

An Analytical Review on the Silent Revolution in Family Structure and Rising Trend of Divorce and its Impact on Children in India

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Abstract: In recent decades, India has witnessed remarkable transformation in the family structure from the traditional family structure to the modern family structure. Due to the effect of colonial intervention, the deeply rooted family system has been shaken leading to shift of family structure from joint family structure to nuclear family structure. The spread of Western values in Indian family structure led to transition in the tradition, culture and moral values. Factors such as urbanization, industrialization, globalization, technological developments, etc., led to changing norms and roles in the family structures. This paper tried to analytically review literatures on the factors leading to divorce and its impact on children development. The literature reviewed clearly shows that divorce in India is a complex and multidimensional social issue. It cannot be attributed to a single cause. Changes in women's education and employment, economic independence, urbanization, migration and family structures have changed the way people view marriage.

Keywords: Family transformation, divorce rate, impact of divorce, child development

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I. Introduction

In recent decades, India has witnessed remarkable transformation in the family structure from the traditional family structure to the modern family structure. Due to the effect of colonial intervention, the deeply rooted family system has been shaken leading to shift of family structure from joint family structure to nuclear family structure. The spread of Western values in Indian family structure led to transition in the tradition, culture and moral values. Factors such as urbanization, industrialization, globalization, technological developments, etc., led to changing norms and roles in the family structures. Change in the norms and rules in family are not just a result of dynamic socio-economic and legal changes but also due to growing needs of individual interdependence and economic independence. But nuclear family system lacks elders support and guidance which is available in joint family system, thereby leading to numerous problems and resulting in the dissolution of marriages which further affects societal family well-being. One of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), i.e., goal 3 focuses on promoting family well-being and good health, as families play a crucial role in health and well-being of all the members which is vital for better productivity and output of the citizens.

Since ancient times, social structure of India was rich in terms of traditional norms and culture, and marriages were considered sacred sacrament and a vital social institution, whereas, divorces were generally discouraged and very rare. However, in present context, families in contemporary India are exposed to dynamic and unprecedented transformation in cultural values, leading to evolving family structures, urban migration, etc. Due to widespread societal transformation brought about by urbanization and industrialization, India has experienced increased in divorce rates over the past decades. Silent transformation of family structure has various positive and negative effects on the society and the individuals, viz., access to greater financial stability, scope of dual income in the family, individual freedom, personal space, etc. are the positive impacts of transformation in family structure. However, negative effects of family transformation such as, increase in stress level of the children, isolation, depression, increase in divorce rates, increased burden on women, etc. greatly affect today's family structure. As per census 2011, there has been sharp decline in joint family system, thereby reflecting shift in family structure from traditional joint family system to nuclear family system. This change in family structure is prevalent in all states of India in various intensity. Thus, this paper aimed at studying the factors responsible for increase in Indivorce rates by systematic reviewing of literatures. Also this paper aimed at studying the impact of divorces on children and their development.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To study the factors leading to increase in the number of divorces.
2. To study the impact of divorces on children and their development.

Methodology:

This study aimed at highlighting the significance of societal transformation family structure, rising trend of divorce and economic shifts in India. Qualitative method by systematic literature review (SLR) was set up in order to present a complete and recent overview of empirical studies published in the last 15 years.

II. Results and Discussions

Literature Reviews on Factors Leading to Divorces

Lee and McLanahan 2015, studied the impact of transformation of family structure on child development. They undertook an interesting study where the causal effect of family instability on child's outcome has been studied. Their study used child's Fixed Effect Model (FEM) to evaluate the effect of family instability. Using Marginal Structure Model (MSM) child's experience with respect to family instability and prior history affecting child have been evaluated. Their study found that family structure instability has a negative effect on children's cognitive and socioemotional development during early to middle childhood. Similar study was undertaken by Gupta 2016, where mentioned urbanization and migration have been mentioned as the major drivers of transformation of Indian family structures. The study was descriptive in nature and gave a general overview of historical shifts, socio-economic factors, gender factors, etc. The study was entirely based on the literature review and could be better supported by facts to support the study strongly.

Dommaraju 2016, studied on contextualization of key aspects of marriage in India and analysed socio-cultural and legal systems that influence durability of marriages in India. The study found variations in the divorce rate across country due to variations in kingship, culture and marriage system in India. To investigate the impact of social change on success rate of rate, the author used education as a broad measure for the time period 1987 to 2007. Results showed an increasing rise in the rate of divorce and the degree varies according to region, religion, rural and urban, and number and sex of children in divorce and separation. Also, it has been found that marriage among educated women is more successful than women with less education.

Gupta (2016) examined the changing nature of family structures in India and identified urbanization and migration as two major factors contributing to these changes. The study provided a descriptive overview of the historical transformation of Indian families, along with the socio-economic and gender-related factors influencing this process. However, the study was primarily based on a review of existing literature and therefore lacked sufficient empirical evidence to establish the strength and nature of these relationships. The inclusion of supporting statistical data and field-based evidence could have made the findings more convincing.

Vincent and Mellow (2018) explored the changing pattern of divorce in India and discussed several social and economic factors associated with marital breakdown. According to their study, increasing women's empowerment and changing expectations within marriage may contribute to marital incompatibility and, consequently, rising divorce rates. The authors also observed that childless couples may be more vulnerable to divorce because children can strengthen the emotional and social bond between spouses. Their findings indicated that women constituted a slightly higher proportion of those seeking divorce than men. The study further suggested that greater access to education, employment and financial independence enables both partners to make independent decisions about ending an unsuccessful marriage. However, although the study discussed changing divorce patterns, the evidence was based on data from a limited period and therefore did not provide a sufficiently long-term assessment of divorce trends in India.

Chakravorty, Goli and James (2021) examined emerging patterns of family demography in India and discussed the factors associated with changes in marriage and family structures. Results revealed that urbanization, industrialization, increasing educational attainment, women's empowerment and female labour-force participation as important factors behind changing patterns of marital dissolution. Greater education and employment can enhance women's economic independence and provide them with greater agency in making decisions about their personal and family lives.

Sahoo, Pradhan, Alagarajan, Sharma and Das (2025) found that urban women were more likely to experience marital dissolution and that the risk was higher among poorer and childless women. Their study highlighted factors such as infertility, poverty, child marriage, differences in educational attainment between spouses, urbanization and spousal violence as significant risk factors. The study is particularly important because it demonstrates that divorce and separation are not caused by a single factor but result from the interaction of demographic, economic, educational and interpersonal circumstances.

Thodukayil, Palaniswamy and Kunjumon (2026) conducted a systematic review of research on the causes of divorce in India and its consequences for women. The authors reviewed 22 scholarly studies, they identified domestic violence, dowry-related problems, patriarchal control and communication breakdown as major factors associated with marital dissolution. The review suggested that violence and harassment within marriage can create severe emotional and psychological distress and may ultimately make continuation of the marriage difficult. Dowry-related conflicts also remain an important concern in some marriages, particularly where demands from the husband or his family are not fulfilled.

Literate Reviews on Impact of Divorce on Children and their Development

Brennan and Shaver (1993) studied the long-term relationship between parental divorce and emotional security. They found that adults who had experienced their parents' divorce during childhood were more likely to feel insecure in their personal and interpersonal relationships than those who had grown up with both parents in an intact family. Their findings suggest that separation of parents during childhood may influence a child's emotional development and may continue to affect their ability to trust and build stable relationships later in life. The absence of one parent and the changes that follow divorce can create feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. However, the effects of parental divorce are not the same for everyone, and other studies have reported different findings.

For example, Hazelton, Lancee and O'Neil (1998) found no significant difference in emotional security between adults who came from divorced families and those who grew up in intact families. This finding suggests that parental divorce does not automatically lead to long-term emotional problems. The way children respond to divorce may depend on several circumstances, such as the quality of parenting after separation, the level of conflict between parents, emotional support from family and friends, financial conditions and the child's ability to adjust to the changes. The different findings reported by Brennan and Shaver (1993) and Hazelton et al. (1998) therefore show that the relationship between parental divorce and emotional development is complex. Family structure alone may not be sufficient to explain the long-term effects of divorce.

Mattoo and Ashai (2012) examined the different changes that adolescents experience following parental separation or divorce. They pointed out that divorce does not simply mean that parents live separately; it can also bring significant changes to an adolescent's daily life. For example, one parent may leave the family home, the child may have to move to another residence or change schools, daily routines may be disrupted, and the child may have to adjust to a new parenting arrangement. At the same time, parents themselves may experience stress and emotional difficulties, which can affect their ability to provide adequate support to their children. These sudden changes may cause adolescents to feel confused, angry, lonely, isolated or even responsible for their parents' separation. If such feelings continue without proper support, they may result in behavioural and emotional problems. Some adolescents may become withdrawn, anxious or depressed, while others may show anger, aggression or disobedience. They may also avoid meeting the non-custodial parent or experience difficulties in their academic performance. The study therefore highlights that the effects of divorce should be understood in terms of the wider changes it brings to an adolescent's family, school and social environment.

Ramachandrapa (2012) focused on the emotional difficulties faced by children after parental divorce. The study found that children may experience considerable emotional pain because of the absence of one parent from their everyday lives. When regular interaction with a parent is reduced, children may feel lonely, rejected, insecure and uncertain about their future. They may also find it difficult to understand why their family has changed and may sometimes blame themselves for the separation. These feelings can become stronger when children have little contact or communication with the non-custodial parent. The study therefore emphasizes that children need continued emotional support, care and reassurance from both parents and other family members following divorce. Proper counselling and a supportive family environment can also help children adjust to the changes associated with parental separation.

Kumar (2011) examined the emotional experiences of adolescents following parental divorce. The study highlighted that adolescents may experience a deep sense of loss when their parents separate. During adolescence, young people are already going through important emotional and social changes, and the breakdown of their family structure can make this period more difficult. Adolescents may mourn not only the separation of their parents but also the loss of the family life they had previously considered normal and secure. Kumar particularly emphasized the loss of regular contact with the non-custodial parent, who is often the father. Reduced interaction with the father may result in feelings of loneliness, sadness, anger and insecurity. These experiences may also shape adolescents' understanding of marriage, family relationships and trust in the future. Thus, the study shows that the impact of parental divorce can extend beyond the immediate period of separation and may influence adolescents' emotional adjustment and their perceptions of family and relationships.

Shentar and Bhatt (2023) examined the impact of divorce on children, families and society in India. Their study highlighted that parental separation can affect children of different age groups and may influence their emotional, behavioural, academic and social development. Children who regularly witness conflict between their parents may develop emotional difficulties and may eventually begin to consider quarrelling and conflict as normal features of family life. The study also suggested that children who grow up in separated or broken families may face a higher risk of experiencing marital difficulties in their own adult lives. Apart from emotional problems, parental divorce may negatively affect children's academic performance, mental well-being and ability to develop healthy social relationships. The authors also discussed the wider consequences of divorce for families and society. However, the study was largely based on existing literature rather than detailed empirical evidence. A study using primary data, larger samples and systematic statistical analysis could provide stronger evidence regarding the actual impact of divorce on children, families and society.

Aneesh and Sriram (2025) examined the impact of parental divorce on adolescents in Kerala. Their study found that parental separation can have significant consequences for adolescents' academic performance, emotional well-being and social relationships. Divorce was associated with problems such as depression, anxiety, insecurity and conflicts with peers. The researchers studied 20 adolescents aged 17–18 years whose parents were divorced and assessed them using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), a tool designed to measure emotional difficulties, behavioural problems and social competencies among young people. The findings indicated differences in the way boys and girls responded to parental separation. Adolescent boys were more likely to express emotional distress externally, sometimes resulting in aggressive behaviour, conflicts with classmates and other confrontational situations. Although the study provides useful insights into the experiences of adolescents following parental divorce, its small sample size limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the wider adolescent population.

Aneesh and Sriram in 2025 studied the impact of divorce on adolescents in Kereal. Their study revealed both positive and negative changes in emotions, psychological functioning, and behavioral issues. Immediately after the divorce, families reported more negative feelings and experiences. It has been found that some of the individuals have tried to cope up with this issue by thinking positive aspects of it. Some of the children revealed that they miss their non-custodian parent and some expressed their anger towards them. There are some of the respondents who have been claimed that they started to feel that more responsibilities are entrusted on them.

Overall, the reviewed studies indicate that changes in family structure, marital instability and divorce can have significant consequences for children, adolescents and families. The existing literature highlights the roles of urbanization, migration, education, women's empowerment, economic independence and changing social values in shaping family relationships.

III. Discussion

The existing literature showed that divorce in India is not caused by one particular factor. It is the result of a combination of economic, social, cultural, demographic and personal circumstances. The traditional Indian family system has changed considerably over the years due to urbanization, migration, higher levels of education, women's employment, financial independence and changing attitudes towards marriage. These changes have influenced how people understand marital relationships and have also made individuals more willing and able to leave marriages that are unhappy or difficult to sustain.

One of the major factors discussed in the literature is the changing position of women in Indian society. Increased access to education, employment and financial resources has given women greater independence and a stronger voice in family decisions. Education can also raise expectations about equality, respect, companionship and shared responsibilities between husbands and wives. When these expectations are not met, women may be more willing to consider separation or divorce, particularly when they have the financial ability to support themselves. However, women's education and empowerment should not be considered direct causes of divorce. Rather, they give women greater freedom to make decisions about their own lives and reduce their dependence on an unhappy or abusive marriage.

Urbanization and changes in family structure have also influenced marital relationships. The shift from joint families to nuclear families, migration for employment and geographical mobility can reduce the support traditionally provided by extended family members. At the same time, urban areas often expose individuals to changing social values and greater acceptance of personal choice. As a result, attitudes towards marriage, separation and divorce may differ between urban and rural populations. The literature also shows that divorce patterns vary across regions, religions and cultural groups, indicating that social and cultural conditions continue to play an important role in marital stability.

However, changes in education, employment and urbanization alone cannot explain the increasing concern about marital breakdown. Problems within the marriage itself are equally important. Domestic violence, dowry-related disputes, substance abuse, extramarital relationships, poor communication, lack of mutual understanding and incompatibility between spouses are frequently identified as reasons for marital conflict. Continuous arguments, interference from family members and unrealistic expectations from either partner can gradually weaken the relationship. Infertility and childlessness may also create pressure on couples, particularly in a social environment where having children is often considered an important part of married life.

The effects of divorce are not limited to the husband and wife. Children are often among those most affected by changes in family structure. The literature suggests that children and adolescents may experience emotional difficulties when their parents separate, especially when the divorce is accompanied by frequent conflict, relocation, changes in school or disruption of their normal daily routine. They may feel sad, confused, angry, lonely or insecure. Some children may even blame themselves for their parents' separation. While some children become quiet and withdrawn, others may express their distress through aggression, disobedience or other behavioural problems.

The absence or reduced involvement of one parent can further increase these difficulties. Children may feel a strong sense of loss when they no longer have regular contact with the non-custodial parent. This can be particularly challenging during adolescence, a period when young people need emotional guidance, support and stability. However, the literature also shows that parental divorce does not affect every child in the same way. The quality of parenting after divorce, the level of conflict between parents, financial security, emotional support and continued contact with both parents can significantly influence how well children adjust to the new family situation.

Divorce can also affect children's education and social development. Emotional stress and changes in residence or school may make it difficult for children to concentrate on their studies. Some may experience a decline in academic performance or have difficulty maintaining relationships with friends and classmates. Continued exposure to parental conflict may also shape the way children understand marriage and family relationships. In some cases, children who grow up in unstable family environments may develop insecurity in their own relationships later in life. However, these outcomes are not unavoidable. A stable home environment, supportive parenting and proper emotional care can help children overcome many of the difficulties associated with parental separation.

An important point emerging from the literature is that the circumstances surrounding divorce may be as important as the divorce itself. For example, children may sometimes adjust better to a peaceful separation than to living in a household where they are continuously exposed to serious parental conflict. Similarly, parents who cooperate after divorce and continue to provide emotional support can reduce many of the negative effects on their children. Therefore, research should not focus only on whether parents are divorced or married. It should also examine the quality of family relationships before and after divorce.

The review also highlights some important limitations in existing research. Several studies are descriptive or depend mainly on previously published literature, while some empirical studies are based on relatively small samples. There is also a shortage of long-term studies that follow children over several years to understand how they adjust to parental divorce. Moreover, the experience of divorce may differ according to a child's age, gender, family income, place of residence and relationship with each parent. Extensive research is therefore needed to understand these differences and to identify the factors that help children cope successfully with parental separation.

IV. Conclusion

The literature reviewed clearly shows that divorce in India is a complex and multidimensional social issue. It cannot be attributed to a single cause. Changes in women's education and employment, economic independence, urbanization, migration and family structures have changed the way people view marriage. At the same time, domestic violence, dowry-related problems, substance abuse, infidelity, communication difficulties, incompatibility, infertility, childlessness and financial problems can create serious tensions within marriage and may eventually lead to separation or divorce.

The consequences of divorce are particularly important when children are involved. Parental separation can affect children's emotional health, behaviour, education, social relationships and understanding of family life. Feelings of insecurity, loneliness, sadness, anger and loss may arise, particularly when children lose regular contact with one of their parents. Changes in residence, school and everyday routines can add to their emotional difficulties. Nevertheless, divorce does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes for every child. Children's ability to adjust depends greatly on the way parents handle the separation, the level of conflict between them, financial stability, emotional support and continued involvement of both parents.

Thus, divorce should not be understood simply as the legal ending of a marriage. It is a major family and social transition that can affect the lives and development of children as well as the individuals involved in the marriage. Efforts should therefore focus not only on reducing unnecessary marital conflict but also on supporting families when separation becomes unavoidable. Counselling, child-focused support, cooperative parenting arrangements, psychological assistance through schools and financial support for vulnerable families can help children adjust to changes in their family environment.

The review also points to the need for more detailed empirical research on divorce in India. Future studies should use larger and more representative samples and, wherever possible, follow families over a longer period to understand the lasting effects of divorce. Researchers should also examine differences based on age, gender, socio-economic background, rural and urban residence, region and the quality of relationships between parents and children. Such research can provide a clearer understanding of both the factors responsible for marital breakdown and the consequences of divorce for children's development. The findings can also help policymakers, educators, counsellors and family-support organizations develop more effective measures to protect children's well-being during and after parental separation.

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