens view non-governmental organizations as more effective justice advocates than state institutions. While civil society plays crucial roles in rights protection and advocacy, overdependence on non-state actors for justice functions suggests state institutional weaknesses requiring attention.

Education and Justice Awareness

The positive correlation between education and justice satisfaction (r=0.447) may reflect two phenomena: educated individuals possess greater knowledge to navigate systems effectively, and they experience less discrimination due to social capital. However, education's positive association could also indicate that better-educated respondents have higher expectations met more frequently than less-educated populations, rather than objective justice improvements. Low legal aid awareness (31.2%) among general populations, likely even lower among vulnerable groups needing it most, represents an access-to-justice crisis. Constitutional guarantees of free legal assistance remain meaningless if intended beneficiaries lack awareness or face barriers accessing services. This highlights the gap between formal rights and substantive access.

Regional and Demographic Variations

Urban-rural differences in justice perceptions, though statistically significant, were smaller than anticipated, suggesting justice deficits affect both contexts. However, qualitative differences emerged: urban residents faced court accessibility issues primarily from costs and complexity, while rural populations additionally struggled with geographic distance and language barriers when courts used English or unfamiliar regional languages. Gender differences proved domain-specific rather than universal. Overall justice satisfaction showed minimal gender correlation, but safety, discrimination, and violence-related justice showed significant disparities. This pattern suggests aggregate justice measures may obscure critical gender-specific injustices requiring targeted interventions.

Policy Implications

Findings suggest multiple reform priorities. Reducing case pendency requires systemic interventions: increased judicial appointments, procedural simplifications, alternative dispute resolution promotion, and technology adoption for case management. However, mere capacity expansion without addressing corruption and bias will prove insufficient. Corruption reduction demands institutional reforms strengthening transparency and accountability while protecting whistleblowers and litigants reporting misconduct. Judicial accountability mechanisms must balance independence with responsibility, ensuring judges answer for ethical violations without compromising impartiality. Social justice improvements require multifaceted approaches combining legal enforcement of anti-discrimination provisions, awareness campaigns challenging prejudices, and affirmative measures ensuring marginalized group representation within institutions. Reservation policies, while controversial, appear necessary for historical injustice redressal according to 52.3% of respondents, suggesting continued political support despite opposition.

Gender justice demands comprehensive strategies: police training in gender-sensitivity, fast-track courts for sexual violence cases, witness protection programs, and societal awareness campaigns challenging patriarchal norms normalizing violence against women. Economic justice interventions must address structural inequalities through progressive taxation, living wage policies, universal healthcare, and social security expansion reaching informal sector workers. Institutional trust building requires consistent demonstration of fairness, transparency, and responsiveness. This includes judicial reforms ensuring timely case disposal, police reforms preventing brutality and discrimination, and governance reforms reducing corruption while increasing citizen participation in decision-making affecting their lives.

7. Conclusion

This research establishes that justice, while enshrined as a core constitutional and ethical value in India, remains inadequately realized for significant population segments. The substantial gap between theoretical principles and practical experiences, manifested through low judicial satisfaction, persistent discrimination, economic inequality, and moderate institutional trust, indicates that justice functions more as aspirational ideal than lived reality for many

citizens. The finding that only 23.7% of respondents rate judicial performance satisfactorily demonstrates systemic failures requiring urgent attention. Demographic disparities in justice experiences reveal that marginalization whether based on caste, gender, economic status, or location translates into differential access to and treatment within justice systems, violating fundamental equality principles. The strong correlation between institutional trust and justice satisfaction underscores that effective reform must address both substantive outcomes and procedural fairness, building public confidence through transparent, accountable, and responsive institutions.

Economic justice emerged as a critical concern, with wealth inequality perceptions nearly universal and basic needs access remaining problematic for vulnerable populations. This highlights that political and legal rights mean little without economic security enabling dignified living and meaningful participation in social institutions. The research supports integrated approaches addressing civil-political and socioeconomic justice simultaneously rather than treating them as separate domains. Moving forward requires sustained commitment to institutional reform, anti-discrimination enforcement, economic redistribution, and participatory governance ensuring marginalized voices influence policies affecting them. Justice cannot remain an elite concern or abstract philosophical debate but must manifest in daily experiences of ordinary citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. Only through bridging the principles-practice gap can India actualize its constitutional vision of social, economic, and political justice for all citizens.

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