# Impact of Divorce on Children, Family, and Society: An Analysis

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**Abstract** – Marriage has been considered the foundation of the family and accepted as a social institution across all societies and civilizations in the past and present. However, dissolution of marriage by formal divorce, or separation of the spouses is on the rise in recent years. The marriage process is diverse among different communities, religions, and societies. The current study is focused on Hindu marriage and divorce in India. The impact of divorce on children, spouses, their families, and society at large has been discussed and analyzed.

**Keywords –** Marriage, separation, divorce, physical health, anxiety, depression.

## I.    Introduction

Human society is experiencing a paradigm shift with respect to its structure, stability,  and prospects throughout the world.  Globalization is the major phenomenon that is involved in the process. Increased human mobility and cross-cultural connections for social, economic, and other day-to-day activities have been made easy through modern technologies. The synergistic influence of all these factors has brought commendable changes in fundamental social institutions like marriage.

Most matrimonial laws define marriage as the  union of two persons with a defined set of duties and legal rights imparted to each spouse [1].  In Indian communities,  family, marriage, and divorce are deeply connected with religious beliefs, and the wedding ceremony is often dominated by religious customs and rituals [2]. These traditional practices are considered the essence of the matrimonial relationship defining the roles, responsibilities, and duties of the spouses in the family and hence strengthening the whole institution of marriage [3]

Marriage is an essential institution in most communities  [1]  and imparts stability to society at large. Marriage has a long history in human civilization and is considered as an integral part of human life. Marriage provides stability to society through the concept of family, the fundamental unit of society. Family provides social, psychological, emotional, ethical, and economic security for individuals. Therefore, healthy family structure and relations are vital for individual human life and society. A healthy society alone can evolve into a decent and successful civilization.

Marriage has got great relevance in Hinduism and is considered a sacrosanct union of the bodies and souls of the spouses with a set of socio-religious duties. Dharma (Duty), Artha (Wealth), Kama (worldly desires), and Moksha  (liberation of the soul) are called the four purusharthas (goals of life) in the Sanathana  Dharma, popularly known as Hinduism today.    Marriage is considered the accepted norm for attaining these purusharthas  by both spouses.  Maintaining mutual trust, support, and love is considered as *Dharma* or righteousness for the spouses. All these ancient customs and rules have in fact given equal status to both husband and wife. However,  several distortions brought by immature intellectuals over a long period of time have turned the whole system to be biased towards the husband, making the whole system to be male-dominated.   This has led to the entry and customization of many social evils like sati, dowry,  etc. as parts of marriage [4] during different periods of history.

Even now, majority of the Hindu marriages are arranged marriages, which in fact practically happen between two families rather than two individuals [4], as the involvement, responsibilities, and duties associated with family members other than the spouses, also count toward a large extent in the execution and continuation of the marriages.   Therefore, there is little or no space for the dissolution of marriage in Hindu society [4, 5].  Hence, the majority of the couple with discord in their marriage, end up in separation without formal divorce in India, especially among the Hindus.    In fact, it has been reported that the separation rate is more than three times that of divorce[6].

Marriage is a social institution that evolved along with human civilizations across the world. The purpose of marriage is interpreted differently among different societies and religions. However, the union of the  two spouses and raising an authentic family have been  accepted as the basic purpose of marriage  among all societies and religions  [5]. Hindu marriages in India used to be arranged marriages only, and the selection of spouses was done by the parents or relatives without the involvement of the spouses. This custom prevailed till the end of the 19th century and the age of marriage also was very low always below 10 years for the girl and below 15 years for the groom. This system has undergone a slow and progressive transformation during the 20th century, in a healthy and meaningful way, by way of introducing a provision for the interaction of the would-be spouses before marriage, getting the consent of both spouses in the spouse selection process, and change in the age of marriage for both the spouses in arranged marriages and also acceptance of self

–selected spouses by the parents and families in rare cases, if all other traditional factors are matching. However, the transformation in the marriage process turned to a bad and later perilous turn during the latter half of the 20th century and the 21st century. A lot of transformations have happened in Hindu marriage in terms of rituals, tradition, legal aspects, age at the time of marriage, etc., and accommodation of prohibited aspects like inter-caste marriage, divorce, remarriage, etc. [7]. Today society is in bewilderment regarding the institution of marriage, as frequencies of challenges like dowry, separation, divorce, etc. reaching terrific heights.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, divorce is "the formal legal dissolution of a legally constituted marriage." [1]. In general, almost all societies consider divorce negatively [8]. The laws governing divorce among different communities are different in India. Of all, the grounds prescribed for divorce in the Hindu marriage Act, 1955 is more stringent [5]. But still, divorce and separations thrive across all communities across India. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, divorce is "the formal legal dissolution of a legally constituted marriage." [1]. In general, almost all societies consider divorce negatively [8]. The laws governing divorce among different communities are different in India. Of all, the grounds prescribed for divorce in the Hindu Marriage Act, of 1955 is more stringent [5]. But still, divorce and separations thrive across all communities across India.

A holistic study on divorce cases in India is lagging when compared to the Western countries and hence there is a real need for detailed investigations on all aspects of divorce [9]. Despite having a formal registry of data on divorce, it has been reported based on information from family courts [10], a phenomenal increase in divorce applications, especially in the urban communities of cities like Bengaluru, Mumbai, Delhi, Lucknow, Kolkata, etc. [11]. Credibility, trust, and respect towards marriage are waning in society in recent years across the world. This trend is obvious in Indian communities, as well, which were considered to be very much intact and resistant to divorce in the past. As opined by Maitra and Gayathri [10], our understanding of all aspects of divorce and its implications is based more on opinions than on real facts. Even though official reports and statistics show divorce rates as low as 1-2% in India, this may not be the case in reality as many of the cases never get reported. A notable increase in the divorce rates in India has been reported, using comprehensive data-driven studies based on census [6, 12]. These studies have observed regional diversity in the rate of divorce in India, Gujarat is the top state in terms of divorce rate. Another important outcome of the above study is the conditions of divorce and separation, the latter being almost treble of the former, indicating the practical reality of marriage dissolution. The long route of law involved in the execution of formal divorce and the social stigma associated with divorce, which makes many cases remain unreported has been identified as the major factors for the unavailability of real data on divorce in India [13, 14].

This study is focused on the impact of divorce on the children, family, and society in general, based on a literature review using keywords like the dissolution of marriage, marriage longevity, divorce, separation of spouses, parenting, family, etc.

## II. Impact of divorce on children

Many investigations have been carried out on the impact of parental divorce on children since the 1960s and the performance of these kids are found to be poor in several psychological, behavioral, and cognitive aspects. Parental conflicts act as a source of chronic stress among children [15]. Children of separated parents are the most affected sector because of divorce. Children of all ages get seriously affected by the separation of their parents. They develop multitudes of physical and mental disorders (Fig.1), depending on their age of exposure to the situation. Psychosis has been reported as a common outcome of parental separation in children across the world [16]. According to psychiatrists, adversities of emotional imbalance of parental separation can develop in children even before birth, as the fetus feels the impact from the age of 6 months onwards and continues the same after birth [17]. All of them have the tendency to accept fighting as the right relationship between spouses and tend to express abusive behavior with their life partners in the future. The chances of divorce among children of broken families are comparatively higher. Another common trend is that the children of divorced parents will not have love and respect for their parents [17].

Children of divorced parents are reported to have hardships in academic performance, poor social skills, and interpersonal relations with parents [18] and are more prone to exhibit behavioral disorders [19]. In addition to cognitive or behavioral impairments, the children of separated parents are at risk of developing physical or physiological health problems like asthma, headache, speech disorders, compromised immunity, etc. [20]. In a recent analysis of the children of divorced parents in Karnataka, Eshwarappa has reported problems in physical health, depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic disorders are widespread among children of broken families. [15]. Repercussions of divorce or separation are not limited to emotional and physical health. The financial burden faced by the separated couple and subsequently the children is another huge challenge for the family [12]. Even the parents of the couple are also burdened with the financial aftermath of separated families depending on the situation.
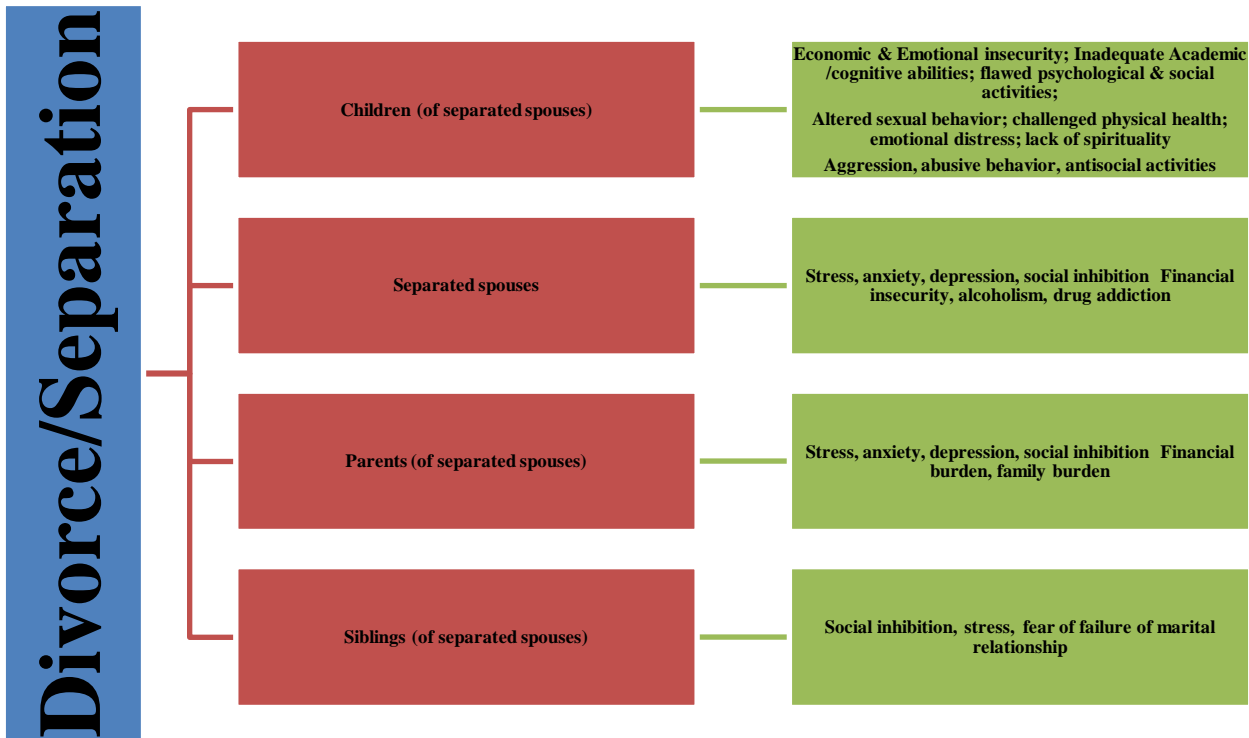
Fig. 1. Effect of divorce or separation on children, spouses and the family [18, 19, 20,21]

## III.  Impact of divorce on spouses and their Families

Divorce of any married couple has repercussions across their families in multiple forms. The emotional turmoil faced by the couple is huge. Damage to self-esteem and emotional trauma is the primary aftermaths of divorce on both spouses [8, 22]. The financial burden of the separated spouses is much more critical, as they find it very difficult to balance. Divorced women face more problems than men concerning financial burdens [23]. Employment is another domain of separated spouses that get affected due to divorce. According to reports, the quality of work at the place of employment of separated spouses gets affected as manifested by overstaying at the office, long absenteeism, anxiety, stress, and other health problems  [23].

There are few reports from different countries on the influence of the divorced couple on their siblings. According to these, siblings of the divorced couple have a higher risk of divorce in their life [17, 24]. Information on the influence of divorce or separation on the parents of the separated couples is not available, though this is also a crucial aspect in the context of Indian society.

## IV.  Impact of divorce on the society

The influence of divorce or separation of a married couple has multiple reverberations across people and professions. As put forth correctly by Yildirim and Pendergast [25],  "Divorce damages society. It consumes social and human capital and diminishes children's future competence in all five of society's major tasks or institutions: family, school, religion, marketplace, and government". The adverse effects of divorce or separation are massive, and multidimensional,   damaging the future of children, families, and the economy of society at large [21].

## V.  Discussion

Marriage dissolution, separation, or divorce are the three prevailing conditions of broken families in India. There is an obvious incremental trend in these phenomena across the country with regional differences. The longevity of marriages is diminishing very fast as the majority of divorce applications are reported to be less than 5 years [10]. Female literacy, women's equality, and the influence of multiple factors connected with globalization are closely involved in this transformation. Religious rituals, traditional practices, and moral values are on a downward trajectory challenging the foundation of society. A revival of these factors, of course in a modernized way is essential for the sustenance of the family structure and society at large [6,7, 10].

The progress of women in education during the last century is tremendous leading to their empowerment and independence in terms of financial terms, thinking, decision-making,  and excelling in a wide array of professional fields. Professional responsibilities have made

educated women find challenges in the discharge of family responsibilities. Added to this a growing fraction of empowered women, tend to get influenced by women's rights and consider family responsibilities also in those terms. This apparently, acts as an important driving factor in bringing fractures in the family configuration. Therefore, women's education and empowerment programs should ensure the inculcation of values and ethics among empowered women, as the power of women in shaping society through maintaining the integrity of the family has been acknowledged very widely in Indian tradition [ 26]. Meanwhile, the men also need to be educated in terms of sharing the family responsibilities right from domestic chores to parenting.

The concepts of caring and sharing, respecting family members, teamwork, and empathy are inculcated through the traditional way of celebrating festivals and family functions in the Sanathana samskruthi of Indian origin. The adoption of the nuclear family concept and avoidance of participation of children in traditional rituals and family functions crept in during the last few decades slowly but tragically creating fissures in the traditional family structure and its integrity. Adults who grow up in a nuclear family are more prone to problems of adjustment with their spouses and the family of the spouses in their married life.

Divorce is an obstacle in building a healthy society and it is recommended to be avoided totally. In case inevitable, pre-divorce and post-divorce counseling is recommended for the spouses and the children as well to avoid the psychological trauma faced by them [15]. The mental stress and psychological alterations developed during the parental separation will continue to haunt the children throughout their life and hence this issue needs to be addressed. Family therapy and connecting the children of specific age groups with peers of the same age groups facing similar difficulties have been suggested as a remedial measure to minimize the damage to children due to the separation of parents [ 20]. According to studies, about 80% of the families of divorced couples believe that divorce has a negative impact on children [8]. The Supreme Court of India also has observed the seriousness of the negative impact of divorce on children and warned couples involved in domestic fights, of damaging the future of the children and is endorsed by mental health professionals and counselors, and social workers [17].

Most of the studies on the aftereffects of divorce have focused on the issues of the children of the separated spouses and the spouses themselves. Very little information could be collected on the influence of the divorce on the siblings of the divorced couple. While considering the family structure and concept in Indian society, the impact of divorce on extended family members like the siblings and parents of the separated couple needs to be analyzed. Considering the prolonged support of parents extended to children in Indian families, even after their marriage, and also the responsibility of married children to take care of the parents during their old age, the repercussions of broken marriages of children on aged parents cannot be ignored. In the current scenario, many young married couples get separated and terminate their marriage very early. This situation creates an emotional and financial burden to the parents of the such couple, who are either retired or on the verge of retirement. This situation needs to be investigated in Indian communities, as such a context will not be available in other countries.

Attrition of morality is a common factor compounding family disputes in modern society. This is a universal phenomenon and not limited to any gender, caste, or community. This problem needs to be addressed for managing family values and societal integrity. Sanathana Samskruthi (ancient heritage)of India believes on righteousness and defined it as Dharma, which stands unique and single for all human beings irrespective of religion, community, caste, or gender. According to this tradition, every human being is obliged to execute his/her duties and responsibilities to the self, the family, and society throughout life. Therefore, upholding the moral values of human life appears to be the need of the hour for safeguarding families and society in the future.

## VI. Conclusion

Analysis of previous studies on divorce or separation of the spouses has confirmed persistent and perpetuating ill-effects of the process on current and future generations in terms of physical and mental health of a sector of the population. The popular saying "Prevention is better than cure", looks very much relevant in this context, as this affects not only the individuals or family but the society at large. The mental health of people plays a more crucial effect on society than physical health and hence needs to be handled with due importance. Married couples should be more committed to family bonds and relationships and should consider them as a social responsibility and contribute towards building a healthy society and civilization.

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