

# Changing Dynamics of FAMILY STRUCTURE IN INDIA



The family has been a foundational institution of society in most parts of the world, particularly in India. However, types of family vary in internal organisation, in its degree of autonomy and in sanctions and taboos by which it is protected and perpetuated. The dynamics of family structure in India have undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting the intricate interplay between tradition, modernity, socio-economic factors, and cultural shifts. Such transformation is emblematic of the broader structural transformations occurring within Indian society, influenced by urbanization, globalization, educational attainment, changing gender roles, and advancements in technology.

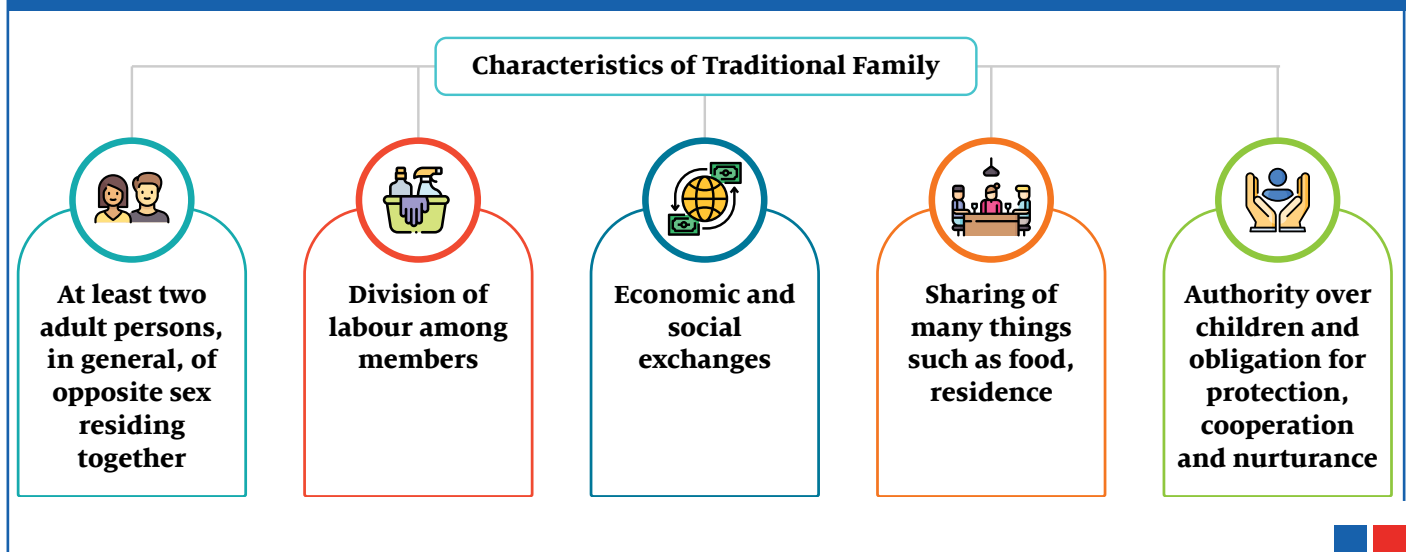
## IN THIS DOCUMENT

<b>1. What do we understand by Family?</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. What are different types of Family structures in India?</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3. What are the changes that have occurred in family structure in India over the period?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4. Factors of Change - What are the factors affecting the family structure in India?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5. What has been the impact of changing family structure on the marginalized?</b>	<b>6</b>
5.1 Impact on women	<b>6</b>
5.2 Impact on transgenders	<b>6</b>
5.3 Impact on children	<b>6</b>
<b>6. Role of governance systems in shaping family structure in India</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>7. Way Forward</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Topic at a Glance</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Boxes, Figures and Tables</b>	<b>10</b>

## 1. What do we understand by family?

- ▶ The term family is derived from the Latin word ‘familia’ denoting a **household establishment** and refers to a “group of individuals **living together** during important phases of their lifetime and **bound to each other by biological and/or social and psychological relationship**”.
- ▶ **Four Major Functions of a Family:**
  - ▶ **Physical Function** – Carried out by providing a safe, comfortable environment necessary to growth, development and rest/recuperation.
  - ▶ **Economic Function** – Provide financial aid for members, as well as, meeting monetary needs of society.
  - ▶ **Reproductive Function** – It is met by the birth of children.
  - ▶ **Socialization Function** – Includes teaching; transmitting beliefs, values, attitudes and coping mechanisms; providing feedback and guiding problem – solving.

### Box 2.1 Indian Family System



## 2. What are different types of Family structures in India?

- ▶ India follows the philosophy of **Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam**, with Kutumb or family acquiring primacy in interpersonal-social relationship dynamics. Unlike the **western society**, which puts impetus on “**individualism**”, this approach of **Indian society is “collectivistic”**. It promotes **interdependence, social cohesion and co-operation**, with the family forming the focal point of this social structure.
  - ▶ **Joint family:** Historically, the traditional, ideal and desired family in India is the joint family which emphasizes on **family integrity, family loyalty, and family unity**.
    - » According to the Census of India (2011), the extended and joint family or households together claim merely **20% of all households**.
  - ▶ **Nuclear Families:** Many of the urban households are **offshoots of rural extended or joint families**.
    - » According to Census (2011), of all the households, nuclear family constituted 70%.
  - ▶ **Authority:** Generally, in India, families adhere to a **patriarchal ideology**, follow the **patrilineal (male descent) rule of descent**, and are **patrilocal** (wife goes to the husband’s house post marriage).
    - » Usually, the **eldest male member** was the head of the house and administered joint property.
    - » However, in **Kerala and some other communities**, the headship rested with the eldest female member.
- ▶ **Gender roles:** Traditional families in India endorse **traditional gender role preferences** with women’s domain being limited to household work and child rearing while outside matters were handled by male members.
- ▶ **Marriage system:** Indian society has been highly **endogamous** and **marriage within the same caste** has been followed generally.
  - » **Monogamy** (state of being married to one person at a time) **is the predominant form** of marriage with some communities practicing **polygamy** (one husband with more than one wife) and some tribes practicing **polygyny** (One wife with more than one husband).

### 3. What are the changes that have occurred in family structure in India over the period?

**Table 3.1. Changes that have occurred in family structure in India**

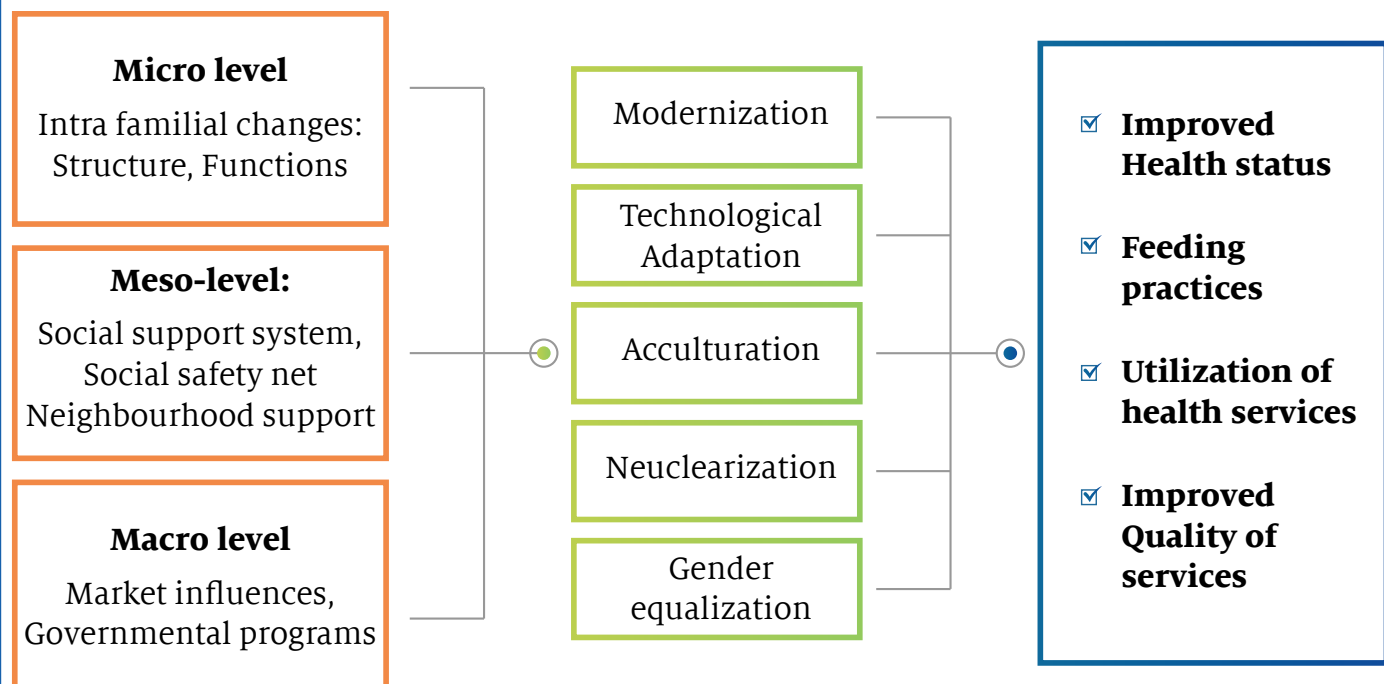
Parameters	Historical Family Structure in India	Changes in India's Family Structure
<b>Family System</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Joint family system</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Virtual <b>disappearance of traditional joint family system</b> and increasing nuclearization of families.</li> </ul>
<b>Authority/ Household head</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Patriarchal family structure</b> with eldest male member being the head of the family.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Though still patriarchal nature, a <b>rise in proportion of female headed households</b> can be seen.</li> </ul>
<b>Marriage norms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Marriage was considered <b>sacrosanct</b> and for <b>lifetime</b>.</li> <li>▶ <b>Norm of arrange marriages:</b> Mate selection was mostly the prerogative of parents and elders.</li> <li>▶ People married early with prevalence of instances of <b>child marriages</b>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Increase in <b>separation and divorce rates</b>.</li> <li>▶ A shift towards love marriages, <b>decline in arrange marriages</b> and mate selection by individuals themselves.</li> <li>▶ <b>Increase in average age of marriage</b> with decrease in instances of child marriage.</li> </ul>
<b>Decision making and Conflicts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Kinship ties were stronger and <b>decisions</b> were mainly taken <b>by household's head</b>.</li> <li>▶ <b>Less instances of family conflicts</b> as family head had uncontested authority over family members.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ There is a <b>shrinking of kinship ties</b> and <b>decisions</b> are taken <b>by continuous consultations</b> between children and parents on familial matters.</li> <li>▶ Greater <b>tension and conflicts</b> between wife and husband, parents and sons and between brothers.</li> </ul>
<b>Fertility and childcare</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Number of children per household were greater with <b>high total fertility rate</b>.</li> <li>▶ <b>Early pregnancy</b> and family planning.</li> <li>▶ <b>Childcare</b> was responsibility of entire family.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <b>Total fertility rate declined</b> to around 2 during 2019-21.</li> <li>▶ <b>Postponement of first pregnancy</b> and family planning.</li> <li>▶ <b>Childcare responsibilities</b> are increasingly coming under the domain of professional caretaking. <b>Family's role as an agent of socialization</b> for children has <b>diminished</b>.</li> </ul>
<b>Gender Roles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Pronatalistic society with the <b>desire to have a male child</b>.</li> <li>▶ <b>Son-Meta Preference</b> wherein couples keep having children until they have the desired number of sons.</li> <li>▶ Restricted roles for female members with <b>limited education</b> and confinement to <b>household work and childcare activities</b>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Increasing <b>acceptance of girl child</b> in the family.</li> <li>▶ Increasing participation of women in education with <b>increase in their role in economic activities</b> outside household and <b>decision making</b> within household.</li> </ul>



## 4. Factors of Change - What are the factors affecting the family structure in India?

- ▶ **Industrialization and Urbanization:** Some impacts of industrialization and urbanization are listed below:
  - ▶ **Nuclearisation of the family** as more and more members are moving away from larger family circle and living as individuals or members of a nuclear unit.
  - ▶ **Migration to industrial and urban areas** in search of employment opportunities also increases **joint living** in some parts of urban areas.
  - ▶ The states with a higher level of urbanization tend to have a **higher proportion of single member households**.
- ▶ **Culture and Westernization:** Culture has been shown to determine the family structure by delineating boundaries, rules for interaction, communication patterns, acceptable practices, discipline and hierarchy in the family. **Impacts –**
  - ▶ **Growth in individual families** with focus on increased privacy and independence, ideals derived from western culture.
  - ▶ **Traditional authority of the eldest male** in the Indian family system is **diminishing** with rising individualism and nuclearization.
  - ▶ Increasing acceptance of **non-traditional relationships** such as homosexual relations and live-in arrangements.
- ▶ **Socio-economic mobility:** Increasing access to education and employment opportunities have restructured the family dynamics in more than one way.
  - ▶ **Gender roles are being redefined** in the wake of increasing participation of women in labour force and thus decision making in the household.
  - ▶ A **high sense of individualism** is growing among young people and they strive to improve their status in community outside the purview of family.
- ▶ **Globalization:** Globalization has resulted in **movement of younger populations** across the countries, especially from **developing countries to developed countries**. It also resulted in increased exchanges in goods, services, cultures and values.
  - ▶ **Penetration of consumerist culture** has weakened the emotional bondage and many young members feel a **sense of identity crisis** in the family.
  - ▶ **Transfer of dependency burden** of family from younger to older generations due to migration of prime working age members.
  - ▶ Traditional decision-making responsibility of the male head of the family, in a patriarchal society, **started collapsing** with foreign employment and improved economic status of women.
- ▶ **Demographic transition:** Its major consequence is the **change in the age structure of the population** with the proportion of adults increasing and the proportion of children and elderly falling.

**Figure 4.1 Factors of Change**



- ▶ Whereas a lesser number of children contribute to **resource-saving** leading to **better investments in socio-economic indicators**, a growing number of elderly members might **neutralize the higher saving propensity**.
- ▶ These individual-level changes in turn affect **family formation, behaviours, choices and inter-generational transfers of resources** and emotional support.
- ▶ **Technology:** Technology has revolutionized the way families communicate.
- ▶ It enables **instant connection** regardless of geographical distances, contributing to connect with extended families.
- ▶ Disruption to **traditional face-to-face interactions** affects the **depth and quality of personal conversations**, which can **increase conflicts** within families.
- ▶ Technological apparatus is **replacing the role of family as means of socializing** and value inculcation in children.

### Box 4.1. In Conversation: Impact of Social Media on Family Structure

**Vinay**

Hey Vinay, do you notice that social media has pervaded every aspect of our life, including our family relations?

Yes, since Individuals' primary source of socialisation and support is family, it is natural for social media to influence that aspect of our life.

Now that I think of it, it has brought families closer to our life by providing a means to communicate on several levels with our extended families. What do you think?

I agree with you. In the modern era of small households, social media has become the main media for fostering familial bonds. But it also has its downfalls, right?

Yes, excessive use of social media can often lead to neglect of immediate family relations and brings strain in familial bond.

Right, it also cannot replace the fun and charm of face-to-face interactions. But isn't it necessary in today's changing society?

I think so. It has become a necessity as families live far apart from each other and social media provides a quick and affordable mean for connection.

Definitely. It's all about how we use it and finding a healthy balance between online and offline interactions.

Exactly. It's important for families to communicate openly, set boundaries, and prioritize quality time together, whether online or offline. That way, we can make the most of social media while maintaining strong family connections.

**Vini**

## 5. What has been the impact of changing family structure on the marginalized?

### 5.1. Impact on women

- **Increased Autonomy:** The transition from traditional joint families to nuclear or non-traditional family structures has often resulted in **greater autonomy and agency** for women.
  - ▷ However, women's autonomy is **differentiated by economic status, caste, region, religion etc.** For instance, women in richer joint households have more autonomy in intra-household decision-making but less freedom of movement outside the home.
- **Dual responsibility:** With **more women joining the workforce**, nuclear families often rely on dual-income households, requiring women to **juggle professional commitments with traditionally established household duties** and caregiving responsibilities.
  - ▷ This can lead to stress, fatigue, health issues and burnout feelings.
- **Economic Opportunities:** In changing nature of authority in families, women have **better access to resources for pursuing higher education** and skill development, leading to **improved employment prospects** and financial independence.
- **Redefined Gender Roles:** Women in nuclear families or non-traditional family arrangements often **challenge traditional gender norms** through their economic participation and role in decision making within the household.
  - ▷ **Household responsibilities** are also being **increasingly shared** with their partners.
- **Socialization:** The decline of the joint family system has impacted women's support systems and social networks. Increasing number of non-traditional family arrangements, especially **single-mother households**, **presents additional challenges** in this regard.
- **Burden of care:** In nuclear families, women have to bear the **primary responsibility of caregiving** to both children and elderly. With ageing of Indian society and changing nature of families, this will continue to pose a significant challenge.

### 5.2. Impact on transgenders

- **Increased Visibility:** With changing family nature, visibility and acceptance of transgenders are increasing, especially in urban societies.
  - ▷ However, the **pace of their recognition and acceptance is slow** compared to changes in family structure.
- **Personal identity:** In traditional Indian family setup, it is difficult for transgenders to reveal their true personal identity and they live under **mental stress, anxiety and depression**.
- **Gender norms expectations:** Transgenders face unique and **complex issues** as they confront cultural expectations of gender expression. Such gender norms expectations form part of most of the families and deviation is low.
- **Social support:** Difficult childhood in traditional families results in **social isolation, low self-esteem** and **self-worth** among transgenders. They then seek support from chosen families, LGBTQIA+ community organizations etc.
- **Policy support:** With recognition of transgender rights with the verdict of Supreme Court and **Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019**, they can expect better access to resources, education and healthcare in Indian society.

### 5.3. Impact on Children

- **Identity formation:** In nuclear families, children often develop a **strong sense of individual identity and autonomy**, while in joint families, they develop a deeper connection to their **extended family heritage and traditions**.
- **Social Support:** In small households, children **lack emotional and social support** that comes from extended family relationships, impacting their well-being and social development.
- **Single-parent households:** Increasing separation and divorce rates result in single-parent household which impacts the welfare of the child.
- **Cultural identity:** Children often lose connection with their cultural heritage in modern family systems.

### Box 5.1 What has been the impact of Covid on the family structure of India?

A growing body of research demonstrates that COVID-19 has had a **profound impact on family functioning and well-being** in a range of countries. **Wider impacts of Covid-19** can be seen from the following:

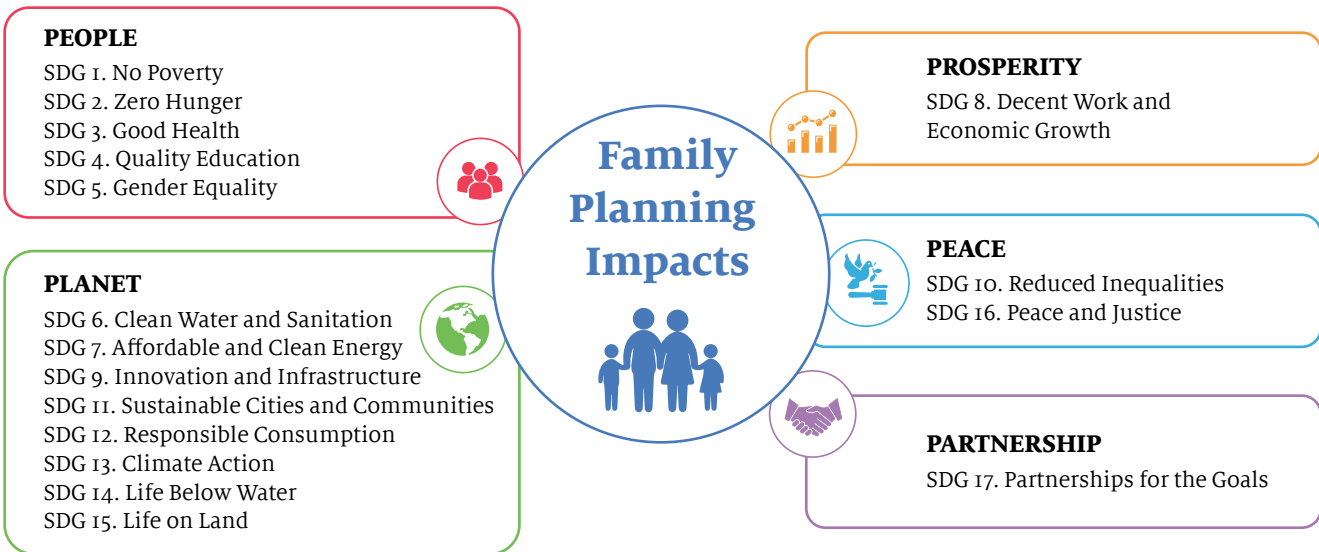
- ▶ **Impact on family bonds:** The mortalities resulting from Covid, its associated health risks and financial rupture has uprooted innumerable families.
  - ▶ School and day-care closures, inadequacies in technology access, loss of contact with non-residential family members and **increased strain**, especially on women and children were other challenges that families faced.
  - ▶ Some **relationships have deteriorated** due to existing financial and social strains, which particularly affected women in abusive relationships.
  - ▶ However, due to constraints and restrictions on movement, several families could live together **making a fresh emotional and social bond**.
- ▶ **Disproportionate impact:** The pandemic disproportionately impacted lower-income families, families from ethnic minority and vulnerable groups, and women.
- ▶ **Financial Stress:** The financial impacts of covid due to associated unemployment and health expenditure have strained family relationships, although the effects depend to a large extent on quality of the relationships and family well-being before COVID-19.
- ▶ **Reallocation of intra-familial tasks:** There have been evidences of a **narrowing of the gender disparity in paid employment**, gender reallocation of time spent on childcare, and to a lesser extent, housework during the early stages of COVID-19.



## 6. Role of governance systems in shaping family structure in India

- ▶ **Legislations and policies:** Various laws and policies have impacted family structure in myriad ways.
  - ▶ **Demographic changes:** Fertility and mortality decline in India is majorly policy-induced (health and family planning policies).
  - ▶ **Economic opportunities:** Labour laws passed for benefit of employees like the Indian Workmen Compensation Act (1923), the Minimum Wages Act 1948, helped to reduce the economic reliance of members on the joint family for economic support.
  - ▶ **Changes in marriages:** Abolition of child marriages and prescription of the minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls with provisions for widow remarriages.
  - ▶ **Family inheritance:** Hindu Succession Act 1956 gave a daughter and a son equal rights to the father's property.
- ▶ **Social welfare programs:** The government's social welfare programs, including those aimed at poverty alleviation, healthcare, and education, have had an impact on family structure.
  - ▶ **Improved access to education and healthcare** led to **smaller family sizes** as families prioritize quality of life over quantity of children.
  - ▶ **Social Security programs** provides means for care of elderly thus making smaller households a viable unit for social functioning.
  - ▶ **Urbanization and industrialization:** Policies are major driving force behind urbanization and industrialization, which further led to significant shifts in family structure.
    - ▶ Resultant migration and economic opportunities result in **smaller family sizes, increased participation of women in workforce** and **shift away from traditional authority**.
  - ▶ **Gender Equality:** Efforts to promote gender equality through legal reforms, such as laws against dowry, domestic violence, and child marriage, have **challenged traditional patriarchal norms** and **empowered women** to make independent choices regarding marriage, family, and career.

### Box 6.1 Family Planning Impacts



## 7. Way Forward

- **Promoting Gender Equality:** Efforts towards promoting gender equality and redefining gender roles should continue through required policy and legal support.
  - ▷ This includes **effective enforcement of laws** against dowry, domestic violence, and child marriage and laws promoting **economic participation** of women.
- **Supporting Marginalized Groups:** Promote inclusion and well-being of marginalized sections including transgenders through **targeted social welfare programs**, access to **education, healthcare** and community support networks.
- **Effective family planning:** Family planning programmes should include resources and **assistance for caregiving responsibilities, creche facilities** for working women and promoting **counselling** for resolving familial conflicts.
- **Addressing socio-economic disparities:** These may include policies to reduce income inequality, improving **access to basic amenities** and create opportunities to every section of society.
- **Elderly Care:** Special attention needs to be brought about the aspects of care related to the elderly population. Key stakeholders like families, government and civil society must come forward to create a **robust mechanism for their care**.
- **Responsible use of Technology:** It is essential to use technology responsibly and maintain a balance between online and offline interactions.
  - ▷ Educating families about the potential risks of excessive technology use and promoting **healthy screen time habits** can help mitigate negative impacts.
- **Cultural Education:** Government/education bodies/civil society can run campaigns for disseminating **knowledge about Indian cultural heritage** so that children and families can connect with their heritage.

## Conclusion

From the traditional joint family system to the increasing prevalence of nuclear and non-traditional family arrangements, the landscape of Indian families has undergone significant transformations over the years. These changes have been driven by industrialization, urbanization, globalization, evolving governance framework among other factors. As families adapt to these changes, they face both opportunities and challenges. By fostering open communication, setting boundaries, and prioritizing quality time together, families can navigate these changes and opportunities while maintaining strong connections and support networks.

**The strength of a Nation is derived from the integrity of its homes.**



- Confucius



## TOPIC AT A GLANCE

### Changing Dynamics of Family Structure in India

- Family usually refers to a “group of individuals **living together** during important phases of their lifetime and **bound to each other by biological and/or social and psychological relationship**”.



#### Indian family system

- Historically, the traditional, ideal and desired family in India is the **joint family**.
- According to census, **nuclear family constitutes 70%** of all households.
- Generally, families follow **patriarchal ideology, patrilineal rule of descent and are patrilocal**.
- Traditional families endorse **traditional gender role preferences** with women’s domain limited to household.
- Highly **endogamous** and general rule of **same caste marriages**.



#### Factors of change

- Industrialization and urbanization** resulting in migration to urban areas and nuclearization of families.
- Westernization** leading to growth in individual families, reduction in traditional authority in household and acceptance of non-traditional relations.
- Socio-economic mobility** redefining gender roles in the household and developing a sense of individualism.
- Globalization** with its consumerist culture weakening the familial bond and increasing dependence burden on older generations.
- Technology** providing instant connection with family members while also disrupting traditional interactions and fuelling conflicts.



#### Impact of changing family structure on the marginalized

- Women:** Increased autonomy and pressure of dual responsibility, better economic opportunities and social mobility, and redefined gender roles.
- Transgenders:** Increasing visibility and acceptance in society, gender norms expectations, difficulties in personal identity formation and recognition of rights.
- Children:** Strong sense of individual identity and autonomy, lack of social support, challenges of single-parent household and lack of cultural identification.



#### Changes in Family Structure in India

- Virtual disappearance of traditional joint family system and **increasing nuclearization**.
- Rise in proportion of **female headed households**.
- Increase in **divorce rates**, decline in arrange marriages and **increase in average age of marriage**. Shrinking of kinship ties and **decisions** in the households **by consultation**.
- Decline in total fertility rate** with postponement of first pregnancy.
- Increasing **acceptance of girl child** and increase in their role in **economic activities**.



#### Role of Governance systems in changing family structure in India

- Legislations and policies** inducing demographic changes, providing economic opportunities, fostering marital changes and providing inheritance rights.
- Social welfare programs** improve socio-economic indicators thus making small families viable units of society.
- Policies driving urbanization and industrialization** resulting in increasing women participation in workforce and shift away from traditional authority.
- Efforts to promote **gender equality** challenges traditional patriarchal norms.



#### Way Forward

- Efforts towards promoting **gender equality and redefining gender roles**.
- Promote **inclusion and well-being of marginalized sections** including transgenders through targeted social welfare programs.
- Family planning programmes** should include resources and assistance for caregiving responsibilities, creche facilities and counselling facilities.
- Addressing socio-economic disparities** through enabling policies.
- Responsible use of technology** and maintaining a balance between online and offline interactions.
- Campaigns for disseminating **knowledge about Indian cultural heritage**.

**Boxes, Figures and Tables**

**Box 2.1 Indian Family System** ..... 2

**Box 4.1. In Conversation: Impact of Social Media on Family Structure** ..... 5

**Box 5.1 What has been the impact of Covid on the family structure of India?** ..... 7

**Box 6.1 Family Planning Impacts** ..... 8

**Figure 4.1 Factors of Change** ..... 4

**Table 3.1 Changes that have occurred in Family Structure in India** ..... 3

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