International Journal Of Advance Research, Ideas And Innovations In Technology

ISSN: 2454-132X
Impact Factor: 6.078
(Volume 12, Issue 3 - V12I3-1141)
Available online at: https://www.ijariit.com

Nuclear Households, Persistent Values: Urbanisation and Family Change in Contemporary India

Abhirath Mehta
1476-as@ppsijc.org
Prabhavati Padamashi Soni International Junior College, Maharashtra

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how urbanisation, economic change, and shifting cultural expectations have reshaped family life in Indian cities across three dimensions: household composition, gender roles, and intergenerational relationships. A structured literature review brings together canonical sociological frameworks, including those of Parsons, Oakley, and Giddens, alongside India-specific scholarship from Uberoi, Gupta, Shah, Desai, Rao, Chakrabarti, Manchanda, and Bhattacharya. Empirical grounding is provided by census data and a 2026 field study of 100 households in Yelahanka, Bangalore. The central finding is that nuclear residential forms have been widely adopted across urban India since 1991, but the obligations and values associated with joint family living have not collapsed alongside them. Women have entered paid employment in considerably larger numbers, yet domestic and caregiving responsibilities have not been redistributed in any proportionate way. Intergenerational financial transfers remain near universal, though physical distance has created measurable social isolation among elderly people in nuclear households. The paper concludes that urban Indian family change is best understood not as modernisation in the Western sociological sense, but as a process of structural adaptation in which residential forms shift while relational premises remain largely intact.

Keywords: *Family Structures, India, Urban.*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's urban population passed 500 million several years ago and shows no sign of stabilising. By 2050, the United Nations projects that figure will nearly double. That scale of movement has consequences for virtually every dimension of social life, and few institutions absorb more of the pressure than the family.

The Indian joint family occupies a peculiar position in sociological writing. It functions simultaneously as an empirical description of how Indians live and as a cultural ideal about how they ought to. These two things have never fully coincided. Joint households were always more common as aspiration than as daily reality, and early scholars who treated them as the default form of Indian social organisation were engaged in as much normative as descriptive work. In cities, the gap between the ideal and the practice has grown wider.

This paper is organised around three questions. How has household composition shifted under urban pressure? How are gender roles being renegotiated, and at what pace? And what has happened to intergenerational relationships when young adults no longer share a roof with their parents? The argument is that urban Indian families have adopted nuclear residential forms without giving up the value system that developed within joint household structures. That combination produces tensions that Western sociological frameworks, built from a different historical experience, are only partially equipped to explain.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Murdock (1949) argued that the nuclear family is universal. Every society, he claimed, depends on it to perform four functions that cannot be delegated elsewhere: sexual regulation, reproduction, economic cooperation, and the socialisation of children. The claim is widely disputed, and the cross-cultural evidence has been turned against it almost as often as it has been used to support it. What survives the critique is something more modest: that urban and industrial conditions tend to favour smaller household units, for material reasons that have little to do with cultural preference.

Parsons (1951) gave this observation its most influential theoretical form. His functional fit theory holds that the nuclear family and industrial capitalism are structurally compatible in a way that the extended family is not. The nuclear unit enables the geographical and social mobility that labour markets require. Parsons further argued that a sex-based division of labour, with men as breadwinners and women as emotional caregivers, was not a historical accident but a structural requirement of this arrangement. Both claims have attracted sustained criticism. But as an initial framework for understanding why urban growth in India has been accompanied by smaller households, functional fit theory has real explanatory purchase, even if it cannot take us very far once we look at the evidence closely.

© 2026, IJARIIT - All rights reserved.

Oakley (1974) demolished the second of Parsons's claims in particular. The domestic role assigned to women is not a functional necessity but a social construction, normalised to the point where it appears natural. The unpaid labour involved in running a household is real labour. Treating it as something other than work is the mechanism by which it remains invisible and unremunerated. Giddens (1992), writing four decades after Parsons, took a different approach. Rather than attacking functional fit directly, he argued that late modernity creates new possibilities for personal relationships. As traditional structures loosen, couples can in principle negotiate the terms of their relationship rather than inheriting them from social convention. He calls this the pure relationship, and it implies a kind of equality between partners that Parsons's framework could not accommodate.

Applying either framework to India requires caution. Uberoi (2003) is perhaps the most careful scholar on this point. She argues that the shift from joint to nuclear cannot be treated as a straightforward developmental sequence in India because jointness was never purely about residence to begin with. It was an ideology, a set of obligations and expectations that could persist even when households physically separated. I.P. Desai (1964) drew the same distinction earlier, coining the term functional jointness to describe nuclear households that maintained strong economic and emotional ties with wider kin. A.M. Shah (1974) stressed the empirical diversity of actual household arrangements, cautioning against treating any single form as either normal or transitional. A.R. Desai (1961), working from a Marxist position, argued that capitalism restructures family organisation without destroying the cultural forms embedded within it.

Later scholars have added texture to this picture. Rao (2008) found that women's educational attainment predicts changing family expectations more reliably than either income or urban residence. Chakrabarti (2015) documented that roughly three-quarters of urban Indian households were dual-income by the mid-2010s, a shift with direct implications for how domestic work gets allocated. Manchanda (2015) tracked the consequences for women specifically, finding that the tension between professional demands and conventional caregiving expectations generates significant personal costs. Bhattacharya (2016) looked at elderly people in nuclear households and found substantially higher rates of reported social isolation than among those living in joint or semi-joint arrangements.

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper uses a structured literature review. Source selection covered multiple theoretical traditions: functionalist, feminist, Marxist, and late modern frameworks are each assessed, and each is placed in dialogue with scholarship focused specifically on India. The three thematic sections draw on this combined body of work, with empirical grounding provided by census data, the secondary sources cited above, and a 2026 micro-sociological field study of 100 households in the Yelahanka suburb of Bangalore (TIJER, 2026). Yelahanka sits within the IT corridor and was selected because it combines high rates of female labour force participation with populations that maintain strong kin networks, making the theoretical tensions visible at the household level.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Urbanisation and Household Composition

Since 1991, household growth in Indian cities has consistently outpaced population growth. More people are living in smaller units. Part of this is straightforwardly material. Urban housing is expensive and scarce. A large multi-generational household in a city flat is a logistical problem that simply did not arise in the same way in rural settings. The daily economic interdependence that gave the joint household its original rationale, shared land, shared labour, shared production, disappears when the household moves to a city where work is waged, external, and individual.

The census figures do not show whether the obligations associated with joint family life have evaporated along with the residential arrangement. The Yelahanka study (TIJER, 2026) suggests they largely have not. The 100 households surveyed were predominantly nuclear, and women's employment in the IT and service sectors was the primary driver. But nearly all of them maintained active support networks with extended kin. Elder care had been reorganised rather than abandoned: financial remittances replaced physical coresidence, and digital contact substituted for daily proximity. The researchers describe this as trans-local support, a phrase that captures both the continuity of obligation and the distances across which it now operates.

Desai (1964) described something similar sixty years ago, though in a rural context. His concept of functional jointness, nuclear residence combined with the continuation of joint obligations, has proved more applicable to urban India than anyone anticipated at the time. Uberoi (2003) makes the theoretical point directly: joint and nuclear are not successive developmental stages but coexisting possibilities that families move between. A.R. Desai (1961) would frame this differently, arguing that capitalism reshapes the structure of family life without touching the cultural forms that give it meaning. WhatsApp groups, festival visits, and arranged marriages sustain kinship networks across distances that earlier generations would not have crossed. The residential form has changed; the relational logic beneath it has not.

4.2 Gender Roles

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 opened service sector employment on a scale that drew large numbers of women into the urban workforce. That much is well documented. What is stated less plainly is that their entry into paid work has not produced anything like a proportionate redistribution of unpaid domestic work. Gupta (1997) traced this contradiction to the structure of post-liberalisation labour markets and the specific way in which women's roles were absorbed into them: as additional earners, not as people released from the domestic functions they were already performing.

Oakley's (1974) double burden describes the resulting situation with uncomfortable precision. Urban middle-class women in India frequently carry full professional workloads alongside primary responsibility for childcare, cooking, household management, and the maintenance of kin relationships. Manchanda (2015) found that this combination takes measurable tolls on both mental health and career progression. The male breadwinner role has been partially disrupted. The female caregiver role has proved considerably more resistant to change.

Gupta (2012) found that younger, more educated urban couples hold more egalitarian attitudes than previous generations. That is real and should not be dismissed. But egalitarian attitudes and egalitarian practice are different things, and the gap between them is substantial. The Yelahanka study (TIJER, 2026) found that even in dual-earner households, husbands retained dominant authority over major decisions involving property, education, and family planning. Everyday tasks were shared somewhat more equitably, but the structural asymmetry had not dissolved.

Uberoi (2003) locates the explanation in kinship ideology: marriage in India remains the moment at which a woman's social identity is fundamentally reconstituted within her husband's family, and that reconstitution brings obligations that professional standing does not dissolve.

Giddens's (1992) pure relationship captures what many younger urban Indians say they want from a partnership. Whether it describes what they actually have is a different matter. Class, region, caste, and the specific configuration of kin expectations each household faces all produce sharp variation in how far the transformation Giddens describes has actually materialised.

4.3 Intergenerational Relationships

The joint household was, among other things, a system for managing intergenerational obligation. Elders held authority over resources; younger members owed deference and care. That system was not without costs, particularly for women who married into a household where their position at the bottom of the hierarchy was fixed by convention. But it resolved, practically if not always comfortably, the question of what adult children owed their ageing parents.

Urban migration disrupts this arrangement at its material base. Physical distance removes the daily proximity through which filial duty was once performed. Economic independence removes the dependence on shared property that structured relationships between generations. What replaces these structural anchors is the question the Yelahanka data address most directly.

Normative expectations have proved more durable than the structural conditions that originally produced them. Financial support from adult children to elderly parents was near universal in the sample, and the expectation of filial care was articulated with real force across all three generations interviewed (TIJER, 2026). The obligation persists; what has changed is the mechanism. Money moves where bodies previously did.

Bhattacharya (2016) identified the cost of this substitution. Elderly people in nuclear households report significantly higher rates of social isolation than those in joint or semi-joint arrangements. Financial transfers and weekly video calls do not fully replace daily human contact. Shah's (1974) distinction between household and family is useful here: the household has changed, the family, understood as a structure of relationships and expectations, has not changed to the same degree. Hallen (1967) argued that the family is an enduring social reality whose fragmentation is always partial. The urban Indian evidence supports that claim, while also making plain that partial fragmentation carries costs that the persistence of kinship norms cannot fully absorb.

5. DISCUSSION

These three findings point in the same direction, but they do not all carry the same meaning, and different theoretical frameworks evaluate them very differently.

Parsonian functionalism would broadly approve of what has happened. Nuclear households are better adapted to urban industrial conditions than joint ones. The persistence of kinship networks alongside nuclear residence is not a contradiction but a practical synthesis: a modified extended family that delivers the labour market mobility industrial capitalism requires while preserving the emotional and socialisation functions that only close relationships can perform. The double burden on women might be read, within this framework, as a transitional problem, a lag between structural change and the adjustment of cultural norms, which time will resolve.

Oakley and the feminist tradition are considerably less patient with that interpretation. The double burden is not a transitional problem but a structural feature of an arrangement that serves male interests and capital simultaneously. Women's unpaid domestic labour subsidises both the male career and the employer who benefits from a workforce that reproduces itself at no public cost. The nuclear household has not freed urban Indian women from patriarchal arrangements; it has given those arrangements a smaller domestic stage. A.R. Desai's (1961) Marxist framework supports a similar conclusion from a different angle. The transformation of family structure under capitalism is not a march toward equality but a reorganisation that preserves the core functions the family performs for capital: social reproduction, the production of future workers, and the management of care at no cost to the state.

Giddens offers a more open reading. The reflexivity of late modernity is a genuine social force, not just a liberal aspiration, and there is real evidence of it in urban India. Love marriages are more common. Parental investment in daughters' education has increased across class lines. Some couples are actively renegotiating domestic arrangements. Uberoi's (2003) scholarship functions as a persistent check on how far this optimism should extend. The Indian nuclear family has been adopted without adopting the individualism that Parsons, Giddens, and others assumed was its cultural precondition. Urban Indian families remain, in their own understanding, collective institutions built around kinship, obligation, and mutual dependence. The form has changed; the premise has not.

6. CONCLUSION

Urban Indian families have changed materially over the past three decades. Households are smaller, women participate in the paid labour force in significantly larger numbers, and young adults live at greater physical distance from their parents than any previous generation. These are not trivial shifts.

But structural change and cultural continuity are not the same thing, and in urban India they have moved at conspicuously different speeds. The obligations that the joint family institutionalised, the web of mutual responsibility, hierarchical deference, and collective decision-making, have not dissolved. They have been rehoused in financial transfers, digital contact, festival visits, and the expectations that parents and adult children continue to hold of each other across the distances that city life creates.

The same pattern appears in gender relations. The structural conditions that sustained the most rigid division of labour have shifted. The expectations embedded in those conditions have shifted considerably less. Women carry more economic weight than before; they carry nearly as much domestic weight as they ever did.

Uberoi's (2003) argument that the joint-versus-nuclear frame is analytically insufficient has been borne out across the evidence. What is needed is a framework capable of holding structural change and cultural continuity in view at the same time, without collapsing one into the other or treating one as mere lag. The urban Indian family is not modernising in the sense that Western sociological theory anticipated. It is doing something more specific: adapting its forms while retaining its premises, and the tensions produced by that combination are neither temporary nor superficial.

REFERENCES

[1] Bhattacharya, S. (2016) 'Ageing, family structure and social isolation in urban India', Indian Journal of Gerontology, 30(2), pp. 145-161.
[2] Chakrabarti, P. (2015) 'Dual income households and changing family structures in metropolitan India', Economic and Political Weekly, 50(18), pp. 44-51.
[3] Desai, A.R. (1961) Rural Sociology in India. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
[4] Desai, I.P. (1964) Some Aspects of Family in Mahuva. Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
[5] Giddens, A. (1992) The Transformation of Intimacy. Cambridge: Polity Press.
[6] Gupta, D. (1997) Rivalry and Brotherhood: Politics in the Life of Farmers in Northern India. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
[7] Gupta, M. (2012) 'Family structure, gender norms and attitudes toward equality in urban India', Contributions to Indian Sociology, 46(3), pp. 321-349.
[8] Hallen, G.C. (1967) Family Research in India: Some Strategies. Meerut: Rohini Publications.
[9] Manchanda, R. (2015) 'Women and the double burden: Professional life and domestic expectations in urban middle-class India', Gender, Place and Culture, 22(7), pp. 990-1006.
[10] Murdock, G.P. (1949) Social Structure. New York: Macmillan.
[11] Oakley, A. (1974) The Sociology of Housework. Oxford: Martin Robertson.
[12] Parsons, T. (1951) The Social System. New York: Free Press.
[13] Rao, N. (2008) Good Women Do Not Inherit Land: Politics of Land and Gender in India. London: Zed Books.
[14] Shah, A.M. (1974) The Household Dimension of the Family in India. Delhi: Orient Longman.
[15] TIJER (2026) 'Changing family patterns, gender roles, and intergenerational support in urbanising Yelahanka, Bangalore', Trends in International Journal of Engineering Research, 13(2).
[16] Uberoi, P. (2003) 'The family in India: Beyond the nuclear versus joint debate', in Das, V. (ed.) The Oxford Companion to Sociology and Social Anthropology. Delhi: Oxford University Press.