

The Ties that Bind

**A Review of Socio-Economic & Demographic
Changes in the Past Two Decades that Have
Transformed Indian Family Structures**

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Abstract

The past two decades in India have witnessed rapid economic development due to globalization and the opening of the Indian economy. This economic development has, inevitably, had social implications, ranging from a growing middle class, to rapidly changing social structures. One of the social institutions most impacted by these demographic changes is that of the family, as the traditional joint family has given way to a predominance of nuclear family households, especially in India's urban areas. Through a review of existing literature, this paper will examine the factors – ranging from economic demands to declining fertility rates - that have led to this change in India's household demographics. It will conclude with a discussion of the impact of these changes, particularly for India's ageing population, which is growing in number, and has traditionally relied on a joint family structure to provide support.

Introduction

The family as an institution is a critical part of India's social fabric. It is the essential agency through which individuals socialize, and learn the basics of cultural life in India. (Lal, 2017) It also, traditionally, formed the center of social and economic life, and was the primary source of support for family members.

In recent years, however, the Indian family has undergone rapid change in both its structure and functions, and has shifted away from a predominantly joint family structure, to a rise in nuclear families. This can be attributed to numerous economic factors, including increasing commercialisation of the economy, the development of the infrastructure of the modern state; and sociological factors including declining fertility rates, increased life expectancy, globalization, urbanization, and migrations. This paper aims to provide a review of the existing literature on how these socioeconomic factors have influenced the Indian family structure, and the impact that has had on India's ageing population.

The Family: A Sociological Perspective

Within the field of Sociology, there are three main theories that define what constitutes a family: symbolic interactionism, critical sociology, and functionalism. According to symbolic interactionist theories, families are groups in which participants view themselves as family members and act accordingly; they come together to form a strong primary group connection, and maintain emotional ties over an extended period of time. Critical sociology, on the other hand, emphasizes that the "typical" family unit is interlinked with historical changes in the economic structures and relations of power in society. This perspective is especially relevant for examining family structures in India, where the predominant family structure has evolved from that of a large, extended family of the rural, agriculture-based economy, to a single breadwinner-led "nuclear" family, in response to prevailing economic conditions.

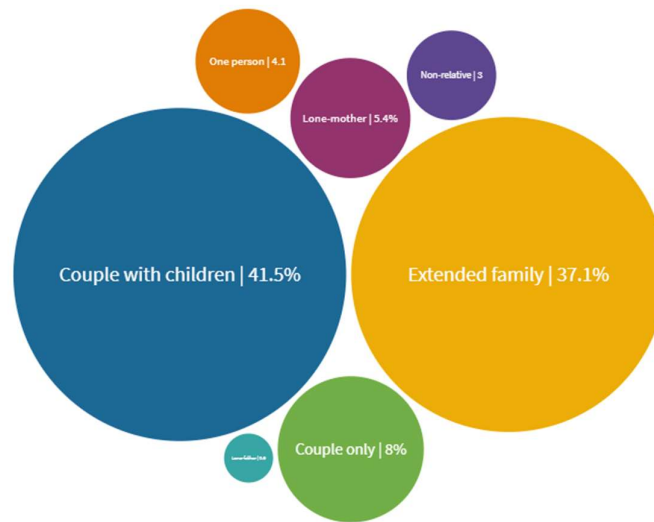
Finally, the functionalist perspective holds that families are groups that perform vital roles for society. Families provide for one another's physical, emotional, and social well-being. While critical sociology focuses on how families configure themselves in response to political-economic pressures and changes, functionalism illuminates the many purposes of families and their role in the maintenance of a balanced society (Little, 2014).

The Indian Joint Family

In a traditional Indian joint family, members of three or four generations live together under one roof, sharing a common property, kitchen, and worshipping and working together in socio-economic activities. (Lal, 2017) Indian joint families are characterized by their large size, as the family consists not just of a wife, husband and their children, but also grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. This extended family shares common property and a common residence. This type of family set up also offers social insurance for orphans, widows, the old, sick, and otherwise incapacitated, who continue to receive support from the family, as there are

numerous other working members of the household who can share the financial responsibility.

While the joint family has been the dominant family structure in India for centuries, 21st century changes in the socioeconomic, political and cultural spheres of society are directly impacting the composition, structures, authority, roles, relationships and values system of the Indian family. In contemporary society, the emergence of modernization and urbanization has resulted in the younger generation moving away from the joint family system, towards a nuclear family structure. In the 2019 population survey by the UN, nuclear families had surpassed the number of extended (joint) families in India. (UN Population Survey, 2019)



Indian Household Size & Composition (2019)

Source: <https://population.un.org/Household/index.html#/countries/840>

The Rise of the Indian Nuclear Family

The rise in globalization over the past few decades has promoted the emergence of nuclear family units across the globe. This phenomenon has been further compounded by difficulties in child bearing and rearing due to formal sector employment, lack of government incentives, and rural to urban migration, all of which have diminished the importance of the extended family.

Especially at a time when national or global mobility makes a worker more competitive in domestic and global markets, the nuclear family is advantageous because it has a high capacity for mobility, especially when compared to a joint family. Because they lack the support of an extended family to provide services, nuclear families must turn to other services including day care centers, super markets, take-away restaurants, homes for the aged, and paid hospitals for health care, as adaptive methods. (Pradhan, 2011)

While this service infrastructure is in place in many western countries, where the nuclear family has been the norm for generations, in India this infrastructure is still emerging, with care for children and senior citizens often falling to the informal sector. As a result, there are often gaps in caregiving, especially for elderly, widowed, unmarried or sick family members who fall outside the bounds of a traditional nuclear family.



House hold

Size & Composition, 2019

India

Average household size
(number of members)
DHS 2015



4.6

1992

Households with at least
one member under 20 years
(aged 0-19)
DHS 2015



74%

1992

Households with at least
one member aged 65 years
or over
DHS 2015



24%

1992

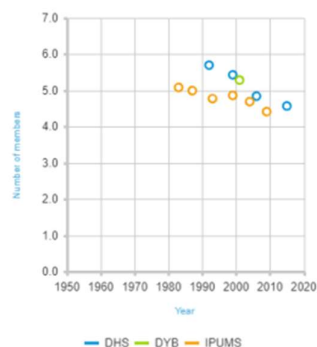
Households with at least
one member under 20 years
AND one member 65 years
or over
DHS 2015



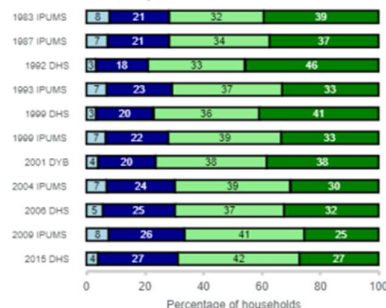
16%

1992

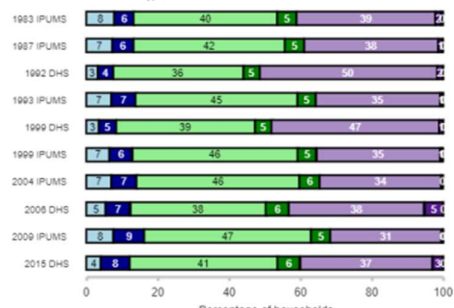
Average household size (number of members)



Distribution of
households by size



Distribution of households by
type



Nuclear households
DHS 2015



56%

1992

Multi-generation
households
DHS 2015



50%

1992

Three generation
households
DHS 2015



29%

1992

Skip generation
households
DHS 2015



1.0%

1992

Data sources:

DHS: estimated from household roster microdata collected in the Demographic and Health Surveys.

DYC: as reported to the United Nations for the Demographic Yearbook.

IPUMS: estimated from household roster microdata archived in the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series - International at the Minnesota Population Center.

LFS: estimated from household roster microdata collected in the European Union Labour Force Surveys.

See 'About' document for additional information about data sources and methods used.

Suggested citation:

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019).

Database on Household Size and Composition 2019.

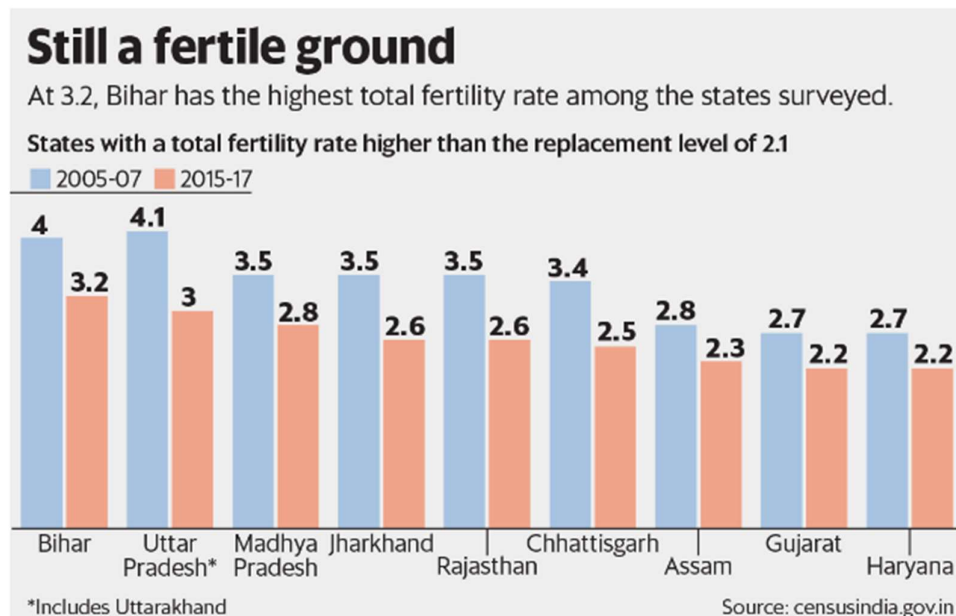
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Source: UN Population Survey (2019) <https://population.un.org/Household/index.html#/countries/840>

Changes in Fertility Rates

Changes in traditional family structures in India can also be attributed to India's overall reduction in fertility levels. According to data collected by the Indian government's Sample Registration System, in 22 states the Total Fertility Rate (TFR)¹ for India declined to 2.2 in 2017, after being stable at 2.3 between 2013 and 2016. The TFR has more than halved in both urban and rural areas, falling even below the replacement level in urban areas, where it is 1.7, down from 4.1 in 1971. In rural areas, TFR has fallen from 5.4 to 2.4 during the same period. (Tripathi, 2019)



Source: <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/what-are-india-s-challenges-as-its-fertility-rate-falls-1563907229812.html>

Higher education, increased mobility, late marriage, financial independence for women, and overall prosperity are all factors that contribute to a falling TFR, particularly in urban areas, where girls are more likely to complete schooling and earn a college degree.

Fertility has also declined due to the combined effect of substantial socio-economic development in India during the last two decades and the effective implementation of family planning programs that advocated for birth control, and not more than 2 children per couple. Further, as India moved away from a traditional economy that relied largely on agriculture, to a more mixed economy, the need for a large number of children to contribute to household labor decreased. In fact, with rising living costs, it became irrational for many to have large families to support. Improvements in health care and child survival also contributed to reduced TFR. (Pradhan, 2011)

Historically, mortality declines, particularly infant mortality rate, also precede the decline of fertility, because improved survival rates of children allow women to achieve their desired family size in fewer births. In the last three decades infant

¹ TFR indicates the average number of children expected to be born to a woman during her reproductive span of 15-49 years.

mortality has declined significantly, contributing to an overall decline in TFR, and thus altering the age structure of the population and the structure within individual families. (Lal, 2017)

Increased Life Expectancy

In conjunction with decreasing fertility rates, India has also experienced an overall increase in average life expectancy, which has increased from 49.7 years in 1970-75 to 68.7 years in 2012-16. (National Health Profile, 2019). Further, according to the Population Census 2011 there are nearly 104 million elderly persons (aged 60 years or above) in India; a report released by the United Nations Population Fund and HelpAge India suggests that this number is expected to grow to 173 million by 2026. (UN Population Fund, 2019) Reflecting the growth of nuclear families, specifically in urban areas, 71% of the elderly population resides in rural areas, whereas 29% is in urban areas. (National Health Profile, 2019)

India's ageing population poses its own unique set of challenges, as it demands increased health care considerations along with the associated costs. After the age of 65 years, the probability of disability or of impairment increases, necessitating additional medical and/or financial support on the part of the adult children or caretakers. (Lal, 2017)

Migration & Urbanization

Rural to urban migration has also had a marked impact on family structure in India. The flow of individuals and families from rural to urban areas is typically for economic reasons (i.e. higher salaries, better job availability, perceived better quality of living), and enhances the process of urbanization. Other factors, such as superior educational or health services available in urban areas, function as "pull factors" that draw people to urban areas. (Perera, 1992)

With an increased proportion of the population residing in urban areas, there has been a greater tendency, over the last two decades, towards the nucleation of the family system. This can be attributed to urban congestion and limited housing availability, particularly for low income groups, which discourages larger, extended family households. This gradual collapse of the extended family system can create problems of family support both for younger dependents and older persons in the family. (Lal, 2017)

Changes in Household Demographics & Impact on the Elderly

Due to changing household structure and demographics, the care of elderly parents and relatives – once viewed as a traditional obligation – has become increasingly difficult for young people to fulfil. Changing values and economic priorities, including the need for adult children to move in search of employment, has resulted in the decline of multi-generational families, particularly in the case of rapid urbanization, where the members of the extended family living in rural areas are left behind, as children move to the cities. (Pradhan, 2011)

Considering the fact that one in four elderly is now forced to live alone in India, innovative solutions are the need of the hour. (Ganesh, 2019) In the current scenario, lack of infrastructure, social support, and access to affordable healthcare coupled with changing family structure are some factors that impact India's ageing population.

There is now a growing trend for elderly parents to save up in anticipation of their own retirement, as is the norm in western countries. However, this is not possible for low-income families who typically have no savings. Sadly, it is often the breadwinners from low-income families that are most likely to migrate to urban areas in search of jobs, leaving their parents behind.

Conclusion

Due to the continuous and growing impact of urbanization and westernization, the traditional joint household in India has, both in ideal and in practice, undergone changes in the past two decades. It has, further, been speculated that half of the Indian population will live in urban areas by 2050. As with any rapid change to a society's traditional structure, it becomes imperative for policymakers to take into account the possible consequences of this change. This is especially prudent given that, according to a 2017 report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), nearly 12.5% of the Indian population will be 60 years and older by 2030; this will, further increase to one-fifth the population by 2050. In anticipation of this ongoing demographic change, Indian policymakers must look ahead to improve elderly care structure, health structure, and build a support system to address this shift.

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