Family Disputes And Child Anxiety In India: A Textual Analysis

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I.   Introduction

In India, the joint family system, holding cultural importance is the most common as in the culture we choose to live with our elders to support them when in need out of love and respect. Individuals are highly traditional and have faith in their culture and religion and learn from what their elders teach them. Joint families include grandparents, parents, children and a broad network of relatives which includes shared responsibility, both emotionally and financially. Grandparents, being the oldest one, make the major decisions of the household and take up roles such as those who provide their experiences, knowledge, values and more to teach their children and their grandchildren, further on passing their knowledge. Each person can offer different perspectives and opinions about any topic in the family however this can lead to tension and conflict. Disputes may arise over issues such as marriage, inheritance, or differing attitudes towards things among the members which can create tension and stress around the household affecting the emotional and development state of a child if any children are there in the house. Families frequently have disagreements or may have past traumatic events that are still discussed in the family. Disputes are not uncommon in Indian households, but they are now a prevalent element influencing the mental health of both parents and children. On the other hand, joint families can also be a support system to a child as members can teach them about shared responsibility, which teaches them about skills such as teamwork and cooperation. Living with a range of other generations makes the children learn about traditions, values and beliefs in the family and culture which also helps them build their identity. It can help socially develop the child, bring empathy and communication skills from regular interactions.

Until the early 2000s, women after marriage would typically live with the husband's side of the family, which included his parents and siblings. However due to certain reasons the pair usually chooses to move out and live alone. This was a shift caused by a generational clash and a shift in mindset. This began with the Baby Boomers generation, who are members of the demographically large generation born between the end of WWII and the mid-1960s (Pew Research Center, 2024)[1]. Most people who were uneducated of this generation married at a young age, typically between the ages of 16 and 18 for women and 19 and 21 for men. They expanded India's population by having at least three children per mother in a family, despite not having the financial means to do so. This occurred owing to women's illiteracy, a desire for a male child, or even superstitious beliefs. Women in India's rural areas had no idea about birth control or giving birth in hospitals. The government of India recommended the use of sanitary pads for basic hygiene in 2011. Women used cotton cloth during their periods until recently, which caused urinary tract infections, infertility, cancer, and other issues. Their children are generation "X" children (*Gen X Is Kind of, Sort of, Not Really the Boss*, n.d.)[2]. These individuals had a specific level of education and married between the ages of 20-25 for ladies and 23-28 for men. Although this was not what educated women expected, mothers would choose an appropriate partner for their son who could take over all the chores of the house, such as cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and caring for the children. Women of Generation X had little choice but to accept and live this life, even if they were educated, due to societal pressure and pressure from the woman's family, because this was what was passed down from generation to daughter. Education for women was established much later than for men. Women were married at young ages even if they desired to finish their education because their dads saw their daughters as a burden on their shoulders and because of cultural pressure. These educated women did not anticipate being placed in a household where they would be

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[1] Pew Research Center. (2024, April 14). *Baby Boomers: the gloomiest generation*.
https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2008/06/25/baby-boomers-the-gloomiest-generation/
[2] *Gen X is kind of, sort of, not really the boss*. (n.d.). The New York Times. Retrieved April 20, 2024, from
https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/14/opinion/generation-x-millennials-work.html

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assigned responsibility for everything. They were normally treated similarly to how the mother-in-law was treated when she married and became a daughter-in-law. Although not all mother-in-laws were like that, the educated ones treated the daughters like their own daughters but the ones who came from a poor background with no education and knowledge were like this. Despite the fact that hardships were encountered and all responsibilities were completed on a daily basis, the daughters were subjected to ridicule. Taunts like "she stole my son" or "she doesn't help around the house." Because the baby boomer generation was so controlling, freedom meant nothing to the women (Airey et al., 2020)[3]. This is why mother-in-laws dislike their daughter-in-laws and vice versa. There is no independence for the daughters, and the mothers believe they do not work as hard as their mother-in-law did when she was a daughter-in-law. This is what caused a shift and why couples now prefer to move out as a nuclear family. In this research paper, there will be further in depth research about child development under stress and conflict.

II.   Family Trauma And Conflict

Family traumas are known to be frightening and life threatening events which can happen to any member of the family which can lead to stress responses in the family members with consequences that may affect the relationships and the functioning of the family. (By, n.d.)[4]

As explained above, conflict may arise due to various issues, these can range from personal problems such as intergenerational issues to issues in a marriage or even financial issues in inheritance. These factors can severely affect a child's development causing behavioural issues and development delays (Charlie Health Editorial Team, 2024)[5].

● **Financial stress** is a major factor due to large families depending on a few bread winners around the house. This includes inheritance disputes over who gets how much of the inheritance which can lead to resentment of family members.
● **Intergenerational issues** may arise due to differing opinions and values such as career choices, marriage and lifestyle. There are several cultural norms that are expected out of people in a society and if not followed there may be significant conflict in the family.
● **Emotional wounds** such as loss of a parent, physical and psychological abuse at an early age and feeling of being neglected during childhood can also affect children as they develop making them more confused about their feelings as an adult.

Conflicts can happen between two people or in a whole household. The divorce rate in India is 1.1% (1 out of 100) (advocatekhoj.com, n.d.)[6] which is comparatively very less that couples in the United States who have a huge divorce rate of 50%. The shift from joint to nuclear families has led to a breakdown in traditional support systems, resulting in higher rates of conflict and divorce.

● **Marital Conflicts:** Conflicts may arise from expectations between spouses regarding the roles and responsibilities, and in nuclear families where traditional support is absen this can be a factor leading to marital disputes or divorces (Dey & Dey, 2022)[7].
● **Custody and Child Welfare:** In single-parent households, there may be tension with custody arrangements and welfare of children which can complicate co-parenting, leading to further conflicts over parenting (VISION IAS [VISION IAS], n.d.)[8].

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[3] Airey, L., Lain, D., Jandrić, J., & Loretto, W. (2020). A selfish generation? 'Baby boomers', values, and the provision of childcare for grandchildren. *The Sociological Review*, *69*(4), 812–829. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120916104

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[7] Dey, A., & Dey, A. (2022, August 4). *Nuclear families 'less familiar with Indian values', which leads to more divorces, says BJP MP*. ThePrint. https://theprint.in/india/nuclear-families-less-familiar-with-indian-values-which-leads-to-more-divorces-says-bjp-mp/1068930/

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Trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next and this cycle goes on as the children become adults who may take similar actions in their relationships further on. The child will observe and interact with other individuals adopting these patterns where they won't be able to express themselves emotionally . In families with high levels of conflict, the child may feel pressured to take on the responsibilities and fulfil expectations and high exposure to these conflicts may induce mental health issues in children as well as adults such as, depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Charlie Health Editorial Team, 2024)[9].

III.   Impact Of Family Trauma On Parents' Mental Health

According to statistics, single parenthood causes more risks of mental health for both the parent and the children which leads to psychological problems in the future. In India they seek single parenting as a complicated and non traditional thing. Being a single parent raises challenges such as health risks, financial risks, societal risks and many other major things. These problems can further lead to behavioural problems for the children and these problems may affect the child's future relationships. Statistically these problems have also raised the suicide rate over the years because children who have single parents or divorced parents often have mental health disorders such as depression in adulthood or may need therapy. The child's behaviour can change by them not adjusting and not being stable. Raising children as a single mother in India can be particularly challenging, especially depending on the level of support the mother receives from her family. Financial struggles are a common issue, as finding stable employment as a single mother is often difficult, coupled with the societal judgement that is frequently passed. Safety concerns also become a major factor, but typically, single mothers in India raise their children with the help of their own parents. This ensures that the child has a father figure, such as the grandfather, providing a more stable and nurturing environment. Having this extended family involvement can create a healthy atmosphere for the child, where they can grow and develop faster than they might otherwise. However, single mothers still face considerable societal stigma and financial pressure, which can make them emotionally vulnerable.

Intergenerational trauma, unresolved family conflicts, or financial struggles can impact the mother's mental health, potentially affecting her ability to provide emotional security for the child. In turn, the child may develop behavioural problems like anxiety, aggression, or struggles with relationships. Since single mothers often have to resolve these family disputes, their attention can be diverted from their child's emotional needs, which may hamper the child's overall socio-emotional development.

For single fathers in India, the situation can be different, often influenced by whether the child is a daughter or a son. Fathers raising daughters might face unique challenges, particularly during stages in the girl's life where she may need guidance from a woman. In these instances, she might turn to her grandmother, aunt, or another close female figure for support. On the other hand, fathers raising sons may face fewer communication barriers. Despite this, single fathers often lack the social and emotional support networks that single mothers have, particularly in traditional Indian settings. This adds pressure on them to manage not only their child's needs but also any unresolved family disputes. These extended family conflicts can place an additional burden on the father, who may feel compelled to fulfil the role of sole provider. As a result, this focus on being the breadwinner can come at the expense of their emotional availability for the child. The absence of a maternal figure can leave children without the emotional support they need, potentially leading to stress, detachment, or behavioural issues. Additionally, within patriarchal family structures, the child may witness or experience gender-based expectations and conflicts, which can shape their understanding of relationships and authority in the family. When kids witness their parents or their entire family structure disrupted and feel insecure, they believe that communicating their feelings, thoughts, and emotions would cause issues, therefore they learn to keep things to themselves. Typically, families who have experienced previous family troubles and disturbances experience higher emotional problems. Children who do not have solid ties and attachments with their parents are more likely to experience stress and relationship problems alone, such as shutting down, anxiety issues, and panic attacks, and are more likely to develop psychiatric issues in adulthood and as they grow older, they may begin smoking, vaping, and even overeating. Children who have anger issues or are quickly offended in tiny situations will try to avoid interaction with their parents as much as possible. These issues can be evident in Generation X persons as a result of the behaviours of the baby boomers that they have observed. The baby boomers' parenting can be described as "rigid," yet Generation X strives to portray the good side of the baby boomers' parenting to their own children, known as Generation Z (Genz) (VISION IAS [VISION IAS], n.d.)[10].

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[9] Charlie Health Editorial Team. (2024, March 5). Let's Talk About Family Trauma. *Charlie Health.* https://www.charliehealth.com/post/family-trauma

[10] VISION IAS [VISION IAS]. (n.d.). FAMILY STRUCTURE IN INDIA. In *Unknown*. Retrieved August 10, 2024, from https://cdn.visionias.in/value_added_material/9bac5-changing-dynamics-of-family-structure-in-india.pdf

Although the baby boomers may sound like the bad cop in parenting, they had their good sides as well. Not all baby boomers would have a majority of the bad traits, but what Indian parents are most renowned for is how they disciplined and raised their children. The children of the baby boomers (Generation X) were raised to punish their children, but they may have also learned to mock their children in specific areas. Another consideration is how to be on the safe side in life and never take the risk to choose a career option where either you would fail or where your parents may get disappointed in you. A common saying that is heard by many Indian parents is something like "I want my child to be a doctor, engineer or a lawyer" all of them being commendable jobs and being one of the most successful and safe options. Discipline, responsibility and time management skills were the three basic practical skills of life which were taught to the kids for them to succeed in anything they would do which in turn helped them and gave them a sense of maturity (Harlow, 2024)[11].

Many individuals argue that the baby boomers are very strict towards their values due to how they were raised during the time when India was on the verge of getting independent as a nation. The attitude of the baby boomers is said to be people who always like to be on the safer side in terms of financial stability from their past experiences, people who care a lot about money and where to spend it, are very work focused, socially interactive and people who have a positive outlook on life. This made them traditional and close to their ethics and morals. They had a straightforward mindset due to the scarcity of resources after the country's independence. Due to having several members in the family (living in an extended family setting), they had to look after everyone whereas the current generation work to become independent. These shifts of working for yourself, leaving the family and starting your own nuclear family in the younger generation has led to a clash between the generations, this is also because the baby boomers are perceived as old fashioned, orthodox, and outdated (Pew Research Center, 2024)[12].

Direct Effects On Children's Behaviour And Development

The changes after a couple's separation can cause troubles for both sides. Emotionally and physically. Day-to-day changes can occur and these changes can bring changes in the child which he or she may not be able to handle very well. This can lead to a range of behavioural issues such as poor academic performance, anger and withdrawal. Children under the environment of conflicts may exhibit aggression through verbal or physical fights with their friends or siblings (BetterHelp Editorial Team, 2024b)[13].

Especially in Indian families where open discussions about emotions are not seen as normal or accepted, this aggression may be shown in educational settings in the child. Some children also start withdrawing themselves from going out in social settings with their friends or family and stay indoors which is a coping mechanism to deal with the anxiety (Yassin, 2024)[14]. This stress can also lead to poor performances in school where the child may struggle to concentrate on their studies and especially in a country like India where education is highly valued with children all around the company competing. Children may have problems in brainstorming and critical thinking due to the emotional distress in the household which can interfere with cognitive growth affecting their overall academic capabilities (Goel, 2023)[15].

Sibling Dynamics And Differences In Impact

Siblings may react to the same trauma and conflict in a different manner and they may have different roles. Some siblings may take on a protective or caregiving role whereas others may act out. This behaviour can be a way to protect the younger one from the trauma or conflict and act as a parent figure. For instance, in families with domestic violence, the older sibling may act as a parent of the younger one, telling them what's wrong and

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[11] Harlow, S. (2024, March 4). *10 baby boomers characteristics - GWI*. GWI.
https://blog.gwi.com/marketing/baby-boomers-characteristics/

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right, and keeping them safe from that violence. This role can enhance their leadership qualities however they may have emotional burdens through this, suppressing anger (Speldewinde, 2018c)[16]. On the other hand, some siblings may act out, withdrawing themselves from the family interactions to deal with the emotions.

The emotional development, social skills and development may vary between both the types. The protective siblings may have strong empathy and EQ towards their and other feelings however they may take on guilt to protect others. The acting out siblings struggle with EQ and develop aggressive behaviours to protect themselves (Annie, 2024)[17]. Social skills of the protective siblings are high as they respond appropriately and understand others feelings and perspectives however the withdrawn siblings may suffer from social anxiety and miss out on developing critical social skills. Lastly, the cognitive development of the protective sibling is complex but adaptable; however the acting out siblings may face academic challenges and may have difficulty focusing on their emotions (Libby, 2023a)[18].

Long-Term Psychological And Behavioural Consequences

Growing up in a household with regular conflicts and passed on trauma, this can lead to long term psychological consequences such as depression and anxiety. Children exposed to trauma may develop anxiety disorders as a response to their environment due to the constant stress and unpredictability, this can create fear in their minds. The high level conflict environment can lead to depressive symptoms as well, for instance the child may develop an image of a parent with a negative attitude and image, feeling unworthy of love. According to attachment theory, children who are exposed to conflict may develop an insecure attachment style with anxiety which may impact their future relationships. Using the stress buffering hypothesis it is found that in families with unresolved conflict, the lack of support can lead to high rates of depression and anxiety in children (Yassin, 2024)[19].

Statistics And Real-World Data

Several statistics and psychological studies highlight the consequences of growing up in an environment with trauma and conflict both short and long term. A study done by the Indian Psychiatric Society shows that around 12% of children in India go through mental health disorders due to family conflict (Mehra et al., 2022)[20]. UNICEF indicates that about 30% of Indian children witness their mothers or siblings going through domestic violence which indicates anxiety and behavioural issues and these children are likely to get PTSD or other disorders (*Violence Against Children*, n.d.)[21].

This also affects this school performance according to the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* who found that children with conflict in their families have higher rates of having difficulty in their academic performances and even dropping out of school.

Global

Globally, several studies indicate the same but on a higher level. This includes the study published by *Biological Psychiatry* that shows that childhood trauma is strongly related to disorders such as anxiety, major depressive disorder, PTSD and even depression. Studies also indicate that the trauma that has been experienced during childhood can not only affect the victim but also its offspring showing trauma across generations. Lastly, the world's largest study on childhood trauma done by the University of Essex indicated that children who experience trauma go through brain rewiring and that there are disruptions in neural networks related to self-focus

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[21] *Violence against children*. (n.d.). UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/india/stories/violence-against-children

and problem-solving, leading them to not understand emotions (*World's Largest Childhood Trauma Study Uncovers Brain Rewiring*, 2024)[22].

IV.   Conclusion And Solutions

Understanding the impact of family trauma is particularly important for parents and within Indian families, it is important to address long term psychological issues and spread awareness about them, be it in a local area or an urban city. These children are at a high risk of inducing anxiety or depression and this can affect not only them or their surroundings but also their future ones. Recognizing these challenges is one step forward towards having a healthy environment and promoting well-being. Counselling and mental health awareness for both the children and the parents are extremely important which can help solve unresolved conflicts and heal emotional wounds. Professionals can guide them with better communication and increase awareness about mental health issues within children. Family therapy can be a safe space for all members to understand their issues, others perspectives and observe and reflect on what they have done and what they should do to solve these conflicts to build the relationship again. Community support groups for parents and children can also help with this experience and can provide support and resources in these situations. Furthermore, for children to understand this in a better manner, schools should provide mental health programs to support their children and their minds. To better understand this research, longitudinal studies that understand and track trauma can be done which can help understand how trauma follows along with the growth of a child to an adult. By analysing and recognizing these issues within Indian extended families, our society should work towards creating healthier environments that promote emotional well-being for our future generations (VISION IAS [VISION IAS], n.d.)[23].

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