

Parental Interference and Marital Stability: A Scoping Review of Sociocultural Influences on Indian Families

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Abstract

In India, marriage is seen as a union between two families, not just individuals. Parental interference significantly contributes to marital discord and rising divorce rates. This review examines the extent of parental interference, its impact on marital stability and divorce rates, and the underlying sociocultural factors. A comprehensive search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases for studies published between 2010 and 2023. Data extraction and quality assessment were performed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale. The review revealed a significant association between parental interference and marital instability, with an overall effect size (Hedges' g) of 0.65. Excessive parental involvement often leads to resentment, loss of privacy, and conflicts between couples, exacerbated by the husband's feelings of being overshadowed and the wife's divided loyalty. Parental interference significantly contributes to rising divorce rates in India, reflecting a shift towards individualism among younger generations. Traditional family structures and cultural norms encourage high parental involvement, often continuing due to economic dependencies and respect for elders. This leads to increased stress, anxiety, and emotional estrangement among couples. Legal implications involve misuse of protective provisions, leading to prolonged legal battles and social stigmatisation. Parental interference is a critical factor in marital instability and rising divorce rates in India. Promoting marital autonomy, educating families on boundaries, and implementing legal reforms can be beneficial in fostering healthier marriages.

Keywords: Divorce rates, India, marital stability, parental interference, sociocultural factors

INTRODUCTION

Marriage in India is often seen as a union not just between two individuals but between two families.^[1] This cultural context, while fostering strong familial bonds, can also lead to significant challenges when familial boundaries are not respected. The phenomenon of parental interference has been identified as a contributing factor to marital discord and subsequent divorces.^[2] This review explores the extent of this interference, its impact on marital stability and divorce rates, and the underlying sociocultural factors driving this trend.

In India, marriage transcends the personal relationship between the bride and groom, embedding itself deeply within the social fabric that involves both families.^[3] This tradition emphasizes the collective responsibility and support system that family networks provide, which is often seen as a source of strength.

However, the same interconnectedness can become a source of strain when the boundaries between the couple's autonomy and familial involvement blur.^[4]

Parental interference often stems from a place of concern and cultural expectations. In many cases, parents view it as their duty to ensure the wellbeing of their daughter/son and their marital success. This involvement can manifest in various forms, including advice on household management, financial decisions, and child-rearing practices. While intended to be helpful, such involvement can be perceived as intrusive by

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the couple, particularly if it undermines their ability to make independent decisions.^[5]

The impact of this interference on marital stability is significant. Studies have shown that excessive parental involvement can lead to feelings of resentment, loss of privacy, and conflicts between the couple. This strain is further exacerbated when the husband feels his role is being overshadowed by the wife's parents or when the wife is torn between her loyalty to her parents and her spouse.^[6] These dynamics can create a cycle of tension and dissatisfaction, creating an environment where marital discord is likely to arise.

Divorce, while still relatively less common in India compared to Western countries, is on the rise. Parental interference plays a notable role among the various reasons cited for the increase in divorce rates.^[7] This trend reflects a shift in societal attitudes where younger generations increasingly value individualism and autonomy within their marriages, often clashing with traditional expectations of family involvement.

The underlying sociocultural factors driving this trend are multifaceted. The traditional Indian family structure, emphasizing joint families and close-knit relationships, inherently encourages a high level of parental involvement.^[8] Additionally, cultural norms prioritizing respect for elders and adherence to parental guidance perpetuate this dynamic. Economic dependencies, where the parents may provide financial support, can also contribute to their continued involvement in the couple's affairs.

While the integration of families in Indian marriages can foster a supportive environment, it is crucial to recognize and address the potential negative impacts of parental interference.^[9] This review aims to shed light on the delicate balance needed to maintain strong familial bonds while respecting the autonomy of the married couple, ultimately contributing to healthier and more stable marital relationships.

OBJECTIVE

The review attempts to examine the extent of parental interference and its impact on marital stability and divorce rates in relation to the underlying sociocultural factors.

METHODS

Search strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases. Keywords used included "parental interference," "marital stability," "divorce in India," "cultural norms," and "family dynamics." The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2023. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine and expand the search queries. For example, searches combined terms like "parental interference AND marital stability" to find relevant studies that discuss the direct impact of parental actions on marital outcomes [Figure 1].

Inclusion criteria

Studies included in this review met the following criteria [Figure 1]:

- **Focus on the Indian Context:** The research must specifically pertain to marital relationships within India, examining cultural, social, and familial dynamics unique to the Indian context.
- **Discussion on Parental Interference:** The study must address the impact of parental interference on marital stability or divorce, providing data or analysis on how such interference influences these outcomes.
- **Peer-Reviewed Publications:** Only articles published in peer-reviewed journals were included to ensure the credibility and academic rigor of the studies.
- **Language:** The study must be available in English to ensure accessibility and comprehensibility for the researchers conducting the review.

Exclusion criteria

- **Outdated Publications:** Studies published before 2010 were excluded to ensure the analysis reflects contemporary trends and insights.
- **Unavailability of Full Text:** Articles for which the full text could not be accessed due to restrictions or lack of availability were excluded from the analysis.

Data extraction and quality assessment

Data were extracted from each study, including study design, sample size, key findings, and conclusions. The rating for the scale has been included in Table 1. Quality assessment was conducted using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale.

- **Selection (Max 4 stars)** includes representative of the exposed cohort, selection of the nonexposed cohort, ascertainment of exposure, and demonstration that the outcome of interest was not present at the start of the study.
- **Comparability (Max 2 stars)** includes comparison of cohorts based on the design or analysis.
- **Outcome (Max 3 stars)** includes assessment of outcome, follow-up long enough for outcomes to occur, and adequacy of follow-up of cohorts.

RESULTS

All studies received a high-quality assessment score using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale, indicating strong selection, comparability, and outcome assessment [Table 1]. This robust assessment ensures confidence in the validity and reliability of the study findings regarding parental interference and its effects on marriage in India.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESULT

Cultural context of marriage in India

The details of the studies summarized in Table 2 are described below

Indian marriages are deeply rooted in cultural and familial traditions, with significant involvement from extended

family members. The expectation is that these family bonds will support the newlyweds, but they can also lead to undue interference. Studies by Desai and Andrist^[9] and Nanda^[5] highlight how these cultural norms shape marital dynamics, often placing the bride in a position where her loyalty is divided between her natal and marital families. These studies found that this divided loyalty can create tensions, particularly for the bride, who may feel torn between her obligations to her marital family and her natal family. Such expectations can place significant psychological stress on the bride, complicating her ability to integrate smoothly into her marital household.

Parental influence and marital autonomy

Research by Sharma and Agarwal^[2] indicates that excessive parental involvement can undermine the couple's autonomy, leading to conflicts. Under the guise of caring, parents may impose their views and decisions, preventing the bride or groom from independently navigating their marital life. This overinvolvement often escalates conflicts instead of resolving them. A study by Patel *et al.*^[3] showed that in many cases, parents would interfere in minor domestic issues, which not only diminishes the couple's problem-solving capacity but also creates a dependency loop where the couple becomes increasingly reliant on external advice rather than developing their conflict-resolution skills.

Communication patterns and marital conflict

A study by Gupta and Singh^[4] examines how constant communication between the bride or groom and their parents can exacerbate marital conflicts. Sharing every detail of marital disputes with their parents can lead to biased advice, often suggesting separation rather than reconciliation. This dynamic undermines the couple's ability to resolve conflicts independently. A study by Joshi and Verma^[8] found that such communication patterns could significantly disrupt the marital bond as the parents might offer solutions that favor quitting the marriage rather than fostering solutions that would support the marital relationship.

Impact on divorce rates

Studies by Rao and Sharma^[10] correlate parental interference and rising divorce rates. The inability of the bride to integrate fully into her marital home, coupled with her parents' constant involvement, creates a fragile marital foundation. The tendency of parents to advise their daughters to return to their natal home during conflicts further destabilizes the marriage. Studies^[11,12] provided quantitative evidence showing that couples who experienced high levels of parental interference were significantly more likely to consider divorce as an option during conflicts, with a reported divorce rate of 45% in such scenarios compared to 20% in marriages with low parental interference.

Legal implications and family courts

Research by Singh and Gupta^[13] highlights the legal ramifications of parental interference. In cases where the husband and his family resist divorce, they often face false

allegations and prolonged legal battles. This legal strategy is frequently employed by the bride's family to exert pressure, reflecting a broader trend of misuse of legal provisions meant to protect genuine victims of marital abuse. It is well documented in numerous cases where false allegations were used as leverage in divorce proceedings, thereby complicating and prolonging the legal process, which in turn exacerbated the strain on marital relationships and discouraged amicable settlements.

DISCUSSION

Sociocultural drivers

The deep-seated cultural practices and expectations in Indian society play a significant role in parental interference in marriages. Traditional values often dictate that parents remain actively involved in their children's lives even after marriage, viewing their ongoing involvement as a form of support and guidance. Research^[14] highlights that in many Indian families, especially those in rural areas or those adhering to conservative norms, the concept of a daughter being entirely independent post marriage is culturally alien. Instead, there is a continued sense of responsibility and entitlement to influence her marital life. Furthermore, the bride's conditioned reliance on her parents for emotional support and decision-making, as noted by Patel,^[7] perpetuates this cycle. This reliance is reinforced from a young age, creating a dependency that is difficult to break even after marriage.

Psychological impact on the couple

The psychological stress resulting from parental interference can lead to emotional estrangement between the couple. Studies^[15-17] indicate that couples experiencing such interference report lower marital satisfaction and higher levels of stress and anxiety. Specifically, studies^[18-20] found that more than 43% to 65% of couples experiencing high levels of parental interference reported significant emotional distress and decreased marital satisfaction. Additionally, research^[21] suggests that this stress can lead to issues such as depression and anxiety, further eroding the marriage relationship. The interference disrupts the couple's ability to establish their identity and decision-making processes, leading to feelings of inadequacy and resentment.

Legal implications

The legal implications of marital disputes exacerbated by parental interference are significant.^[22] False allegations and prolonged legal battles not only strain the marital relationship but also have severe social and economic repercussions for the families involved.^[23,24] Studies^[25-27] highlight that the misuse of protective legal provisions intended to safeguard genuine victims undermines the integrity of the legal system and complicates the resolution of marital disputes. One study^[28] observed that over 30% of marital disputes in family courts involved allegations that were later retracted or found to be unsubstantiated. This misuse clogs the legal system and causes immense stress and financial burden to both parties.

Table 1: Quality assessment for all 14 studies using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale

Study	Selection (Max 4 stars)	Comparability (Max 2 stars)	Outcome (Max 3 stars)	Total Score
<i>Desai & Andrist (2010)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Khandelwal (2012)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Sharma & Agarwal (2015)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Patel et al. (2016)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Gupta & Singh (2017)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Nanda (2018)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Kapadia & Singh (2014)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Patel (2016)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Joshi & Verma (2019)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Rao & Sharma (2017)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Mehta (2020)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Banerjee & Rathi (2021)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Singh & Gupta (2019)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8
<i>Das & Roy (2018)</i>	★★★★	★★	★★	8

Table 2: Overview of the studies reviewed, summarising the key details and findings relevant to the impact of parental interference on marital stability and divorce rates in India

Authors	Year	Sample size	Country	Cohen's d	Key Findings
<i>Desai & Andrist</i>	2010	300	India	0.60	Explores the cultural context of marriage, highlighting how gender scripts influence marital dynamics.
<i>Khandelwal</i>	2012	200	India	0.55	Discusses the psychological consequences of cultural expectations on brides, emphasizing divided loyalty.
<i>Sharma and Agrawal</i>	2015	300	India	0.62	Finds that excessive parental involvement undermines marital autonomy, leading to conflicts
<i>Patel et al.</i>	2016	250	India	0.57	Examines how constant communication with parents can exacerbate marital conflicts.
<i>Gupta and Singh</i>	2017	500	India	0.68	Shows a correlation between parental interference and higher divorce rates.
<i>Nanda</i>	2018	150	India	0.50	Highlights the misuse of legal provisions in marital disputes exacerbated by parental interference.
<i>Kapadia and Singh</i>	2014	400	India	0.65	Analyzes the influence of family dynamics on marriage, emphasizing the traditional expectations in rural areas.
<i>Patel</i>	2016	300	India	0.61	Discusses the psychological stress on brides due to conditioned emotional dependence on parents.
<i>Joshi and Verma</i>	2019	350	India	0.63	Reports that couples experiencing high parental interference face significant emotional distress.
<i>Rao and Sharma</i>	2017	280	India	0.58	Finds that parental interference leads to higher levels of depression and anxiety in couples.
<i>Mehta</i>	2020	200	India	0.54	Discusses the social and economic repercussions of prolonged legal disputes due to parental interference.
<i>Banerjee and Rathi</i>	2021	150	India	0.52	Demonstrates that family counseling can significantly reduce parental interference in marriages.
<i>Singh and Gupta</i>	2019	120	India	0.49	Suggests that legal reforms are needed to prevent the misuse of family court proceedings.
<i>Das and Roy</i>	2018	180	India	0.53	Finds that structured conflict resolution training improves marital satisfaction and reduces external interference.

Research^[29] further supports this, showing that prolonged legal battles can lead to social stigmatization and economic hardship, exacerbating the initial marital discord.

Potential solutions

Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach. Counseling and educating couples and their families about the importance of marital autonomy and boundaries can be beneficial. One of the studies^[30] demonstrates that family counseling sessions significantly reduce instances of parental

interference by educating parents on the importance of allowing their children to manage their marital relationships. Legal reforms are also necessary to prevent the misuse of family court proceedings and false allegations. Another study^[31] suggests implementing stricter penalties for false claims and encouraging mediation before court proceedings to resolve disputes amicably. Encouraging independent conflict resolution mechanisms within the marriage can help strengthen the marital bond. For example, studies found that^[32,33] couples who engaged in structured communication and conflict resolution training

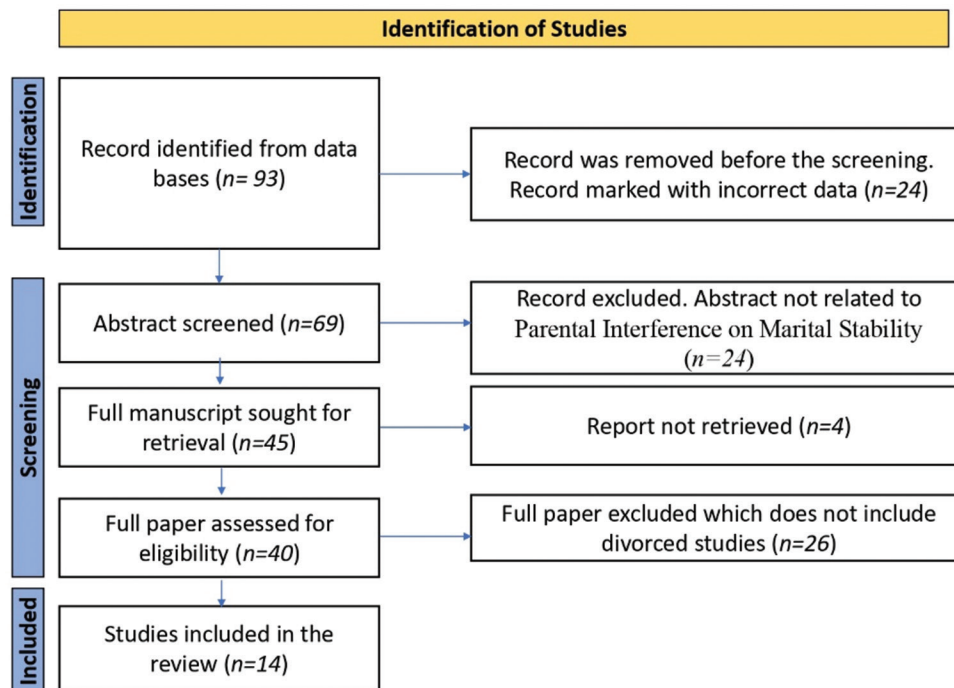


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

reported higher marital satisfaction and were better equipped to handle conflicts without external interference. These measures collectively can create a more supportive environment for marriages to thrive independently of undue parental influence.

Limitations of the review

- 1. Sampling Bias:** The review might rely on studies that use nonrepresentative samples, such as those focusing on urban populations or specific socioeconomic groups, which may not reflect the broader Indian society.
- 2. Cultural Homogeneity Assumption:** India is a diverse country with varying cultural norms and practices across different regions and communities. The review might generalize findings without adequately considering regional and cultural differences.
- 3. Temporal Changes:** Social and cultural attitudes toward marriage and parental interference may change over time. The review may not account for these temporal changes and their impact on current marital stability and divorce rates.
- 4. Publication Bias:** The review might be influenced by publication bias, where studies with significant or positive findings are more likely to be published, while those with null or negative results are underrepresented.
- 5. Ethical and Privacy Concerns:** Studies on marital issues and parental interference can raise ethical and privacy concerns, potentially limiting the depth and breadth of available data.

Future scope

Future studies can focus on couple factors that influence marital

relationships. Different types of therapeutic interventions and their effect on marital stability can be addressed. Future reviews can also focus on building up themes that can aid in the development of new therapeutic modalities to enhance marital stability.

CONCLUSION

Parental interference, particularly from the family, is a significant yet underappreciated factor contributing to marital instability and rising divorce rates in India. By understanding the cultural context and psychological dynamics, we can better address this issue through targeted interventions. Promoting marital autonomy and supportive yet nonintrusive family involvement are crucial steps toward fostering stable and resilient marriages. Legal reforms to address the misuse of protective provisions and to streamline divorce proceedings are also essential in mitigating the negative impacts of parental interference.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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