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**CHANGING TRENDS IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM OF  
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF  
INDIA'S TRANSFORMATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Indian family, traditionally idealized as a multigenerational joint unit bound by kinship, collectivism, and filial piety, is undergoing profound transformation in contemporary society. This article examines the multifaceted changes reshaping family structures across urban and rural India, drawing on recent empirical research and demographic data. Analysis reveals four interconnected trends: the numerical decline in household size from 4.8 to 4.4 members between 2015-2024; the emergence of diverse family forms including single-person households and multi-locational families driven by circular migration; significant gender role realignment as women gain economic independence while still underrepresented as primary earners; and the reconfiguration of intergenerational relationships as adult children migrate for work. These changes carry profound implications for legal systems, social policy, and individual well-being. The article argues that India is witnessing not simply the “breakdown” of the traditional family but rather its complex reconfiguration into pluralistic forms that reflect broader economic liberalization, urbanization, and cultural globalization while retaining distinctively Indian adaptations.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian family, household structure, demographic transition, gender roles, intergenerational relations, migration, urbanization.

## INTRODUCTION

In every civilization, the family has been recognized as the fundamental institution of society—the link to “our past and a bridge to our future,” as Supreme Court Justice B. V. Nagarathna recently observed (The Hindu, 2025). For generations, the Indian imagination has been dominated by an archetypal image: the joint family, where several generations live together under one roof, sharing resources, responsibilities, and rituals. This idealized form of the family, although never common to all, has had an enormous cultural impact, influencing everything from matrimonial ads to housing policies, from movie plots to laws. However, beneath the surface of this long-held ideal, seismic changes are taking place. The Indian family of the twenty-first century is rapidly becoming less like its mid-twentieth-century counterpart. These transformations are not simply superficial changes but radical transformations in the way Indians live, love, work, and care for each other across generations. They are a part of, and an interpretation of, the larger changes taking place in the Indian economy, polity, and culture—the liberalization that began in 1991, the pace of urbanization that has altered the settlement patterns of the country, and the communications revolution that has brought even the remotest villages into the global stream of information and desire.

Understanding these changes is not merely an academic exercise. As Justice Nagarathna emphasizes, the transformation of the family carries profound implications for the legal system, which must adjudicate new forms of dispute arising from novel family configurations (The Hindu, 2025). It matters for policymakers designing social welfare programs, for businesses marketing products and services, for educators preparing children for diverse family experiences, and for every Indian navigating the sometimes turbulent waters of changing family expectations.

## Literature Review

### A) Theoretical Perspectives on Family Change

The study of family transformation in India has been approached through multiple theoretical lenses. Modernization theory, influential in mid-twentieth-century scholarship, posited a unilinear movement from joint to nuclear families as societies industrialized and urbanized (Goode, 1963). This perspective, while identifying important trends, has been critiqued for its oversimplification and Western-centric assumptions. Subsequent scholarship has emphasized the persistence of kinship ties even when families adopt nuclear living arrangements, giving

rise to concepts such as the “modified extended family” (Litwak, 1960) and “federated joint families” (Shah, 1998). Feminist scholarship has fundamentally reshaped understanding of family dynamics by foregrounding gender as an organizing principle of family life. Researchers have documented how patriarchal norms structure intra-household resource allocation, decision-making, and care responsibilities (Dreze & Sen, 1995; Agarwal, 1997). This literature has been crucial in revealing the family not as a harmonious unit of shared interests but as a site of negotiation, conflict, and inequality.

Political economy approaches have situated family change within broader transformations in India's economic structure. Scholars have examined how economic liberalization, labor market restructuring, and migration patterns reshape family strategies and relationships (Bremar, 1996; Deshingkar & Start, 2003). This literature emphasizes the family's role as a risk-pooling institution in contexts where state-provided social protection remains limited.

### **B) Empirical Research on Indian Family Change**

Empirical research on Indian family structure has documented significant transformations over recent decades. Analysis of National Family Health Survey data from 1992-2006 found that nuclear households increased by nine percentage points over that fourteen-year period (ScienceDirect, 2016). More recent data from the People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) indicates that this trend has continued, with average household size declining from 4.8 members in 2015-16 to 4.4 members in 2023-24 (Shukla, 2025). Research on migration has revealed its profound implications for family structure.

Nijman, van Duijne, and Choithani (2025) document the emergence of “permanent circular labor migration,” where workers reside away from villages for nine to eleven months annually over many years. Debnath and Nayak (2025) found that 29% of older parents in rural West Bengal lived alone or only with a spouse, rising to 37% among parents of migrants, challenging assumptions about multigenerational co-residence in later life. Studies of gender dynamics within families have documented both change and continuity. While women's educational attainment and workforce participation have increased, only 13% of Indian households identify a woman as the principal earner (Shukla, 2025). Research on fatherhood suggests evolving patterns of involvement in caregiving, though these changes remain uneven and contested (Trivedi, 2025; Jacob, 2025).

### **C) Gaps in Existing Literature**

Despite valuable contributions, existing literature exhibits several gaps. First, research has tended to focus on either demographic trends or qualitative dimensions of family change, with insufficient integration of these approaches. Second, the implications of family

transformation for legal systems and social policy remain underexplored, despite recognition that these domains must adapt to changing family realities (The Hindu, 2025). Third, emerging family forms—single-person households, same-sex families, multi-locational arrangements—have received limited empirical attention. This article addresses these gaps by synthesizing diverse evidence and examining implications across multiple domains.

## METHODOLOGY

### 1) Research Design

This article employs a comprehensive literature review and secondary data analysis approach to examine changing trends in the Indian family system. The research design synthesizes findings from multiple sources, including demographic surveys, ethnographic studies, policy analyses, and legal scholarship. This approach enables triangulation of evidence across methods and disciplines, providing a more complete picture of family transformation than any single study could offer.

### 2) Data Sources: Data were drawn from the following sources

- **Demographic surveys:** National Family Health Survey rounds (1992-2021); People Research on India's Consumer Economy (PRICE) household survey data (2015-2024); Census of India publications.
- **Peer-reviewed research:** Studies published in academic journals examining family structure, migration, gender relations, and intergenerational dynamics in contemporary India.
- **Legal and policy documents:** Judicial decisions, legislative materials, and policy reports addressing family-related matters.
- **Media sources:** Reports from reputable news organizations providing contemporary illustrations of family change.

### 3) Analytical Approach

Analysis proceeded through multiple stages. First, demographic indicators were extracted from survey data to establish quantitative trends in household size, composition, and economic organization. Second, qualitative findings from ethnographic and interview-based studies were analyzed to understand meanings, experiences, and negotiations underlying aggregate patterns. Third, legal and policy materials were examined to assess institutional responses to family change. Fourth, findings were synthesized across domains to identify overarching themes and implications.

#### 4) Limitations

This study has several limitations. Secondary data analysis is constrained by the categories and questions employed in original data collection. Demographic surveys may not adequately capture emerging family forms. Qualitative studies, while providing depth, may not be generalizable across India's diverse regions and communities. The rapid pace of change means that findings require ongoing updating. Despite these limitations, the synthesis approach employed here provides valuable insights into contemporary family transformation.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A) Demographic Transformations: The Shrinking Household

Perhaps the most visible indicator of family change in India is the steady decline in household size. According to data from PRICE, the average Indian household has shrunk from 4.8 members in 2015-16 to 4.4 members in 2023-24 (Shukla, 2025). This numerical decline, while seemingly modest, masks a more profound structural transformation: the joint family system, long considered the bedrock of Indian society, is progressively yielding to nuclear arrangements, which are in turn giving way to two-member and even single-person households, particularly in urban areas (Shukla, 2025). This demographic shift reflects the convergence of multiple factors. With declining fertility rates, there are fewer children per family, which directly affects the size of the family. With increased life expectancy, there are more generations living at the same time, but this does not necessarily mean that there is joint living among the generations. Changing cultural values have reduced the stigma associated with living alone or in small family units.

Rapid urbanization, with its associated housing shortages and employment patterns, leads to the physical separation of family members who would otherwise live together. The importance of these trends is seen when they are considered over time. Studies that considered the National Family Health Survey data from 1992 to 2006 indicated that the nuclear family rose by nine percentage points over the fourteen-year period (ScienceDirect, 2016). This trend has almost certainly continued and accelerated since then, indicating that the nuclear family has become not only an alternative to joint living but the norm for large portions of the population. Importantly, this trend is not experienced in the same way across all portions of society. Households containing older members are slightly less likely to be nuclear than the average household, reflecting the continued attractiveness of intergenerational joint living in old age

### **B) Economic Transformation: From Single to Multiple Earners**

The shrinking of Indian households has not, counterintuitively, led to a decline in income generation. Conversely, almost half (48%) of Indian households now have multiple earners, and this number is 62% for the wealthiest fifth (Shukla, 2025). This is a paradigm shift in the family economy structure in India. There are several reasons for this multi-earner phenomenon. Women's participation in the workforce, although limited by several factors, is up. Offspring are contributing to the family income instead of forming independent economic units. The rise of gig economy and informal economy means that families have to piece together income from various sources to make ends meet (Shukla, 2025). Families are now managing their income like a portfolio, spreading the risk of economic uncertainty by diversifying their income sources.

But this is a quantitative change that hides qualitative aspects. Households with only one earner report average annual incomes of ₹2.5 lakh, while those with three or more earners report incomes upwards of ₹8.3 lakh (Shukla, 2025). This disparity reflects not merely differences in the number of earners but in the quality of employment they can access. In lower-income quintiles, multiple earners are typically engaged in insecure, low-paying informal work. In the top quintile, households benefit from stable formal employment with access to financial services and social protection. This bifurcation points to a crucial dimension of family change: the family's economic role as a risk-pooling institution becomes more important precisely as the risks households face become more acute. In the absence of robust public support systems—affordable healthcare, comprehensive pensions, subsidized childcare—the family remains the primary shock absorber for economic volatility. Yet this very function may be undermined by the demographic changes that reduce the number of family members available to share risks.

### **C) Gender and the Remaking of Family Roles**

Perhaps nowhere are changes in the Indian family more profound—or more contested—than in the realm of gender relations. The traditional Indian family was organized around clearly demarcated gender roles: men as breadwinners and public-facing representatives, women as homemakers and caregivers, with authority flowing along generational and gender hierarchies. This model, while never static or universally experienced, provided the normative template against which family life was measured. Contemporary India presents a far more complex picture. Women's educational attainment has surged, their workforce participation has increased (though with significant fluctuations), and their aspirations have

expanded dramatically. These changes inevitably reshape family dynamics. As Supreme Court Justice Nagarathna observes, the socio-economic liberation of women through education and employment must be viewed positively—such women contribute not only to family well-being but to the nation itself (The Hindu, 2025).

Yet the gap between changing realities and entrenched attitudes creates friction. Despite rising female labor force participation, only 13% of Indian households identify a woman as the principal earner—a figure even lower among poorer households (Shukla, 2025). This persistent disparity reflects entrenched gender norms, limited access to quality jobs, systemic wage inequalities, occupational segregation, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work that continues to fall on women. The tension is vividly illustrated in everyday interactions. When Bollywood actress Sushmita Sen's father jokingly suggested she learn to cook as “a girl must know how,” her response captured a generational shift in expectations: “I'm going to work and afford a cook” (Jacob, 2025). This anecdote, seemingly trivial, encapsulates a profound realignment of assumptions about gender, work, and domesticity. As clinical psychologist Juslin Jacob notes, such micro-gestures—sharing chores, encouraging daughters' ambitions, using inclusive language—cumulatively challenge deep-rooted stereotypes and lay foundations for more equitable futures (Jacob, 2025).

Men's roles are transforming alongside women's. Indian fatherhood is shifting from the traditional model of distant authority figure to more involved caregiver and partner. Fathers increasingly participate in daily routines—storytelling, diaper-changing, schoolwork assistance—that were once considered maternal preserves. They provide emotional support to children and partners, share household management responsibilities, and take on caregiving for aging parents (Trivedi, 2025). This evolution reflects growing awareness of emotional well-being and a redefinition of masculinity itself. Yet these changes are neither uniform nor uncontested. Traditional elders may question why a man is cooking or taking paternity leave (Trivedi, 2025). Men themselves may struggle with conflicting expectations, silently carrying the burden of being provider, caring husband, responsible son, and loving parent without feeling comfortable discussing the resulting stress. The transformation of gender roles within families is thus an uneven, sometimes painful process of negotiation between generations and between partners.

#### **D) Migration and the Multi-Locational Family**

One of the most significant yet underappreciated dimensions of family change in contemporary India is the rise of what demographers term “multi-locational families”—

households whose members are physically dispersed across space while maintaining economic and emotional connections. Migration, both internal and international, has reshaped the lived experience of family for millions of Indians. Research by Nijman, van Duijne, and Choithani (2025) reveals the profound social ramifications of changing migration patterns in rural India. Traditionally, circular migration was short-term and tied to the agricultural off-season: migrants would leave for three to six months, earn supplemental cash, and return in time for the next sowing. Contemporary patterns are markedly different. “Permanent circular labor migration” involves migrants residing away from their villages for nine to eleven months annually, often for many consecutive years, returning only for major festivals, weddings, or family obligations (Nijman et al., 2025).

This shift has produced a fundamental reorganization of rural family life. Migrant workers experience a structural separation from the households that remain in villages. Remittances replace local farm earnings as the household's primary income source. Women whose husbands migrate long-term often gain greater autonomy, power, and responsibilities in managing household affairs—a change that can be both empowering and burdensome (Nijman et al., 2025). The implications for the older parents who are left behind are of particular importance. In rural West Bengal, 29% of older parents lived alone or with a spouse only, increasing to 37% for parents of migrants (Debnath & Nayak, 2025). Parents with sons who were migrants were particularly likely to live alone or with spouses only, reflecting the out-migration of those very children who would otherwise be caring for them (Debnath & Nayak, 2025). This goes against the traditional ideals of filial piety, in which the younger generation takes care of their aging parents.

Notably, economic considerations play a mediating role in these results. Farmland-owning parents are less likely to live alone or with spouses only, indicating that property ownership allows for the co-residence of multiple generations (Debnath & Nayak, 2025). However, even when co-residence is no longer possible, older parents may choose to consider their children's welfare over their own comfort, separating themselves due to concerns about financial limitations and their children's prospects. The concept of “federated joint families” captures the complexity of these arrangements. Families that appear nuclear in their day-to-day living arrangements may remain deeply interconnected through remittance flows, regular communication, shared property ownership, and mutual obligations activated during crises or celebrations. The joint family does not so much disappear as reconfigure itself across physical space.

### **E) Emerging Family Forms: Beyond the Nuclear-Joint Binary**

As the preceding discussion suggests, the traditional binary between joint and nuclear families increasingly fails to capture the diversity of Indian family experiences. Contemporary India is witnessing the emergence of family forms that defy easy categorization. Single-person households, once virtually unknown outside specific life stages (widowhood, for instance), are becoming increasingly common, particularly in urban areas. Young professionals pursuing careers in distant cities, older adults whose children have migrated, individuals choosing to remain unmarried—all contribute to this growing category. These households contest the idea of family as necessarily involving co-residence and challenge policymakers to think of housing, services, and social support for those living alone.

Single-member households are an extreme manifestation of a more general trend: the decoupling of family relationships from co-residence. With the migration of adult children, with elderly parents living in ancestral villages while their children live in cities, with couples maintaining dual-career households in different locations, in all these cases, family relationships continue despite the absence of co-residence. The family is no longer a co-resident unit but a network that spans space. Female-headed households, though small in number, are on the rise. This category includes a variety of circumstances: widowed women heading households, women heading households because of male outmigration, women heading households after marital separation, and women heading households voluntarily. Each of these has different implications.

Same-sex couples and families are an emerging form of family that is receiving legal recognition even as they lack full social acceptance. Although same-sex marriage is not recognized under Indian law, the courts have recognized that same-sex couples do form family units without marriage (UK Home Office, 2025). The government has lifted restrictions on LGBT+ individuals to open joint bank accounts, same-sex partners to be nominated as financial beneficiaries, and the recognition of LGBT+ partners of the same household for ration cards (UK Home Office, 2025). These developments indicate a gradual expansion of the definition of “family” under Indian law and society. The rise of these diverse forms of family does not imply that the traditional joint family system has become extinct. A study conducted in rural West Bengal indicated that 44% of households still retained three or more generations, which is an indication of the continued relevance of intergenerational living (Debnath & Nayak, 2025). However, even such “traditional” households may be

functioning in a manner that is different from the past, with changed power relations, economic patterns, and intergenerational expectations.

#### **F) Drivers of Change**

The transformation of the Indian family cannot be attributed to any single cause. Rather, it reflects the convergence of multiple forces operating at different levels and reinforcing one another in complex ways.

- **Economic liberalization and restructuring** have fundamentally altered the opportunity structures within which families make decisions. The decline of agricultural employment—40 million farm-dependent jobs lost between 2004 and 2016 (Bhagat, 2025)—has pushed households toward diversified livelihood strategies. The growth of urban-based employment has incentivized migration. The expansion of consumer markets has created new aspirations and new possibilities for meeting needs through market rather than family provision.
- **Urbanization** reshapes family life in multiple dimensions. It physically separates family members who might otherwise co-reside. It exposes individuals to diverse ways of living that may challenge traditional norms. It creates housing constraints that make multigenerational co-residence difficult. It brings women into paid employment in ways that shift household gender dynamics. India's urbanization is not confined to cities proper; as Nijman and colleagues (2025) demonstrate, processes of urbanization are reshaping rural regions through employment restructuring and migration patterns.
- **Educational expansion** has transformed aspirations, expectations, and capabilities. Educated women approach marriage, employment, and family formation differently than their non-educated counterparts. Educated individuals may migrate for employment, separating from families of origin. Education exposes individuals to ideas about family, gender, and individual fulfillment that may challenge traditional norms.
- **Cultural globalization**—the flow of ideas, images, and narratives across national boundaries—has exposed Indians to diverse models of family life. Television, cinema, social media, and increased travel all contribute to a global imaginary within which Indians situate their own family experiences and aspirations.
- **Legal and policy changes** have both reflected and shaped family transformation. Constitutional guarantees of equality, judicial interpretations expanding rights, and legislative changes affecting marriage and inheritance have all altered the legal landscape within which families operate. As Justice Nagarathna notes, the law has aided in the transformation of the family (The Hindu, 2025).

Crucially, these drivers do not operate uniformly across India's diverse regions, communities, and classes. The family changes observable in metropolitan Mumbai differ from those in rural Bihar; those among the urban middle class differ from those among urban poor; those among communities with different kinship systems, gender norms, and economic bases vary considerably. Understanding family change in India requires attention to this diversity.

### **G) Implications and Challenges**

The transformation of the Indian family carries profound implications across multiple domains.

❖ **For legal systems**, the emergence of diverse family forms challenges frameworks built around particular family models. As Justice Nagarathna observes, nearly 40% of marriages in the last decade have ended in divorce or separation, contributing to docket explosion in family courts (The Hindu, 2025). Adjudicating disputes arising from novel family configurations—multi-locational families, same-sex partnerships, live-in relationships—requires legal categories and procedures that may not yet exist. Pre-litigation conciliation, trained mediators, and family courts adequate to rising caseloads are urgently needed (The Hindu, 2025).

❖ **For social policy**, the diversification of family forms challenges assumptions embedded in welfare programs. Schemes historically centered on individuals may need to recognize the household as the primary unit of economic life (Shukla, 2025). Programs like MGNREGA could accommodate flexible, family-based work allotments. Financial inclusion initiatives should account for intra-household dynamics—enabling joint savings products, group insurance plans, and family-linked credit scores. Welfare programs should adjust thresholds based on household structure and dependency load, not merely individual income (Shukla, 2025).

❖ **For elder care**, the erosion of traditional co-residence arrangements raises urgent questions. With fewer young people available to provide care and increasing migration separating generations, how will India's aging population be supported? Debnath and Nayak (2025) emphasize that the answer cannot simply be to lament the decline of joint families or to place full responsibility on families already stretched thin. Robust public support systems—affordable healthcare, accessible pensions, quality institutional care options—are essential complements to family-based care.

❖ **For children and youth**, changing family forms create both opportunities and challenges. Children may benefit from more involved fathering, more educated mothers, and greater

emotional expressiveness within families. They may also experience the stresses of family disruption, the complexities of multi-locational family arrangements, and the challenges of negotiating between generations with different values. Trivedi (2025) notes that understanding these impacts and developing appropriate supports requires sustained research attention.

❖ **For individuals**, the transformation of family expands possibilities for self-determination while potentially eroding traditional supports. Women may escape patriarchal constraints but also lose traditional protections. Men may develop richer emotional lives but also face conflicting expectations. Elderly parents may gain independence but lose proximate care. Young people may pursue their aspirations but navigate family relationships without clear scripts.

## CONCLUSION

What, then, can we conclude about changing trends in the Indian family system? The evidence reviewed in this article suggests several overarching observations. First, the Indian family is, without question, undergoing a transformation in terms of size, organization, gender relations, and intergenerational relations. The changes are of a magnitude that can be termed a transformation and not just an evolution. The twenty-first-century Indian family is vastly different from the family that existed in the mid-twentieth century. Second, the nature of the changes is such that they cannot be explained by the simplistic models of “breakdown” or “decline.” What is happening is not the end of the family but the beginning of a new era in which the family will take on more and more varied forms. The joint family is still there, coexisting with nuclear families, lone-headed households, multi-locational families, and other forms of family organization that are yet to be named. This diversity is, in itself, the hallmark of the contemporary Indian family.

Third, the changes in the Indian family are not a simple imitation of the Western model or an indigenous development. Rather, they represent the complex interplay of global and local factors, economic and cultural transformations, and structural and individual constraints and opportunities. The consequences—“federated joint families,” “permanent circular migration” families, women-headed households in putatively patriarchal arrangements—are uniquely Indian responses to shifting conditions. Fourth, the implications are of a depth that requires answers from a variety of institutions. The law must evolve to resolve disputes in novel ways. The policy must adjust to accommodate different family arrangements. Society must change

to encompass different family experiences. Individuals must find ways to cope with new expectations and possibilities.

As Justice Nagarathna suggests, much family conflict might be resolved if partners would practice understanding and respect for the other alongside awareness of oneself (The Hindu, 2025). This wisdom, applicable at the interpersonal level, may also guide societal responses to family change. Understanding the other—the diverse ways Indians now construct family life—and maintaining awareness of our own assumptions and attachments—can help create conditions where families in all their diversity can flourish. The Indian family is changing. The question is not whether this change will continue—it surely will—but how individuals, communities, and institutions will respond. The answer to that question will shape not only the future of the Indian family but the future of Indian society itself.

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