

From Obedience to Negotiation: Changing Parent–Adult Child Relationships in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The Indian family has historically been characterised by intergenerational solidarity, respect for elders, parental authority, filial obligations and collective decision-making. However, rapid educational expansion, urbanisation, occupational mobility, migration, women's increasing participation in education and employment, economic change and the growing accessibility of digital technologies have altered the social context within which parent–adult child relationships are experienced. The increasing penetration of smartphones, social media, digital entertainment and online communication has introduced new patterns of interaction within families. While technology can facilitate communication between geographically separated parents and adult children, intensive and individualised digital engagement may also reduce face-to-face interaction, reshape patterns of intimacy and privacy, and contribute to greater individual orientation in everyday family life. Thus, technological change does not simply weaken family relationships; rather, it is transforming the ways in which emotional connection, communication, autonomy and interdependence are negotiated between generations.

The present article examines the changing nature of parent–adult child relationships in contemporary India, with particular attention to the transformation of parental authority, adult children's autonomy and continuing intergenerational obligations. The study is based on secondary analysis of evidence from major Indian surveys and open-access empirical studies, particularly the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), and the Time Use Survey (TUS) 2024. The evidence indicates that Indian family relations are experiencing a gradual movement from unquestioned parental authority towards greater participation, communication and negotiation. Nevertheless, this transformation is uneven across different domains. Educational and occupational decisions have experienced greater individualisation, whereas marriage, caregiving, family responsibilities and intergenerational financial support continue to reflect strong family involvement. Time-use evidence further demonstrates the persistence of gendered domestic and caregiving responsibilities. The article argues that contemporary Indian parent–adult child relationships are best understood through the concept of **negotiated interdependence**, in which individual autonomy and family obligations coexist rather than replace one another. The strongest aspect of this transformation is that parental authority is changing, but intergenerational dependence has not disappeared; instead, it is increasingly being renegotiated through education, employment, migration, changing gender roles, digital communication and evolving expectations of privacy and individual autonomy.

Keywords: Parent–adult child relationship, Indian family, intergenerational relations, parental authority,

individualisation, negotiation, family change, youth autonomy, filial responsibility, social change

1. Introduction

The family continues to be one of the most important social institutions in India. It provides emotional security, socialisation, economic assistance, care, cultural transmission and intergenerational continuity. Parent–child relationships constitute one of the most enduring forms of social relationships, extending beyond childhood into adulthood and old age.

In the traditional Indian family context, the relationship between parents and children has generally been embedded within a hierarchical age structure. Parents have historically been regarded as sources of knowledge, authority, protection and economic support, while children have been expected to demonstrate obedience, respect and responsibility towards their parents. Decisions concerning education, occupation, marriage, residence and family responsibilities were often understood as matters involving the wider family rather than solely the individual.

Contemporary Indian society, however, has experienced substantial socioeconomic and cultural transformation. Expansion of education, increasing participation in formal employment, urbanisation, migration, technological development and changing aspirations have created new opportunities for individual choice. Young adults increasingly encounter social environments beyond the immediate family through universities, workplaces, cities, migration networks and digital media. These transformations have important implications for intergenerational relations. A young adult who possesses higher education, independent employment and personal income may have greater capacity to make decisions independently of parents. At the same time, the same individual may continue to depend on parents for emotional support, housing, childcare, social networks or assistance during periods of economic uncertainty.

Similarly, parents may continue to influence marriage decisions while becoming more accepting of children's choices regarding education and careers. Adult children may live separately from parents but continue to provide financial support and participate in family decisions through digital communication. Consequently, the contemporary transformation of the Indian family cannot adequately be described as a simple movement from traditional authority to individual independence. Rather, it involves a restructuring of the relationship between **authority, autonomy and interdependence**. The concept of **negotiated interdependence** is therefore useful for understanding this transformation. It refers to a relationship in which adult children possess increasing individual autonomy while continuing to participate in networks of emotional, economic and familial responsibility.

2. Sociological Context of Changing Parent–Adult Child Relationships

Changes in parent–adult child relationships must be understood within broader processes of social change. Education is particularly important. Expansion of secondary and higher education has exposed younger generations to new occupations, lifestyles and ideas concerning individual rights and personal choice. Education can also alter the balance of resources within families because qualifications provide access to employment and independent income.

Urbanisation similarly changes family relationships. Migration from villages to towns and cities frequently separates generations geographically. The adult child may establish an independent household while continuing to maintain close contact with parents.

Employment creates another important source of autonomy. Regular income can reduce dependence on parental resources and provide adult children with greater control over decisions concerning occupation,

residence and consumption.

Women's education and employment have also influenced intergenerational relations. As daughters increasingly obtain higher education and participate in employment, traditional assumptions concerning gender and dependence are being renegotiated. Nevertheless, evidence from official time-use statistics shows that women continue to perform a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving work. These changes demonstrate that family transformation is not uniform. Different aspects of family life change at different speeds. Education may become increasingly individualised while marriage remains strongly family-oriented. Employment may increase autonomy while caregiving responsibilities remain collective. Migration may reduce physical proximity while digital communication maintains emotional connections. The Indian family is therefore undergoing **selective and uneven individualisation**.

3. Theoretical Understanding of Intergenerational Change

3.1 Modernisation and Family Change

Modernisation theory associates industrialisation, urbanisation, education and occupational mobility with transformations in traditional institutions.

From this perspective, the expansion of individual choice may weaken certain forms of hierarchical family authority. Young adults with higher education and independent employment may become less dependent on parents for everyday decisions. Indian experience demonstrates that modernisation does not necessarily eliminate family relationships. Instead, family obligations can coexist with individual autonomy. Thus, the relevance of modernisation lies not in the disappearance of the family but in the changing organisation of family relationships.

3.2 Individualisation

Individualisation highlights the growing importance of personal choice and self-directed life decisions. Young adults increasingly make decisions concerning education, career, occupation, residence, lifestyle, relationships, consumption, and marriage. However, individualisation in India remains embedded within social and family networks. Personal choices are frequently negotiated with parents and other relatives. Individualisation therefore does not necessarily mean social isolation. It may instead mean greater participation in determining one's own life course.

3.3 Social Exchange and Intergenerational Reciprocity

Social exchange theory draws attention to the exchange of resources between generations.

Parents provide: education, financial assistance, housing, emotional support, childcare, and social connections.

Adult children may subsequently provide: financial assistance, healthcare support, caregiving, companionship, and assistance with household responsibilities.

The relationship is therefore reciprocal rather than simply hierarchical.

3.4 Intergenerational Solidarity

Intergenerational solidarity focuses on the continuing emotional, structural, associational and functional relationships between generations. Even when adult children migrate, marry or establish independent households, relationships can continue through: telephone communication, digital communication, financial transfers, visits, caregiving, emotional support, and participation in family decisions. This perspective is particularly useful for understanding contemporary Indian families because it explains how autonomy and connectedness can exist simultaneously.

4. Data Sources and Analytical Approach

The article is based exclusively on **secondary data and published empirical evidence**. It does not claim to have collected a new primary survey.

The principal sources used are:

1. **National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), 2019–21**
2. **Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), Wave 1, 2017–18**
3. **Time Use Survey 2024**
4. Recent open-access empirical research based on Indian populations.

NFHS-5 provides nationally representative evidence concerning household decision-making, demographic characteristics, women's autonomy and family-related indicators. LASI is particularly relevant for intergenerational relationships because it contains information concerning family structure, social relationships, economic circumstances, health and support among adults aged 45 and above. The first LASI wave covered **73,396 individuals aged 45 years and above across India's states and Union Territories**. ([IIPS India](http://www.iipsindia.org))

The Time Use Survey 2024 provides evidence concerning unpaid domestic work, caregiving and the distribution of time between men and women. It is particularly relevant for understanding intergenerational care and gendered family responsibilities. ([Ministry of Statistics](http://www.mospi.gov.in)). Recent open-access research based on Indian datasets is used to supplement the official survey evidence where specific dimensions of parent–adult child relationships are not directly measured in national surveys.

5. Statistical Evidence on Changing Family Relationships in India

Table 1. Selected Statistical Evidence Relevant to Parent–Adult Child Relationships

Indicator	Statistical evidence	Source
LASI Wave 1 coverage	73,396 adults aged 45+	IIPS, LASI
Older parents with at least one migrant child	36%	LASI-based study
Older adults who were empty nesters	35%	LASI-based study
Children-to-parent financial transfers	13.1%	LASI 2017–18
Parents-to-children financial transfers	4.4%	LASI 2017–18
Married women's participation in household decision-making	Nearly 89%	NFHS-5
Females 6+ participating in unpaid domestic services	81.5%	TUS 2024
Males 6+ participating in unpaid domestic services	27.1%	TUS 2024
Female participants' average domestic work	289 minutes/day	TUS 2024
Male participants' average domestic work	88 minutes/day	TUS 2024
Females 15–59 participating in caregiving	41.0%	TUS 2024
Males 15–59 participating in caregiving	21.4%	TUS 2024
Female caregiving participants' average time	140 minutes/day	TUS 2024
Male caregiving participants' average time	74 minutes/day	TUS 2024

Sources: IIPS/LASI; NFHS-5; MoSPI Time Use Survey 2024. ([IIPS India](http://www.iipsindia.org))

These figures provide an important empirical foundation for understanding contemporary intergenerational relationships. They show that family relationships continue to involve substantial economic, domestic and caregiving exchanges even as individual autonomy increases.

6. Household Decision-Making and the Expansion of Autonomy

One important indicator of changing family authority is participation in household decision-making. NFHS-5 evidence indicates that married women's involvement in decisions concerning their own healthcare, major household purchases and visits to family or relatives increased compared with NFHS-4. IIPS reported that women's involvement in these decisions reached **nearly 89% nationally**, approximately four percentage points higher than in 2015–16. ([IIPS India](#)) This finding is important from a sociological perspective because decision-making participation represents a movement away from exclusive authority by another household member. The measure must be interpreted carefully. IIPS itself cautions that participation in a decision does not necessarily mean that the woman exercises final control over the decision. ([IIPS India](#)) Nevertheless, increased participation demonstrates an important shift toward **consultative family relations**.

This transformation is particularly relevant to parent–adult child relationships because the same broader social processes that increase women's participation in household decisions can also create greater expectations of voice and consultation among younger family members. The contemporary family increasingly accommodates the idea that decisions affecting individuals should involve those individuals.

7. Generational Change in Education and Marriage Norms

One of the strongest pieces of recent empirical evidence concerning changing family authority comes from a study of **659 parent–adolescent dyads in rural Maharashtra**.

The study found substantial generational improvement in educational attainment. Among adolescents, the average educational attainment at age 18 was **12 years**, with 12% not completing the 10th standard. Among girls in the study, 11% had married before age 19. ([PMC](#)). More importantly, approximately **70% of adolescents wanted their hypothetical future children to decide for themselves how much schooling to complete**. This represents a significant shift toward individual choice in educational decisions. ([PMC](#))

Marriage norms, however, demonstrated considerably greater continuity. Only around **10% of adolescent girls and 14% of boys** wanted their hypothetical children to decide their own marriage age. Most adolescents instead wanted their future children to marry later than they themselves had. ([PMC](#)) The study also identified substantial generational reductions in school dropout. Among females, school dropout before completion of the 10th standard declined from **83% in the parental generation to 11% among adolescents** in the study population. Among males, the corresponding decline was from **58% to 14%**. Female early marriage also declined from **66% to 23%** across the generations examined. ([PMC](#)). They demonstrate that: **Educational norms change faster than marriage norms**. Consequently, the transformation of parent–adult child relationships is not uniform across all areas of life.

8. Marriage as a Continuing Domain of Parental Influence

Marriage remains one of the most important areas where individual choice intersects with family authority. Although younger generations increasingly expect greater participation in choosing partners and determining the timing of marriage, family approval remains socially important. The rural Maharashtra

evidence demonstrates this difference clearly. While approximately 70% of adolescents supported individual choice concerning their children's schooling, only around 10–14% expressed the same level of autonomy concerning marriage age. (PMC) The study concluded that marriage norms were more resistant to change than educational norms and suggested that continued influence by senior household members contributes to this time lag. (PMC) Marriage therefore represents an important area of **negotiated authority**. The adult child increasingly becomes a participant in the decision, but parents and other family members can continue to exercise considerable influence.

9. Migration and the Changing Geography of Family Relationships

Migration has changed the spatial organisation of Indian families. Young adults increasingly move away from their parental households for education, employment and other opportunities. Consequently, physical co-residence can decline without necessarily eliminating family connections. Evidence from LASI demonstrates the scale of this phenomenon.

A study using LASI data involving **19,401 adults aged 60 years and above** found that approximately **36% of older parents had at least one migrant child**, while **35% were empty nesters**. Approximately 64% of the older adults in the study lived with children, while 25% lived with a spouse and 6% lived alone. (PMC) The study found that older adults living with children experienced more favourable physical and mental health outcomes, while empty-nest older adults showed higher prevalence of poor self-rated health and depression. (PMC) These findings indicate that geographical separation has consequences for intergenerational relationships. At the same time, migration does not necessarily imply the termination of family responsibility. Migrant children may continue providing financial assistance, emotional support and periodic care. Thus, migration transforms the **location** of family relationships more readily than it eliminates their **social significance**.

10. Intergenerational Financial Support

Financial exchange provides particularly strong evidence of continuing interdependence between adult children and parents. An open-access study using LASI Wave 1 examined **30,147 older adults aged 60 years and above** whose children were alive.

The study found that:

- **13.1%** received financial transfers from children to parents.
- **4.4%** reported financial transfers from parents to children.

Thus, children-to-parent transfers were approximately three times as common as parents-to-children transfers in the study. Older adults living alone received the greatest financial support from their children. (PMC) These figures are particularly important for understanding contemporary family relationships.

Economic independence of adult children does not necessarily weaken family obligations. Instead, independent income can sometimes enable adult children to assume greater responsibility for parents. This produces an important sociological distinction between: **economic independence from parents** and **economic responsibility towards parents**. An adult child can be independent while simultaneously being an important economic resource for the parental generation.

11. Gender, Domestic Work and Intergenerational Responsibilities

Family negotiation cannot be understood without examining gender. The Time Use Survey 2024 provides particularly significant evidence. Among persons aged six years and above, **81.5% of females** participated

in unpaid domestic services for household members compared with **27.1% of males**. Female participants spent an average of **289 minutes per day** on unpaid domestic services, compared with **88 minutes among male participants**. ([Ministry of Statistics](#)) The gender difference is also visible in caregiving. Among people aged 15–59, **41% of females** participated in caregiving for household members compared with **21.4% of males**. Female participants spent approximately **140 minutes per day** on caregiving, compared with **74 minutes among male participants**. ([Ministry of Statistics](#))

These statistics demonstrate that family responsibilities remain highly gendered. The transformation of parent–adult child relationships therefore cannot be understood simply in terms of whether young adults obey their parents. It must also consider: who provides care, who performs domestic work, who supports ageing parents, who provides childcare, who moves for employment, who remains close to the parental household, and who bears the opportunity costs of family responsibilities. Women's increasing educational and economic autonomy exists alongside continuing domestic and caregiving expectations.

12. Digital Communication and Intergenerational Connectedness

Digital technology has introduced another important dimension into contemporary family relationships. Mobile phones, messaging applications and video communication allow adult children to maintain contact with parents despite geographical separation. For migrant families, digital communication can facilitate: daily interaction, participation in family decisions, healthcare coordination, financial discussions, emotional support, sharing of family events, and monitoring of parents' well-being. The increasing importance of digital communication should not, however, be interpreted as complete substitution for physical interaction. The LASI evidence on older parents demonstrates that co-residence and availability of children continue to matter for health and psychological well-being. ([PMC](#)) Digital communication therefore creates a **new layer of intergenerational connectedness**, rather than making physical relationships irrelevant.

13. From Obedience to Negotiation

The empirical evidence suggests that the central transformation is not the disappearance of parental authority but its modification.

The traditional hierarchical relationship can be represented as:

Parent → Authority → Instruction → Child → Compliance

The emerging relationship increasingly takes the form:

Parent ↔ Discussion ↔ Adult Child → Negotiation → Decision

However, the second model does not necessarily replace the first in every aspect of family life.

The same parent and adult child can therefore experience **autonomy in one domain and interdependence in another**.

This is why “negotiated interdependence” is a more appropriate sociological concept than either “traditional authority” or “complete individualisation.”

14. Statistical Interpretation of the Transformation

The available evidence can be interpreted across four major dimensions.

14.1 Increasing participation

NFHS-5 evidence indicates high levels of women's participation in household decision-making, suggesting movement towards greater voice within family structures. ([IIPS India](#))

14.2 Increasing educational autonomy

Approximately 70% of adolescents in the rural Maharashtra study wanted their future children to decide their own schooling, demonstrating a strong generational shift in attitudes towards educational autonomy. ([PMC](#))

14.3 Continuing intergenerational dependence

LASI evidence shows that 13.1% of older adults received financial transfers from children compared with 4.4% transferring money to children, demonstrating continued economic interdependence. ([PMC](#))

14.4 Continuing family responsibility

Time-use evidence shows substantial gender differences in unpaid domestic and caregiving work, demonstrating that family responsibilities remain embedded within everyday social relations. ([Ministry of Statistics](#))

Taken together, these data demonstrate that **autonomy and interdependence are not mutually exclusive**.

15. Negotiated Interdependence as a New Sociological Understanding

The contemporary Indian family can therefore be conceptualised through five interconnected dimensions. **Autonomy:** Adult children increasingly seek control over education, occupation, residence, lifestyle and personal relationships.

Negotiation: Parents and children increasingly discuss decisions rather than relying exclusively on unilateral parental authority.

Reciprocity: Economic and emotional support flows between generations.

Responsibility: Adult children continue to experience obligations towards parents and wider family members.

Connectivity: Digital communication allows intergenerational relationships to continue across geographical distances.

These dimensions constitute **negotiated interdependence**. It differs from traditional obedience because the adult child possesses greater decision-making agency. It differs from complete individualisation because family obligations remain significant. It is therefore a form of family relationship in which:

Individual autonomy operates within continuing networks of intergenerational obligation.

16. Changing Parent–Adult Child Relationships across Major Domains

Family domain	Direction of change	Continuing family influence
Education	Greater individual choice	Parental financial and emotional support
Career	Increasing personal choice	Family expectations and advice
Marriage	Increasing participation of young adults	Strong parental/family influence
Partner selection	Greater individual involvement	Family approval remains important
Residence	Increasing geographical mobility	Continued family obligations
Finance	Increasing adult-child independence	Financial transfers to parents
Communication	Increasing digital interaction	Importance of physical presence
Caregiving	More complex arrangements	Strong family responsibility
Women's roles	Increasing education/employment	Unequal domestic/care work persists
Elderly care	Increasingly negotiated	Continued filial responsibility

17. Conclusion

The relationship between parents and adult children in contemporary India is undergoing a significant transformation. Expansion of education, employment, urbanisation, migration, digital communication and changing aspirations has created new opportunities for adult children to exercise individual choice. Yet the evidence does not support the conclusion that parental authority has simply disappeared. Instead, authority is being reorganised.

Educational decisions show substantial movement towards individual autonomy. Marriage decisions demonstrate greater continuity of parental and family influence. Migration creates geographical distance while intergenerational support continues through financial transfers, communication and caregiving. The transformation can therefore be described as a movement: **from obedience toward participation, from unilateral authority toward negotiation, and from dependence toward negotiated interdependence.**

The concept of **negotiated interdependence** provides a useful framework for understanding this changing relationship. Adult children increasingly expect the right to make decisions concerning their own lives, while parents continue to exercise influence and provide resources. At the same time, adult children remain connected to parents through emotional, economic and caregiving responsibilities. Thus, the most significant change in contemporary parent–adult child relationships may not be the disappearance of authority, but the transformation of the **way authority is exercised and negotiated**. The Indian family is increasingly becoming a space in which generations do not simply obey or separate from one another; they **negotiate, adapt and remain interdependent**.

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