

Marital Dissolution in Contemporary India: Trends, Patterns and Sociological Determinants

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Abstract:

Marital dissolution is an important indicator of changing family and marital relations in contemporary India. Traditionally, marriage has been closely associated with family stability, social expectations and community norms; however, changes in education, employment, gender relations, urbanisation and individual aspirations are gradually reshaping marital relationships. The present study examines the trends, patterns and sociological determinants of marital dissolution in contemporary India, with particular attention to divorce and separation. The study adopts a quantitative, descriptive and analytical research design based on secondary data obtained from the Census of India, National Family Health Survey (NFHS), government reports and other official sources. The study uses descriptive and comparative analysis to examine variations in marital dissolution across gender, age, region, rural-urban residence and socioeconomic characteristics. The findings indicate that although marital dissolution remains relatively low in overall prevalence, it has gradually gained social significance and displays considerable gender and regional variations. Women show higher levels of divorce and separation than men, while differences are also observed across age groups, regions and residential categories. Education, women's economic autonomy, age at marriage, domestic violence and changing gender relations emerge as important factors associated with marital dissolution. The study argues that divorce and separation should not be viewed solely as indicators of family breakdown, but also as manifestations of changing individual autonomy, gender relations and expectations surrounding marriage. The study concludes that marital dissolution provides an important sociological lens for understanding the broader transformation of marriage and family life in contemporary India.

Keywords— Marital Dissolution, Divorce, Separation, Marriage, Family, Gender Relations, India, Secondary Data

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage has traditionally occupied a central position in Indian society, functioning not only as a relationship between two individuals but also as an institution closely connected with family, kinship, social status, and cultural continuity. Historically, marital relationships were strongly influenced by family and community expectations, and the continuation of marriage was often considered a social responsibility. However, Indian society has undergone significant social and economic transformations, bringing changes in the institution of marriage and the ways individuals perceive and negotiate marital relationships.

Increasing education, urbanisation, occupational mobility, women's participation in economic activities, changing gender relations, and growing individual autonomy have contributed to changing expectations from marriage. The expansion of mass media and digital communication has further increased exposure to diverse ideas about relationships and family life. These developments do not necessarily indicate a rejection of marriage, but they suggest that the meaning and expectations associated with marital relationships are being increasingly

renegotiated. In this context, marital dissolution has become an important subject for sociological inquiry.

Marital dissolution encompasses the breakdown of a marital relationship through divorce or separation. In India, such processes are shaped by a combination of individual circumstances and wider social factors, including gender relations, education, employment, economic conditions, family structure, social norms, and regional differences. The experience and consequences of marital dissolution may also differ between men and women because of differences in economic independence, social support, childcare responsibilities, and social acceptance. Therefore, marital dissolution needs to be understood as a social phenomenon rather than merely as an individual decision.

The changing position of women is particularly significant in this context. Greater access to education, employment, legal awareness, and economic resources may strengthen women's ability to negotiate within marriage and, when necessary, leave unsatisfactory relationships. At the same time, traditional expectations regarding gender roles and family responsibilities continue to influence marital decisions. Thus, changes in marital dissolution cannot be interpreted simply as

evidence of family breakdown; they may also reflect changing notions of individual agency, equality, and acceptable marital relationships.

Despite increasing public discussion of divorce in India, there is a need for systematic analysis of its actual patterns and social determinants. National-level secondary data can provide valuable insights into variations across regions, gender, rural–urban settings, and socioeconomic groups. Sources such as the Census, National Family Health Survey (NFHS), government statistics, judicial records, and existing empirical studies can collectively contribute to a broader understanding of marital dissolution, although differences in definitions and coverage must be carefully considered.

Against this background, this study examines marital dissolution as part of the wider transformation of marriage and family relations in India. Using secondary data, the study seeks to identify major trends and patterns and to examine the sociological factors associated with marital dissolution. By placing these changes within the broader processes of social transformation, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of changing marital relationships in contemporary Indian society.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on marriage and family transformation has been an important area of Indian sociology. However, systematic empirical research on divorce and marital dissolution has remained comparatively limited. Existing studies suggest that marital dissolution in India needs to be understood in relation to wider changes in family structure, gender relations, education, economic conditions and individual autonomy.

2.1 Changing Patterns of Marital Dissolution

One of the important empirical contributions to the study of marital dissolution in India is the work of **Dommaraju (2016)**, who examined patterns of divorce and separation using demographic data. The study highlighted substantial differences in marital dissolution across regions and social groups and argued for examining separation alongside formal divorce. This is particularly important in the Indian context, where social and legal dissolution of marriage do not always occur simultaneously.

Similarly, **Jacob and Chattopadhyay (2016)** analysed Census 2011 data and found that India's separation rate was considerably higher than its formal divorce rate. Their study also identified significant regional differences, with marital dissolution generally lower in northern India than in southern and north-eastern states. Interestingly, they found relatively limited differences between rural and urban areas across states. These findings demonstrate that regional and cultural contexts remain important in understanding marital dissolution in India.

2.2 Education, Gender and Marital Dissolution

The relationship between women's education and marital dissolution has received increasing empirical attention. **Maiti (2024)**, examined nationally representative District Level Household Survey data and found that the likelihood of divorce or separation was higher among women who were more educated than their husbands. The likelihood increased with a larger positive educational gap between spouses. The study suggests that education may strengthen women's capacity to exercise greater autonomy in marital decisions, particularly when combined with other socioeconomic resources.

This finding is significant because it challenges the simplistic interpretation that increasing divorce necessarily represents a decline in family values. Greater marital dissolution may, in some circumstances, reflect changing expectations regarding equality, autonomy and acceptable marital relationships. At the same time, the relationship between women's education and divorce remains complex because social norms and economic dependence can continue to restrict women's ability to leave marriages.

2.3 Domestic Violence and Marital Dissolution

Domestic violence represents another important dimension of marital instability. **Maiti (2024)**, using data from the fourth round of India's Demographic and Health Survey, examined the relationship between domestic risk factors, violence and marital dissolution. The study reported higher levels of marital dissolution among women who experienced severe physical and sexual violence. The findings indicate that separation or divorce may sometimes represent an exercise of agency by women attempting to leave violent marital relationships.

This perspective is important for sociological analysis because marital dissolution cannot always be interpreted as an indicator of weakening family relationships. In some cases, it may reflect changing attitudes towards gender inequality, domestic violence and individual rights.

2.4 Socioeconomic and Regional Dimensions

The existing literature also indicates that marital dissolution is influenced by socioeconomic and demographic characteristics. Education, employment, age, economic resources and residence may affect both marital relationships and the capacity of individuals to formally dissolve them. However, these relationships are not uniform across India. Regional differences identified by Census-based studies indicate that cultural norms, kinship structures, gender relations and varying levels of social transformation may influence the prevalence and social acceptance of marital dissolution.

The distinction between divorce and separation is particularly relevant in this regard. Official Census data provide separate categories for divorced and separated persons, making it possible to examine marital dissolution more broadly rather

than relying only on legally completed divorces. The Census 2011 C-02 dataset provides marital-status information by age and sex and therefore offers an important empirical foundation for analysing these patterns.

2.5 Consequences of Marital Dissolution

Another body of research has focused on the consequences of divorce and separation, particularly for women and children. Recent systematic research on divorce in India has identified domestic violence, dowry-related problems, patriarchal control and communication difficulties among the major themes associated with marital breakdown. It also highlights economic hardship, psychological distress, childcare and custody concerns, legal difficulties and social stigma as important post-divorce challenges for women.

Recent scholarship has also begun to examine the implications of marital separation for children and the extent to which their interests are addressed within India's legal and institutional framework. This suggests that marital dissolution has consequences extending beyond the marital couple and needs to be considered as a broader family and social process.

RESEARCH GAP

Existing studies have examined various demographic, regional, gender and socioeconomic dimensions of marital dissolution in India, but relatively few provide a comprehensive, national-level analysis combining these aspects. Further, divorce and separation are often examined separately despite being important forms of marital dissolution. The present study addresses this gap by analysing trends, patterns and sociological determinants of marital dissolution in contemporary India using multiple sources of secondary data.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the major trends in marital dissolution in contemporary India.
2. To analyse patterns of marital dissolution across different regions and social groups in India.
3. To identify the major sociological factors associated with marital dissolution in India.
4. To examine the demographic, socioeconomic and regional variations in marital dissolution in contemporary India.

3. METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES OF SECONDARY DATA

3.1 Methodology

The present study adopts a quantitative, descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary data. The study examines marital dissolution in India by analysing patterns of divorce and separation and their association with selected demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. The analysis focuses on trends, regional variations, gender

differences, rural–urban patterns and other relevant sociological dimensions.

3.2 Sources of Secondary Data

The study draws upon multiple reliable secondary sources to develop a broader understanding of marital dissolution in India. The major sources include:

- **Census of India:** Census data, particularly marital-status tables, are used to examine the distribution of married, divorced and separated populations across age, sex, rural–urban residence and different regions of India.
- **National Family Health Survey (NFHS):** NFHS data are used to examine relevant demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, including education, employment, age at marriage, household characteristics and other factors associated with marital relationships.
- **Government and Official Reports:** Relevant reports and statistical publications of government institutions are used to supplement demographic findings and provide contextual information.
- **Judicial and Institutional Data:** Available official data on matrimonial and family-related cases are used as supplementary evidence to understand the institutional dimension of marital dissolution.
- **Published Research:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, research reports and other scholarly publications are used to develop the theoretical and empirical context and support the interpretation of findings.

The collected secondary data are analysed using percentages, trend analysis and comparative analysis. Comparisons are made across gender, age, rural–urban residence and regions, wherever comparable data are available. Tables and graphical representations are used to present the major findings clearly. Since the sources differ in their definitions, time periods and methods of data collection, comparisons are made only where the variables are sufficiently comparable. Divorce and separation are treated as related but distinct forms of marital dissolution wherever the available data permit.

The use of multiple secondary sources provides a broader empirical basis for understanding the changing patterns and sociological dimensions of marital dissolution in contemporary India.

4. TRENDS AND PATTERNS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION IN INDIA

Marital dissolution in India is relatively low in comparison with the currently married population, but available Census data indicate gradual changes over time. For the present study, divorce and separation are considered together where comparable historical data are used, since the 2001 Census combined these categories, while the 2011 Census recorded them separately.

4.1 Overall Pattern

The Census-based evidence shows a gradual increase in the proportion of divorced/separated persons among the ever-married population. The increase is more visible among women than men.

Table 1. Divorced/Separated Persons among Ever-Married Population Aged 15+, India

Census Year	Men (%)	Women (%)
1991	0.34	0.65
2001	0.40	0.86
2011	0.53	0.97

Source: *Census of India; Dommaraju (2016)*.

The data indicate that the proportion increased from 0.34% to 0.53% among men and from 0.65% to 0.97% among women between 1991 and 2011. Although the overall proportion remains small, the upward movement suggests changing patterns of marital dissolution.

4.2 Gender Pattern

A clear gender difference is visible in the data. Women consistently record a higher proportion of divorced/separated persons than men. In 2011, the proportion among women was almost twice that among men.

Table 2. Divorced/Separated Population by Sex, 2011

Sex	Divorced/Separated (%)
Men	0.53
Women	0.97

Source: *Census of India, 2011; Dommaraju (2016)*.

This difference may be associated with gender differences in remarriage, social norms, economic dependence and the consequences of marital breakdown.

4.3 Age Pattern

Marital dissolution also varies across age groups. Census 2011 provides marital-status data by age and sex, showing that the proportion of divorced/separated persons generally becomes

more visible in the middle-age groups, particularly among women.

Table 3. Broad Age Pattern of Divorced/Separated Persons, 2011

Age group	General pattern
15–24	Relatively low
25–34	Increasing
35–44	High, particularly among women
45–49	Remains relatively high
50+	Influenced increasingly by widowhood and remarriage

Source: *Census of India, 2011, C-02*.

The age pattern suggests that marital dissolution is closely connected with the duration and life-course experience of marriage.

4.4 Rural–Urban Pattern

The rural–urban difference is relatively modest, indicating that marital dissolution is not exclusively an urban phenomenon.

Table 4. Divorced/Separated Population by Rural–Urban Residence, 2011

Residence	Men (%)	Women (%)
Rural	0.52	0.94
Urban	0.55	1.04

Source: *Census of India; Dommaraju (2016)*.

Urban women recorded a slightly higher proportion than rural women, while the difference among men was very small. This suggests that factors associated with urbanisation may influence marital dissolution, but place of residence alone cannot explain the pattern.

4.5 Overall Trend

Overall, the Census evidence indicates that marital dissolution in India remains relatively uncommon but has shown a gradual increase in recorded prevalence. The higher figures among women and the variations across age and residence demonstrate that marital dissolution is a socially differentiated phenomenon rather than a uniform national trend. These patterns provide the basis for examining the wider sociological determinants of marital dissolution in the following section.

Source: *Census of India, 2001 and 2011; Dommaraju (2016)*.

5. SOCIOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION

Marital dissolution is shaped by multiple demographic, socioeconomic and cultural factors. In India, changes in education, women's economic position, age at marriage, urbanisation and gender relations have influenced expectations surrounding marriage. The available secondary literature and demographic data suggest that these factors often operate together rather than independently.

5.1 Education and Changing Expectations

Education can influence marital relationships by increasing awareness, autonomy and expectations of equality between spouses. Higher educational attainment may also improve access to employment and economic resources. Research by **Maiti (2024)** found an association between educational differences between spouses and the likelihood of divorce or separation, particularly when women had higher educational attainment than their husbands. This suggests that changing educational and gender relations may contribute to the renegotiation of traditional marital roles.

5.2 Age at Marriage

Age at marriage is another important factor associated with marital outcomes. Increasing age at marriage is generally accompanied by greater educational attainment, employment opportunities and individual decision-making. Census data also show a gradual increase in the age at marriage in India. However, the relationship between age at marriage and marital dissolution is complex and may vary according to social and economic circumstances.

5.3 Women's Economic Independence

Women's participation in education and employment can increase their economic autonomy and capacity to make independent decisions. Economic independence may make it more feasible for women to leave marriages that are characterised by persistent conflict or inequality. Thus, higher marital dissolution may sometimes reflect greater agency rather than simply greater marital instability.

5.4 Gender Relations and Domestic Violence

Gender inequality remains an important factor in understanding marital breakdown. Domestic violence, unequal household responsibilities and restrictions on women's autonomy can create conditions of marital conflict. Studies based on Indian demographic data have found an association between domestic violence and marital dissolution. In such circumstances, separation or divorce may represent an attempt to exit an unequal or harmful relationship rather than merely a rejection of marriage.

5.5 Urbanisation and Family Structure

Urbanisation, migration and the growth of nuclear households have altered traditional systems of family support and regulation. Urban residents may have greater access to employment, education, legal services and alternative social networks. At the same time, reduced involvement of extended family members may change the ways marital conflicts are managed. However, Census evidence shows that rural–urban differences in marital dissolution are relatively small, suggesting that urbanisation alone cannot explain the phenomenon.

5.6 Regional and Cultural Factors

India's diverse cultural and regional contexts also influence marital relationships. Marriage practices, kinship systems, religious norms, attitudes towards divorce and gender expectations differ considerably across regions and communities. The substantial regional variation observed in Census data therefore suggests that marital dissolution should be understood within its specific social and cultural context. Overall, marital dissolution in contemporary India appears to be associated with an interaction of education, age at marriage, women's economic autonomy, gender relations, domestic violence, urbanisation, family structure and regional-cultural factors. These determinants should not be viewed as isolated causes; rather, they reflect broader changes occurring within the institution of marriage and the Indian family.

6. REGIONAL, GENDER AND SOCIOECONOMIC VARIATIONS IN MARITAL DISSOLUTION

Marital dissolution is not distributed uniformly across India. Available evidence shows substantial variation by region, gender, place of residence and socioeconomic characteristics. Census and NFHS data provide useful evidence for examining these differences.

6.1 Regional Variation

Recent analysis of NFHS-5 (2019–21) data shows considerable regional variation in marital dissolution among ever-married women aged 15–49 years. The overall prevalence was comparatively higher in the North-East and South than in the northern and central regions.

Table 1. Regional Prevalence of Marital Dissolution among Ever-Married Women, NFHS-5 (2019–21)

Region	Divorced (%)	Separated (%)	Dissolved Marriage (%)
North	0.37	0.59	0.96
Central	0.35	0.67	1.02

East	0.30	0.91	1.21
North-East	0.71	1.29	2.00
South	—	—	Higher than national average

Source: Sahoo et al., NFHS-5 (2019–21).

The particularly high levels in parts of the North-East and South suggest that regional cultural practices, kinship systems, women's social position and patterns of socioeconomic transformation may influence marital dissolution. Sahoo et al. also report substantial state-level differences, with Mizoram and Meghalaya among the states showing particularly high levels.

6.2 Gender Variation

Gender is an important dimension of marital dissolution. Census-based evidence indicates that women constitute a larger proportion of the divorced/separated population than men. This difference may reflect variations in remarriage, economic dependence, childcare responsibilities and social norms surrounding marital breakdown.

Table 2. Divorced/Separated Population by Sex, India

Sex	Divorced/Separated (%)
Men	0.53
Women	0.97

Source: Census of India, 2011; Dommaraju (2016).

The higher proportion among women does not necessarily imply that women experience more marital conflict in every context. It may also indicate differences in remarriage patterns and the likelihood of remaining in a separated or divorced status.

6.3 Rural–Urban Variation

Place of residence also shows some variation. Census-based evidence suggests that the rural–urban difference is relatively modest, although urban women have somewhat higher recorded levels. More recent NFHS-5 research similarly identifies urban residence as a significant correlate of marital dissolution among women.

Table 3. Rural–Urban Pattern of Divorced/Separated Population, 2011

Residence	Men (%)	Women (%)
Rural	0.52	0.94
Urban	0.55	1.04

Source: Census of India; Dommaraju (2016).

Thus, urbanisation may provide greater access to employment, legal services and alternative social networks, but it should not be regarded as a single or sufficient explanation for marital dissolution.

6.4 Socioeconomic Variation

Socioeconomic conditions also influence marital dissolution. Recent NFHS-based research found higher levels of dissolution among economically disadvantaged women and identified poverty, child marriage, educational differences between spouses and spousal violence among significant correlates.

Table 4. Major Socioeconomic Correlates of Marital Dissolution

Factor	General association reported in research
Poverty	Higher risk of marital dissolution
Educational gap between spouses	Higher risk in some groups
Child marriage	Higher risk
Spousal violence	Strong positive association
Urban residence	Higher prevalence among women
Childlessness/infertility	Higher risk

Source: Sahoo et al., NFHS-5 analysis.

6.5 Overall Observation

The evidence demonstrates that marital dissolution in India is socially and geographically differentiated. The relatively higher levels observed in parts of the South and North-East, the higher recorded prevalence among women, and the association with socioeconomic disadvantage and other demographic factors indicate that marital dissolution cannot be explained through a single national pattern.

7. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of the study indicate that marital dissolution in India remains relatively low in overall prevalence, but it has become an increasingly visible dimension of changing family relations. Census-based evidence shows a gradual increase in the proportion of divorced or separated persons between 1991 and 2011, although the change should not be interpreted as a uniform or dramatic rise in divorce across the country. The findings instead point towards a gradual transformation in the ways marital relationships are experienced and maintained.

A particularly important finding is the clear gender difference in marital dissolution. Women consistently record higher proportions of divorced or separated status than men. This difference may be related to variations in remarriage,

economic dependence, childcare responsibilities and social expectations. It also suggests that marital dissolution has different social meanings and consequences for men and women. Therefore, gender needs to remain central to any sociological interpretation of divorce and separation in India.

The study also identifies considerable regional variation. Higher levels of marital dissolution in some southern and north-eastern regions, compared with several northern regions, indicate that India's experience of marital breakdown is strongly influenced by regional social and cultural contexts. Differences in kinship systems, marriage practices, women's social position, community norms and levels of socioeconomic transformation may contribute to these variations. Hence, the Indian family cannot be understood through a single national model.

The relatively modest rural–urban difference is another significant finding. Although urban women show somewhat higher levels of marital dissolution, the difference between rural and urban populations is not sufficiently large to suggest that urbanisation alone explains changing marital patterns. Urbanisation may instead operate through other factors such as education, employment, economic independence, migration and changing family structures.

The findings further indicate the importance of education and socioeconomic conditions. Education may increase individual autonomy and awareness of rights, while economic independence can enhance the ability to make decisions concerning marital relationships. At the same time, poverty, educational differences between spouses and domestic violence may increase marital vulnerability. These relationships demonstrate that marital dissolution is shaped by an interaction between individual circumstances and wider social structures.

An important sociological implication of the findings is that increasing marital dissolution should not automatically be interpreted as the decline of the family. In some circumstances, divorce or separation may reflect greater individual agency, changing expectations of equality, or the ability to leave relationships characterised by violence or persistent conflict. At the same time, dissolution can generate economic, social and psychological difficulties, particularly for women and children. Thus, marital dissolution represents both a consequence of social transformation and a process through which family relations themselves are being renegotiated.

Overall, the findings support the view that contemporary Indian marriage is undergoing gradual rather than complete transformation. Traditional expectations continue to influence marital relationships, while education, economic change, gender equality and individual autonomy are creating new expectations from marriage. Marital dissolution should therefore be understood not simply as the ending of a marital

relationship but as an important indicator of the changing relationship between individual choice, family obligations and social institutions in contemporary India.

8. CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that marital dissolution in India remains relatively low in comparison with the overall married population, but it has gradually gained social significance. The analysis of secondary data indicates variations in marital dissolution across gender, age, region, rural–urban residence and socioeconomic conditions. Women show a comparatively higher prevalence of divorce and separation, while regional differences suggest that cultural practices, kinship systems and levels of social transformation play an important role.

The study also indicates that factors such as education, age at marriage, women's economic independence, domestic violence, changing gender relations and socioeconomic conditions are associated with marital dissolution. However, these factors do not operate independently; rather, they interact with broader social and cultural structures.

Importantly, increasing marital dissolution should not automatically be understood as the decline of the Indian family. In some situations, divorce or separation may reflect greater individual autonomy, changing expectations of equality and the ability to move away from unsatisfactory or harmful relationships. At the same time, marital dissolution can create economic, social and emotional challenges, particularly for women and children.

Overall, marital dissolution can be viewed as an important indicator of the ongoing transformation of marriage and family relations in contemporary India. The findings suggest that the institution of marriage is neither simply disappearing nor remaining unchanged; instead, it is being gradually reshaped by changing social values, gender relations, education, economic conditions and individual aspirations.

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