

Families in Crisis: Marital Breakdown in India

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FAMILY HAS ALWAYS BEEN CENTRAL to Indian civilizational thinking, with its many elaborate customs, rules, and values. It has remained a highly esteemed and cherished institution throughout a long and complicated history across diverse geography, cultures, and peoples. Some of its distinctive Indian features include strong relational bonding within a joint family system; arranged marriages; high marital stability; a desire for children; greater intergenerational depth and interactions; and shared living arrangements, property, and religion.

However, families in India have undergone a dramatic transformation in the past two decades, far more than all the changes put together since India's independence in 1947. These changes are rattling the very core of Indian society and its national psyche. Since the opening of the Indian economy in the early 1990s, Indian families have experienced prosperity, mobility, Western cultural influence, demographic shift, prejudices, injustices, educational and economic disparities, media technologies, *etc.*, which have contributed to the undermining of the Indian family system in unpredictable ways.

In this paper, the authors analyze the growing trend of marital breakdown impacting contemporary families in India and identify some underlying grounds behind the rising social instability. This is not an exhaustive analysis of all issues related to marriage and family life in India,

but these findings are based upon extensive involvement of the authors with Indian families and built on input from many scholars, community and religious leaders in India, and the global Indian diaspora.

Family Breakdown: Rising Social Instability

Indian society is known for its traditional joint family system, which provided much order and stability to communities. The joint families would consist of many relatives living under one roof and sharing one kitchen and often a single bank account. Though it may trace its roots to Hindu heritage and the sacred institution of Indic society, the joint family system has been successfully adopted and adapted by other religions.

Though the traditional practice held families together, it is riddled with many problems and complexities. These rarely came out into the open because of the social stigma attached to family conflicts and separation. The patriarchal system was oppressive to women, who were confined to the four walls of their home, doing menial tasks without any major role in family decision-making. Clan elders were often biased and abusive toward women and children, and households were rife with in-law conflicts and even incest or sexual abuse. However, the family unit appeared intact, and individuals endured much pain and frustration without addressing or resolving real issues satisfactorily.

Upon independence, most Indians lived in villages; there were only a handful of cities. The changes of the last two decades brought about by industrialization, new social and economic policies, connectivity, mass media, and migration have led to massive demographic shifts.¹ This rapid urbanization has created many problems pertaining to housing, poverty, inequality, crime, sanitation, health, transportation, environmental degradation, pollution, and governance, all of which affect families adversely. It also led to the nuclearization of families and greater individualism by severing the age-old joint family system. As city life is more favorable to smaller nuclear units, urbanization stripped away familial support systems, and with them, family-based moral authority.

1. It is estimated that by the middle of this century over 814 million people will live in some 400 cities in India. See UN report on World Urbanization, 2014, available at <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/Publications/Files/WUP2014-Highlights.pdf>.

In the past divorce was unheard of in Indian society, but now marriage courts in India are flooded with divorce petitions. The divorce rate in India has exponentially increased in almost all regions and states. The incidence of marital separation, dissolution, or desertion have skyrocketed in recent decades, though it remains lower than in some Western nations. Some states, like Kerala, and cities like Kolkata have recorded an increase of 350% when compared to the divorce rates a decade ago.² Dowry-related harassment and deaths have risen sharply, and child marriages are still prevalent in some of parts of the country.

Of course, the nuclearization of the family exposed the shackles of the past and rigid authoritarian structures that forced couples to stay together in spite of domestic violence or gender-based exploitation. Though incidence of *sati* (the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband) has been nearly eradicated and there exists a more acceptable life beyond widowhood, the laws against dowry, as well as those protecting property ownership rights and economic interests of women, have all exposed evil practices long ingrained in Indian family life. At the same time, the new legal provisions of mutual consent, a more pleasure-seeking attitude, theories of individual happiness, and disregard for elders and social obligations have contributed to the rise of divorce.

Another major trend that is destructive to family life in India is the rise of cohabitation. The moral or societal inhibition toward cohabitation has disappeared fast among educated urban young adults. Relational and sexual exploration before and outside of marriage have impaired the sanctity and exclusivity of the marital relationship. Other trends closely related to divorce in India are the rise in remarriage, blended families, single parenting, non-marital childbearing, and delay in the marriage age for both men and women.

Factors at Work

There are many, many different factors contributing to family decline in India, most of which have been a contribution of increasing modernization and urbanization. These are examined at length below.

2. "Divorce Rate in India Increasing," IndiaFacts.in, January 5, 2015 (originally reported in the *Hindustan Times*).

Education: Increased educational opportunity has played a major role in changing family life in India. As Joseph George writes, “opportunities for formal education have drastically changed values, attitudes, relational patterns and their belief systems.”³ The prospect of employment and not having to depend on their husbands have given women greater boldness to break away from “repressive” marital unions. Social ostracization and stigma against divorcees have waned significantly among the educated urban populace. Education also provides social and economic mobility to both men and women, and it is common to see couples apart from each other and their children for prolonged periods of time on account of their professional aspirations.

Occupation and work culture: The new economic policies of the last two decades have established a robust middle class in India with ample opportunities for well-paid jobs. These careers have dramatically changed priorities towards careers, and people tend to pour heart and soul into work ceaselessly at the cost of family life. Many find primary emotional gratification from their jobs, titles, and pay package and neglect household relationships and responsibilities. Young people find themselves increasingly wealthy, but deprived of a normal family life and traditional caring responsibilities.⁴ Many work across time zones and cultures and are required to travel regularly within and outside of the country. They miss out on customary familial interactions and build their social, emotional and even sexual bonding with colleagues or others. Marital infidelity and workplace affairs have become common among this “generation of the night,” who are working for overseas clients during night shifts.

Wealth, Materialism, and Independence of Women: The recent economic surge has resulted in increased purchasing power and financial disparities in India. It adds undue pressure on young couples toward material accumulation and results in many financial rifts in their marriages. In spite of increased financial security in the current generation,

3. Joseph George, “The Changing Pattern of Family in India,” in *The Changing Pattern of the Family in India*, ed. P.D. Devanand and M.M. Thomas (Bangalore: CISRS, 2007), 24.

4. *Ibid.*

the physical, emotional, and psychological needs of the spouse and children are not adequately met. Taking advantage of this deprivation, advertisers of various products give material substitutes to human interactions, quality time, and mutually supportive living situations. George calls this the “commodification of family experience.”⁵ Huge salaries and corresponding debt, as outsized purchasing has increased, have caused dual-income couples to keep their individual accounts separate. This growing individualistic attitude and newfound economic freedom—especially for women—have contributed to the growing setback in familial culture.

Inter-Caste, Inter-Faith, and Inter-Ethnic Marriages: Traditionally, marriages in India occurred strictly within language, caste, and religious lines. But in recent years, due to closer interactions with people unlike themselves, more young people are marrying someone outside of their own religious, caste, or ethnic groups than ever before. This is leading to the breakdown of age-old conventions, and these couples remain outside the influence of social norms, family elders, and religious orders. This trend cannot be fully understood unless one considers the confusion, friction, rejection, anger, and indifference encountered in the processes of entering into such intercultural marital relationships.

Media and Technology: Mass media and technology have affected Indian families in a significant manner. Television, computers, Internet, and mobile phones have become part of normal life. Children are exposed to illicit materials at a younger age. With more parents working long hours, television, Internet, and mobile phones are replacing quality time and human interactions. Mobile phones have aided many a marital breakdown with constant messages and phone calls that keep people from spending quality time with their family.

Growing Promiscuity: Sex was a taboo topic in India for generations. It was considered to be strictly private and for procreative purposes within the confines of a marriage relationship. All that has changed dramatically

5. *Ibid.*, 27.

in recent decades. There is a lack of research or reliable figures in regard to sexual behaviors, as the Indian people are reluctant to admit or publically share their sexual experiences. But anecdotal observation reveals greatly changed attitudes. Sexual fantasies are fanned these days by adult literature, movies, and online content, which are all easily accessible. Though men consume more of these sexual materials, women increasingly partake as well. As a result, premarital sexual activities are more common among college students and young adults. There is not much objection to causal flirtation with colleagues or a visit to strip clubs after school or work.

With high smartphone use and cheap data rates, Indian porn consumption is one of the highest in the world. The distribution of obscenity and pornographic materials is technically illegal in India. Child pornography and the sale of obscene objects to minors are also illegal. But accessing obscene content privately is not illegal. When the Indian government tried to ban hardcore porn sites recently, protests and media uproar forced a rollback of the ban within a week.⁶ This shows the levels of consumption of hardcore porn by Indian society.

Growing promiscuity among the young and many other related issues such as abortions, domestic violence, alcoholism and other substance abuse, pornography, single parenting, *etc.* have had a direct impact on the health of families. But in spite of such problems, India is still a very shame-driven culture, which keeps struggling families from seeking any help or professional counseling.

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The strange paradox of embracing modernity came with the disintegration of strong kinship bonds and a centuries-old culture of familism. India may be trailing still in some of these dramatic social transformations, but changes that occurred in the West over nearly a century are taking place within a matter of a couple of decades in India. These sudden developments are sending major shockwaves to social and religious

6. Ivana Kottasova, "India Reverses Ban on Pornography Websites," *CNN Money*, August 6, 2015, available at <http://money.cnn.com/2015/08/05/news/india-porn-ban-reversed/>.

institutions, which are reeling under their negative impacts and wondering how to address these new realities of a new world.

One of the ways to combat the crisis at a grassroots level is for pro-family institutions and major religious bodies to uphold a healthy family culture. Due to strong religious sentiments, the Indian people are still inclined to give heed to such institutional leaders, who must maintain high moral ground to counter the disintegration of families. Family life educators should teach ways to combat forces that are undermining families through systematic teaching to the young as well as adults at schools, colleges, and workplaces. These long-term intentional efforts are the only way to combat the crisis of families in India.

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