

# Navigating Life Transitions: A Qualitative Study of Divorce's Impact on Indian Men

Sunandita Das

Research Scholar, Department of Family & Generations  
International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India

Email ID- [dassunandita60@gmail.com](mailto:dassunandita60@gmail.com)

Divorce is widely recognized as one of life's most stressful events, with far-reaching effects that deeply impact the well-being and overall life circumstances of those involved (Muchena, Howcroft, & Stroud, 2018). While it is commonly believed that women face greater challenges in resuming a normal life after divorce, (Amato P. R., 2010) recent research has highlighted that men also encounter significant difficulties, including both physical and psychological health issues (Kulik & Kasa, 2014). Although divorce is often perceived as a profoundly negative experience, it is not solely defined by its hardships. Individuals who go through a divorce frequently gain valuable insights and lessons, some of which are difficult and painful, while others can be unexpectedly positive. It's crucial to delve into the personal and emotional growth of divorced individuals, moving beyond the focus on risk factors and negative impacts that often dominate discussions around divorce.

Indian divorce literature has predominantly concentrated on the prevalence, risk factors, and effects of divorce, especially on women and children, operating under the assumption that they suffer the most post-divorce. However, it is difficult to determine definitively who suffers the most from divorce—whether it be women, children, or men—since every marriage and divorce story is unique. There remains a significant gap in understanding men's experiences, their actions during the divorce process, and the life transitions they undergo afterward. This study aims to explore how divorce impacts and brings about changes in the lives of divorced men.

## Methodology

Qualitative research methods were employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of divorce and the subsequent transitions in the lives of the participants. The study was conducted from March to September 2023, involving 30 divorced men. The Institutional Review Board of the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, India, reviewed and approved all procedures before the study commenced. Data were collected using purposive sampling, which included in-depth, face-to-face interviews through a semi-structured interview guide. The guide focused on four main categories: sociodemographic details, and their quality of life before, during, and after the divorce. During the interviews, prompts were used to encourage detailed responses. This study used a qualitative approach to deeply understand the participants' experiences of divorce, applying thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## Participants' Information

The study, conducted over six months using purposive sampling, included men from lower-middle to upper-middle-class backgrounds aged 29 to 54, with a mean age of 40 years. About 60% had no children from their marriage, and 53% had education beyond graduation. Most participants (97%) were Hindu, 67% were employed in the private sector, and 66% came from nuclear families. Additionally, 60% of the marriages were arranged, and 63% of the participants had an age gap of more than 10 years with their wives. (Table 1).

## Findings

The research identified three major themes based on participant interviews: (1) Before Divorce, (2) During Divorce, and (3) After Divorce. There are five sub-themes under these major themes.

### 1) Before Divorce

Divorce is not a one-day decision, it takes so much of emotion, courage, and time.

#### *Anxious, Stress, and Depression*

Marriage is typically entered into with the hope of a fulfilling, lifelong partnership, so the experience of becoming emotionally distant from a spouse can be deeply painful (Amato P., 2000). One participant in the study vividly recounted how long-distance marriage leads to emotional distance in their relationship, combined with persistent conflicts and unresolved tensions, made it impossible to maintain a healthy connection with his wife. As he stated: *"My wife never visited me in India, despite my efforts. Traveling there was expensive and stressful—a round trip cost about 1,00,000 rupees for a 25-hour journey, and I had to do it three times in a year and a half. The stress was overwhelming. We tried to talk, but it often ended in arguments. I felt exhausted and hopeless. The last few times I came back to India, I had lost hope and happiness. I couldn't focus on my work, which made me even angrier. I had never shown my anger like that before. I couldn't control my emotions—anger, helplessness—and I lost sleep worrying about our uncertain future. It was tough."*

Traditional gender roles often make it difficult for society to accept that women can be perpetrators of violence against men. Most research has focused on men as the aggressors and women as the victims of domestic violence (Dobash, 1979; Dobash & Dobash, 2004). However, there is growing recognition that men can also suffer various forms of domestic violence. One study participant shared his experience: *"She didn't want to be with me. She always created problems. She forced me to live separately, and I agreed, but she never respected me. I tried to hold my family together in every possible way, but she didn't want that either. Just to get a divorce from me, she lodged 8 false cases against me. Hearing about those allegations, I felt like the ground slipped from under my feet. I was so scared and mentally devastated. She tortured me until I agreed to give her a divorce."*

This study found that many participants were unaware of their partner's health conditions before marriage. Participant 6 shared his experience of discovering that his wife had mental health issues just after their marriage. He explained: *"I honestly couldn't understand what had happened. Having never been in a relationship before, I had always dreamed of a happy family life with my wife and children. When I learned of the truth, I felt overwhelming anxiety and blamed my parents for not choosing the right partner for me. This burden has weighed heavily on me ever since. My home was filled with my parents' constant crying and*

sadness, and I didn't want to be there. Yet, I couldn't leave them either. I felt mentally depressed and trapped in a situation with no easy way out."

### **Pain, Grief, and Shame**

Extra-marital relationships, whether casual or serious, can have devastating effects on marriages, often leading to separation or divorce. These affairs severely damage trust and emotional bonds, causing significant emotional distress. Participant 5 shared the profound emotional pain and humiliation he experienced after discovering his wife's affair. He stated: *"People from our neighborhood often warned me to check my wife's whereabouts, but I didn't. I loved and trusted her too much to believe them. I thought they were exaggerating. One day, she left me and our daughter without a word. I was confused and heartbroken, but when I saw pictures of her with another man, I was completely shattered. The strong person I used to be was broken into pieces, hiding in a corner, overcome with grief and shame. My world turned upside down. Despite everything, I still believed she would come back, but she didn't. Every night, I cried for her and prayed, hoping for her return, until I received the divorce papers."*

### **Deterioration in Work life**

When individuals face challenges in their personal relationships, their focus on job responsibilities often diminishes, negatively impacting their professional life. Strained marital relationships can heighten stress and anxiety, which not only affects work performance but also relationships with colleagues. Participant 26 shared his experience: *"She started staying at my house for 10 days and then spent the rest at hers. The constant arguments took a heavy toll on my mental health. I couldn't sleep properly, overthinking everything. I couldn't focus on work, and eventually, I got demoted. All the career growth I experienced happened before my marriage—during the marriage, I didn't see any progress in my career."*

### **Health Issues**

Many studies have noted that divorcees often experience serious health problems as a result of divorce (Rathi & Panchauri, 2018). A 2015 study even found that divorced men were significantly more likely to die early compared to divorced women (Sbarra, 2015). However, in our research, we observed that participants began experiencing health issues even before the actual divorce—during the separation period when their marriages were deteriorating despite their efforts to save them. Participant 28 shared his experience: *"When she left me to be with someone else, I was in no condition to go back to work. The emotional turmoil took a heavy toll on both my mental and physical health. I couldn't accept what had happened—my dream of a family was completely shattered. I suffered a heart attack after that. The doctor said even the medicines weren't working at the time, but by God's grace, they managed to save my life."*

## **2) During Divorce**

This phase represents the core of the divorce process, encompassing the most significant legal, practical, and emotional upheavals that individuals face. During this period, most of the issues surrounding the divorce, such as property division, custody arrangements, financial settlements, and emotional adjustments, are raised, debated, and ultimately resolved. It is a deeply challenging time, marked by intense mental, physical, and financial strain.

### **Trapped and Helpless**

The legal divorce process can be overwhelming and highly unpredictable—some cases are resolved within a year, while others drag on for nearly a decade, intensifying the emotional and financial strain on those involved. Many participants in our study described being harassed by false allegations in divorce and alimony cases. In India, the absence of laws allowing men to file complaints against their wives or in-laws leaves them vulnerable to accusations, such as those under Section 498A and dowry-related charges. False allegations can be a highly sensitive issue, leading to long, drawn-out legal battles and severe psychological consequences, including anxiety and depression (Deshpande, 2019; Bulut & Dagtas, 2022). Around 12 out of 30 participants had stressful experience due to false allegations. Participant 23 shared his experience of enduring 12 years of legal battles while fighting false charges: *"She wanted to live separately from my family, and I didn't agree. Her family started threatening me with false police cases, made me leave my hometown. Before filing for divorce, I sent two letters through my lawyer asking her to return, but she ignored them. When I filed for divorce, they demanded 10 lakh rupees, which I couldn't pay. The divorce case dragged on for two years, but the 498A case lasted 12 years, weighing heavily on me. I changed lawyers 5-6 times, but each court date filled me with dread and anxiety. The stress was overwhelming—I had palpitations, and sometimes the palpitations were so intense I thought I would pass out. My mind was consumed with fear and worry, imagining the worst possible outcome. Those 12 years drained me emotionally and financially, costing me nearly 12 lakh rupees"*

### **Struggled Alone**

While women often gain strength from family support and the presence of children, men tend to rely on their friends and their own hope to navigate the challenges of divorce (Bulut & Dagtas, 2022). However, when emotional and physical support is absent, balancing everything becomes significantly harder. Some of our participants struggled through the divorce process with no one to lean on. Participant 20 shared his experience of isolation during this period: *"There was no one to help. Her family strategized to send me to jail during Durga Puja, knowing that getting bail wouldn't be easy. But a brother helped me during that time. Even my own sister and sister-in-law didn't help. I didn't tell my parents everything—they only knew that my wife wanted a divorce and came with the police to collect her belongings. My sister and sister-in-law should've supported me, but they didn't because my wife falsely accused them too. My sister-in-law said, 'Tumi toh duble e amader k nia duble' (You're drowning and taking us with you). That statement hurt deeply. I had hoped for support, but after that, I fought my battle all alone."*

### ***Adopting Bad Habits***

Marriage and divorce both have significant effects on a person's health behaviors, with marriage often benefiting health, while divorce tends to have the opposite impact (Umberson & Williams, 1993). Research has shown that the stress associated with divorce can lead to unhealthy behaviors, such as increased smoking and drinking (Cohen, Schwartz, Bromet, & Parkinson, 1991; Horwitz & White, 1991). Participant 4 shared his experience: *"The divorce petition was filed, but I couldn't process everything. I spent 13-14 years with this person, and she left me for another man so easily. The chat screenshots, pictures, and audios couldn't make me forget the day I caught her red-handed. Neither she nor her family made any effort to save our marriage. I was mentally exhausted, replaying everything over and over in my head. I couldn't sleep, and whenever I tried, those conversations haunted me. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Eventually, I started drinking, smoking, and even going for paid sex. My healthy lifestyle completely deteriorated—I had no regular schedule for eating or sleeping."*

### ***Feeling like a failure and Withdrawn from Society***

The emotional devastation caused by a partner's extramarital affair can lead to profound feelings of failure and withdrawal from society. The sense of betrayal can make it difficult for the individual to engage in everyday life. Participant 28 stated: *"You won't believe how much I gave to our marriage. I didn't focus on myself or my career but instead supported her, thinking it was for us and our future. I wasn't selfish. But after she found success, she left me for another man. No one in my family had ever been divorced, no one in my neighborhood had experienced anything like this. I felt like a failure, like a 'coward.' I used to enjoy hanging out with friends after work until late at night, but after this, I stopped everything. I completely withdrew myself."*

### ***Becoming Strong***

Becoming strong after the decision to divorce was a common theme among our participants. Though initially difficult, many individuals grew stronger as they gradually accepted the reality of their situation. Participant 25 shared: *"I had already gone through so much. Even after she cheated on me, I tried to stay, tried to communicate and work things out, but she refused. Knowing the marriage was going to end was painful, but I also knew I gave my 100% to save it. That realization helped me stop mourning. I quit overthinking and started focusing on my work again. It was only possible because I accepted that the marriage wouldn't work, no matter what."*

## **3) After Divorce**

In this phase, participants begin moving away from the immediate pain of divorce towards the process of rebuilding their lives. It's characterized by a deep acceptance of the divorce, where individuals come to terms with the end of their marriage and start focusing on their personal development.

### ***Focused on Work***

Participants frequently report dedicating themselves to their careers, striving to improve their financial situation, and reconstructing the aspects of their lives that were disrupted by the divorce. Participant 8 stated: *"After divorce, I'm doing much better. Although repaying loans is tough, I'm optimistic about recovering within the next five years. Life is going good without the daily arguments and tension now. I'm working hard to rebuild myself."*

### ***More towards Spirituality***

Some studies suggest that attachment to spirituality or a higher power can facilitate better adjustment following a divorce. A 2009 study identified spirituality as a key factor in post-divorce adjustment (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009). Participant 7 shared: *"Divorce took so much from me, but now I'm 100% fine. I've always had faith in God, and in my darkest moments, He saved me. I believe that God never sends anyone away empty-handed. I am a devotee of Shiva, and I prayed earnestly for guidance towards happiness. In response, God brought a new woman into my life who helped mend my broken pieces. Together, we began to rebuild our lives, and I found new hope and purpose through this spiritual journey."*

### ***Seeing Divorce as 'Positive Experience'***

We observed that many participants viewed their divorce as a profound learning experience, which led them to adopt a more positive mindset. Participant 3 stated: *"I wouldn't say that such incidents should happen in everyone's life, but it's like putting raw iron into the fire to make it into steel, to strengthen it. I made myself aware of the laws and their loopholes, as there is no law to safeguard a man. I didn't know what I know today, and I'm now able to give some advice to those boys who are helplessly wandering around for divorce and maintenance cases."*

### ***Support or Lack of Social support***

Social support emerged as a crucial factor in helping participants adjust after divorce. Participant 4 expressed: *"If my parents hadn't supported me, I wouldn't be here today... My family struggled just as much during the whole process."*

Participant 7 highlighted the importance of friends: *"I wasn't ready to move on mentally or physically, but my friends pushed me. Thanks to them, I'm doing well now. Even my neighbours were also supported me and that motivated me a lot."*

Similarly, Participant 17 shared: *"I was depressed and locked myself in a room, but the open environment at JNU and my friend circle did everything they could to lift my spirits. Some days, I skipped meals, and they would force me to eat. If it weren't for them, I would've fallen seriously ill since I had no family to help me."*

Participant 19 found support at work: *"I had no support from my family, but my office head gave me the time and space to balance my life. After those false allegations, people lost trust in me, but he motivated me to prove my innocence and helped me believe that life can still be beautiful after the storm."*

## Discussion

Existing studies (Thomas & Ryan, 2008), particularly those incorporating Mezirow's transformative framework, have primarily focused on the emotional and psychological changes that occur during and after divorce, overlooking the critical period leading up to it. Our research highlighted the significance of the "before divorce" phase—a period marked by growing dissatisfaction, internal conflict, and a gradual realization that the marriage no longer aligns with personal expectations or life goals. For many participants, the decision to divorce was not a sudden event but a gradual process of confronting long-held beliefs about marriage and identity. By exploring the entire trajectory—from the initial recognition of marital problems to the eventual rebuilding of life post-divorce—our study adds depth to existing research, emphasizing that personal transformation is an ongoing process, not confined to the legal and procedural aspects of divorce. Unlike other studies, this research places a special focus on the journey of divorced men, a topic often overlooked and underrepresented in Indian literature. Our study findings provide fresh insights into men's issues related to marriage, divorce, and personal growth. Similar to the Thomas & Ryan (2008) study, we also identified social support as a critical factor in navigating the divorce process and fostering personal development. Each marriage and divorce story are unique, but common challenges include undisclosed mental health issues and pressure to become resident sons-in-law. Men often struggled with false allegations, extramarital affairs, and emotional distress, which led to anxiety and depression. Over time, many found personal growth and rebuilt their lives, though some continue to struggle.

## Conclusion

As family structures and societal norms evolve, it's vital to recognize that men, like women, can face significant challenges during divorce, including harassment by spouses and in-laws. Their struggles must be acknowledged as serious social and public health issues, deserving of support and legal safeguards. The study's findings reveal that while divorce can be devastating, it also offers a powerful opportunity for personal growth and transformation. By examining the experiences of these men and the phases they navigated, the research provides valuable insights for others facing similar challenges, encouraging them to approach divorce with patience, resolve issues, and reduce stress by recognizing their strengths. This perspective highlights the potential for rebuilding a fulfilling life, even after loss and also emphasizes the need for both men and women to receive protection and understanding during these difficult times.

**Table 1: Participant Information**

| Age-group                            | Percentage Share | Age at Marriage (Mean= 29 Years)   | Percentage Share |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| 20-30                                | 10               | 20-30                              | 63               |
| 31-40                                | 50               | 31-40                              | 37               |
| Above 40                             | 40               | Marital Duration (Mean= 2.6 Years) |                  |
| <b>Caste</b>                         |                  | Less than 5 Years                  | 23               |
| General                              | 57               | 5-10 Years                         | 47               |
| Scheduled Castes                     | 11               | 10-15 Years                        | 13               |
| Other Backward Castes                | 32               | More than 15 Years                 | 17               |
| <b>Religion</b>                      |                  | <b>Known before Marriage</b>       |                  |
| Hindu                                | 97               | Less than a Year                   | 60               |
| Muslim                               | 3                | 1-5 Years                          | 23               |
| <b>Type of Residence</b>             |                  | More than 5 years                  | 17               |
| Rural                                | 40               | <b>Children</b>                    |                  |
| Urban                                | 60               | No Child                           | 60               |
| <b>Wealth Status (Self-reported)</b> |                  | Daughter                           | 23               |
| Poor                                 | 17               | Son                                | 17               |
| Middle                               | 62               | <b>Type of marriage</b>            |                  |
| Rich                                 | 21               | Love                               | 40               |
| <b>Education Level</b>               |                  | Arranged                           | 60               |
| Higher Secondary                     | 27               |                                    |                  |
| Graduation                           | 20               |                                    |                  |
| Above Graduation                     | 53               |                                    |                  |
| <b>Partners' Education Level</b>     |                  |                                    |                  |
| Higher Secondary                     | 30               |                                    |                  |
| Graduation                           | 37               |                                    |                  |
| Above Graduation                     | 33               |                                    |                  |
| <b>Occupation</b>                    |                  |                                    |                  |
| Private Job                          | 67               |                                    |                  |
| Government Job                       | 20               |                                    |                  |
| Business                             | 10               |                                    |                  |
| No Job                               | 3                |                                    |                  |
| <b>Family Type</b>                   |                  |                                    |                  |
| Joint                                | 34               |                                    |                  |
| Nuclear                              | 66               |                                    |                  |
| <b>Age Difference with Wife</b>      |                  |                                    |                  |
| Less than 5 Years                    | 30               |                                    |                  |
| 5-10 Years                           | 7                |                                    |                  |
| More than 10 Years                   | 63               |                                    |                  |

