Public Health: A Philosophical Approach

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Abstract

This article explores the philosophical foundations of public health through the lens of Social Philosophy and their manifestation in India's National Health Policy 2017. Social Philosophy, with its emphasis on common good, equity, and the ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family), provides a normative framework for addressing contemporary global crises such as inequality, fundamentalism, environmental degradation, and terrorism. It advocates holistic, justice-oriented, and ecological approaches that integrate values of fraternity, compassion, and human dignity. Complementing this perspective, philosophical debates on health, naturalistic versus holistic, highlight the dual nature of health as both a biological state and a value-laden human experience. The National Health Policy 2017 embodies these approaches by emphasising equity, universality, pluralism, patient-centeredness, and accountability, while also drawing on ecological and preventive orientations. Yet, while the policy is philosophically rich, implementation challenges persist, particularly in translating ideals into practice. The article reviews and analyses these convergences to argue for a value-based, integrative approach to public health policy and practice.

Keywords: *National Health Policy 2017; Social Philosophy; Governance ethics; Public health philosophy; Health policy in India*

Introduction

In the contemporary world, humanity remains deeply divided along the lines of religion, region, caste, creed, colour, and community. Despite the lofty ideals espoused by philosophy and religion, it is undeniable that the globe stands on the threshold of an unprecedented crisis. Rather than enjoying peace and harmony, societies are increasingly confronted with war, terrorism, and violence, even as scientific and technological advances promise a vision of the world as a single global family.

Paradoxically, human progress has also led to destructive tendencies. The pursuit of nuclear weapons threatens life itself, while unchecked industrialisation and exploitation of natural resources pollute the essential elements of earth, water, and air—the very foundations created to sustain life. As a result, ecological balance is being disrupted, global warming continues to accelerate, and the natural rhythm of seasons has been destabilised. Irregular rainfall, coupled with frequent natural disasters such as droughts, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, reflects the growing fragility of the planet. In this context, human actions have rendered the earth increasingly inhospitable, even as calls for globalisation and peace grow louder.

Public Health

The right to health necessarily entails a right to public health, placing a clear obligation on the state to take active measures to reduce risks to population wellbeing. When governments neglect to implement

reasonable and accessible interventions, and thereby allow preventable harm or death to occur, they fail in this obligation and can be regarded as Neglectful States. From both a philosophical and governance perspective, the ethical challenge of public health policy is not a simple rejection of paternalism or nannying, but rather the more complex task of balancing liberty with responsibility. Good governance requires steering a careful course between undue interference and harmful neglect, recognising that protecting the right to public health may sometimes necessitate proportionate restrictions on individual freedom. Such measures, when grounded in principles of justice and collective responsibility, serve not as infringements but as legitimate expressions of the state's duty to safeguard the conditions for a healthy society (Wilson, 2021).

Perspectives of Social Philosophy

Social Philosophy is concerned with the values, principles, and ideals that shape society. Unlike abstract theorising, it is deeply rooted in the practical realities of human life and the challenges of collective existence. Its foremost aim is the realisation of the common good and common welfare, encapsulated in the ancient Indian ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, "the world is one family." At its core, Social Philosophy seeks to reconstruct society on the foundations of justice, equality, fraternity, and peace, transcending divisions of caste, creed, religion, and race.

The Ethical Crisis of Modern Humanity

Despite philosophical and religious ideals, the world today faces unprecedented crises. Religion, which should serve as a path toward higher values, has often been distorted into an instrument of conflict in the hands of fanatics. Global society suffers from terrorism, war, and a steady erosion of moral values, reflecting what can be called an "annihilation syndrome", the tendency to pit ideologies and communities against each other, resulting in destruction.

Alongside these moral challenges, humanity is confronted with socio-economic inequalities and ecological imbalances. Nuclear armament, environmental degradation, global warming, and pollution threaten the sustainability of life itself. Natural calamities such as floods, droughts, and earthquakes are exacerbated by human irresponsibility. These crises demonstrate that without political, economic, and moral equality, the dream of a just and peaceful world remains elusive.

The Role of Social Philosophy

It is in this context that Social Philosophy becomes crucial. Far from being an ivory-tower discipline, it is a living, dynamic approach to addressing the pressing issues of human society. Social Philosophy:

- Diagnoses social evils such as fundamentalism, fanaticism, terrorism, racism, communalism, and casteism, identifying them as root causes of division and violence.
- Prescribes ideals by envisioning a society based on equality, justice, and fraternity.
- Adapts dynamically to changing social contexts, new ideologies, scientific progress, and shifting cultural values.

Social Philosophy thus serves as a critical and constructive discipline: it critiques harmful structures while also offering normative guidance for creating a more humane world.

Towards a Universal Vision

At the heart of Social Philosophy lies the conviction that terrorism and war can be overcome only by developing a universal vision - one world, one humanity, one fraternity. This is not about uniformity, but about embracing "unity in diversity." Philosophically, it calls for transcending divisive "isms" such as sectarianism, fundamentalism, and excessive nationalism, while affirming human dignity and mutual respect. Such a vision also demands practical commitments. Social Philosophy advocates for disarmament and the redirection of military expenditure toward eradicating hunger, disease, and illiteracy. It calls for dismantling systems of inequality, whether based on caste, class, race, or religion that fuel injustice and violence. By doing so, it aligns with both ethical principles and policy-oriented strategies for global welfare.

Ecosophy and Ecological Balance

A significant offshoot of Social Philosophy is Ecosophy, which addresses the relationship between humanity and nature. It responds to the ecological crises of pollution, global warming, and environmental degradation by stressing harmony between the human, natural, and spiritual realms. Ecosophy underscores that peace and sustainability require respect for the balance of nature and responsible stewardship of resources. In this sense, Social Philosophy is inseparable from ecological philosophy, as both aim to secure the long-term survival and flourishing of life on earth.

Value Education and Human Development

One of the vital tasks of Social Philosophy is to educate individuals in value discernment. Human beings are not static, and neither are societies; values must evolve to meet the demands of changing contexts. Social Philosophy thus fosters a socio-secular and humanistic value system, one that transcends narrow divisions and seeks to uplift all people without discrimination. This process involves discarding values that promote violence, hatred, or exploitation, and cultivating those that foster compassion, cooperation, and justice. Such value education is not merely moral instruction but a foundation for civic responsibility, global citizenship, and peaceful coexistence.

The Transcendental Dimension: Spiritual Globalisation

Social Philosophy does not limit itself to material or political dimensions; it also embraces a transcendental outlook. This has been described as spiritual globalisation: the recognition of an all-pervading unity that binds humanity, nature, and the divine. In this vision, the universe is seen as interconnected (Ishaavaasyamidam Sarvam - "all this is pervaded by the divine"). By affirming compassion, service, and love as universal religious values, it transcends the walls built by sectarianism. It envisions one humanity under one divine truth, bound together as a global family. This vision does not erase diversity; rather, it harmonises the insights of different prophets, sages, and traditions into a shared path toward peace.

Practical Implications for Governance and Policy

From a policy and governance perspective, Social Philosophy translates into commitments such as:

- Promoting disarmament and redirecting resources toward human development.
- Enforcing social and economic justice by eliminating structural inequalities.
- Implementing ecological policies to preserve the natural balance.
- Encouraging interfaith dialogue and cooperation to counter extremism.
- Embedding value education within civic and educational institutions to foster ethical citizenship.

By integrating philosophical ideals with concrete governance measures, Social Philosophy becomes not only an intellectual pursuit but also a guide for political, social, and ecological reform (Siddhashrama, 2018)

Social Philosophy represents the challenge and promise of our era. In a world marked by rapid scientific progress, socio-political upheavals, and ecological crises, it provides both a critical lens and a constructive framework for human flourishing. It diagnoses the evils of fanaticism, inequality, and exploitation while prescribing ideals of justice, equality, ecological balance, and global unity.

Its transcendental vision of spiritual globalisation affirms the interconnectedness of all life and offers a unifying path beyond the divisions that threaten humanity. By cultivating a socio-secular, humanistic value system and embedding these ideals in governance, health, education, and policy, Social Philosophy emerges as an indispensable discipline for building a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

The philosophy of health explores what it means to be healthy, how health should be defined, and the implications of these definitions for individuals and society. This field addresses the interplay between biological, psychological, social, and ethical dimensions, challenging simplistic or purely biomedical views and emphasising the importance of holistic and pluralistic approaches.

Philosophical Approach to Public Health: Integrating Concepts, Values, and Practice

Teaching ethics is not yet a standard component of public health curricula, particularly within schools of public health in the European region, despite the fact that professionals in this field often encounter complex ethical dilemmas. Empirical evidence, however, shows increasing interest in integrating ethics into training programmes, reflecting recognition of its importance for guiding decision-making in matters of justice, equity, autonomy, and efficiency. The challenge, as noted by the authors, lies in the overcrowded nature of public health curricula, which often leaves little room for additional subjects.

To address this challenge, the authors propose a practical model that introduces ethics through a short course of five to eight hours. Though limited in duration, this approach sensitises students to ethical reasoning by applying seven mid-level principles—non-maleficence, beneficence, health maximisation, efficiency, respect for autonomy, justice, and proportionality to real-world cases. The use of simple, accessible tools enables students from diverse backgrounds to engage with ethical dilemmas in a structured way, making the course efficient and impactful despite time constraints. This model represents a pragmatic step toward embedding ethical awareness into public health education, ensuring that future professionals are equipped with at least a foundational capacity for ethical reflection and argumentation (Schröder-Bäck, 2014).

The development of health concepts in medicine addresses three main demands: comprehensive models, assessment of therapy influence, and evaluation of sustainability. Review articles present four families of health concepts: health as no disease, well-being, capacity/functioning, and adaptation/resilience. A concept of health, along with a construct and a measurement scale, is a valuable tool in medical research and healthcare (Lalumera, 2025).

The question of what constitutes health has been a longstanding focus of philosophical and practical debate: is health best understood as a state of the body, the mind, or both? Is it primarily a natural, biological condition, or is it a more holistic, value-laden state shaped by social and existential factors?

Philosophical perspectives on health have generally been divided into two broad camps: naturalistic and holistic, each offering distinct but complementary insights into the meaning of health and its implications for population wellbeing.

Naturalistic accounts, most prominently associated with thinkers such as Boorse (1997), conceptualise health in biological and physiological terms. From this standpoint, health is understood as the proper functioning of the body, a state that can be objectively measured, observed, and diagnosed with the aid of modern science and technology. This perspective underpins much of biomedicine and clinical public health, where health indicators such as blood pressure, disease incidence, or life expectancy are used as markers of population health. Its strength lies in providing tangible, quantifiable data that can be systematically tracked, compared, and acted upon through evidence-based interventions. However, its limitations become evident when health is reduced to what is measurable, often leaving out the lived experiences, values, and aspirations of individuals and communities.

In contrast, holistic views argue that health cannot be confined to biological parameters alone. Holistic philosophies emphasise value-laden dimensions such as vital goals, meaning, purpose, and the capacity to lead a fulfilling life. From this perspective, health is relational and contextual: it includes social connectedness, psychological well-being, environmental harmony, and cultural values. Holistic approaches underpin many global health frameworks that stress the social determinants of health, well-being, and quality of life, going beyond the biomedical model to recognise factors such as equity, justice, and human flourishing. While harder to measure with precision, this view highlights aspects of health that are essential for human dignity and social sustainability.

For public health policy and practice, the tension between naturalistic and holistic perspectives has significant implications. Policies grounded in the naturalistic model prioritise disease prevention, surveillance, and treatment, often relying heavily on biomedical interventions and technological innovation. While highly effective in controlling epidemics and improving survival, such approaches

may fall short in addressing inequalities, mental health, or the broader conditions that enable people to thrive. Holistic approaches, in contrast, push public health to integrate social policies, community participation, and value-based frameworks, recognising that health is as much about meaning and social justice as it is about biology.

Taken together, naturalistic and holistic perspectives reveal that health is both a measurable biological state and a lived human experience. Public health can be enriched by holding these perspectives in dialogue, combining the rigour of biomedical science with the insights of holistic, value-driven frameworks to advance more comprehensive, equitable, and human-centred health policies (Nordenfelt, 2007).

The health and philosophy are deeply interconnected, particularly through the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. Philosophical concepts like equanimity, detachment, self-realisation, and understanding the transient nature of suffering serve as mental and emotional tools that promote psychological well-being. These teachings help individuals develop resilience, emotional regulation, and a balanced perspective on life's challenges. The paper illustrates that philosophical insights from ancient texts can be practically applied in modern psychological practices, underscoring that philosophy offers foundational principles for maintaining mental health and fostering holistic well-being.

There are several philosophical approaches to mental well-being and health rooted in the teachings of the Buddha and Bhagavad Gita, which also find relevance in modern psychological theories. These approaches include:

- Equanimity (Samatva Bhava): This concept emphasises maintaining a stable and balanced state of mind amidst dualities such as joy and sorrow or success and failure. In the Gita, equanimity is considered essential for spiritual growth and inner peace. It aligns with the Buddhist concept of Upekkha, promoting wisdom and liberation, and correlates with modern psychological practices like Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) that encourage emotional stability through acceptance and mindfulness.

- Detachment (Vairagya): Detachment involves engaging with life and its challenges objectively without being overly identified with outcomes or material possessions. Krishna advocates for performing one's duty with detachment to develop mental resilience. In contemporary psychology, this approach parallels techniques like mindfulness and ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy), which teach individuals to observe their thoughts and feelings without attachment or judgment.

- Self-Realisation (Atma Jnana): The Gita highlights the importance of recognising and aligning with one's true self, which is distinct from social identity or superficial self-image. This approach encourages inner awareness and authentic selfhood, concepts that are emphasised in psychological theories by thinkers like Carl Jung and Maslow, who stress the significance of self-actualisation and understanding one's true nature for psychological wellbeing.

- Transient Nature of Suffering (Dukha): The understanding that suffering is temporary and ever-changing helps individuals cope with distress and reduces attachment to pain. Recognising the impermanent nature of suffering fosters resilience and acceptance, which are central ideas in both spiritual philosophy and modern stress and trauma therapies (Mittal, 2025).

Overall, these philosophical approaches advocate for mental resilience through inner stability, acceptance, authentic self-awareness, and understanding the fleeting nature of hardship principles that are highly relevant in contemporary mental health practices and overall well-being.

Philosophy in Practice: National Health Policy 2017

The National Health Policy 2017 combines naturalistic, holistic, and justice-based philosophies. Its foundation in equity and universality reflects egalitarian ethics, while its pluralist acceptance of medical systems illustrates cultural inclusivity. The rights-based orientation places health within a moral

and ethical framework of justice, not just service delivery. However, critics might argue that while the policy is philosophically rich, its translation into practice often falls short due to resource constraints, weak accountability mechanisms, and systemic inequalities. In essence, the policy reflects a blended philosophy: egalitarian in its vision, pluralist in its inclusiveness, humanistic in its patient focus, and ecological in its attention to determinants of health.

Philosophical Approaches in the Policy are;

Equity and Social Justice: The policy strongly reflects a justice-based philosophy, emphasising the reduction of disparities across gender, geography, socio-economic status, and marginalised groups. It views health not only as a biological need but as a matter of fairness and distributive justice, aligning with egalitarian and rights-based philosophies.

Universality and Inclusiveness: By advocating "universal access to good quality health care," the policy embodies a Universalist philosophy where health is a public good. This is rooted in the ideal of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family), reflecting holistic traditions that see health as interconnected with social and community wellbeing.

Patient-Centeredness and Autonomy: The commitment to making services responsive and patient-centric aligns with a humanistic and liberal philosophy. It foregrounds respect for individual autonomy, dignity, and participatory decision-making in health care.

Pluralism and Evidence-Informed Care: The policy acknowledges India's medical pluralism (allopathy, AYUSH, traditional practices), reflecting a pluralist and pragmatic philosophy. It respects cultural diversity in health care while also stressing evidence-based practice and integration of rationalist and contextual approaches.

Accountability and Transparency: Philosophically, this reflects contractarian and governance-based ethics: the state has obligations of accountability to its citizens. It echoes principles of social contract theory; citizens entrust the state to ensure their health rights are safeguarded.

Preventive and Holistic Orientation: The emphasis on prevention, wellness, and determinants of health (nutrition, sanitation, and environment) draws from a holistic and ecological philosophy. It is consistent with Gandhian ideals of self-reliance, community wellbeing, and balance between individual and collective health (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017).

Conclusion

Social philosophy remains a dynamic field, grappling with questions of social order, ethics, and collective life. It integrates normative and descriptive analysis, adapts to contemporary challenges, and continues to shape our understanding of society and its values. Philosophy of health is a dynamic field that interrogates the meaning, value, and practice of health. It moves beyond reductionist models, advocating for integrative, pluralistic, and context-sensitive frameworks that recognise the interplay of biological, psychological, social, and ethical factors. This philosophical inquiry is essential for shaping effective, equitable, and person-centred health care and policy.

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