

Understanding Shame in India: Cultural Manifestations and Conceptual Reflections

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Shame is a socio-cultural phenomenon, recognized as a self-conscious emotion that involves self-devaluation and concerns of social-devaluation. While it is extensively studied in Western contexts, its expression and effects in India remain underexplored. This narrative review includes 22 relevant studies, with the aim of exploring ways shame is conceptualized, contextualized and culturally manifested in India. The review highlights dominant conceptual frameworks and limited contextualization in existing research. Findings suggest that shame is associated with negative effects such as, reduced well-being and self-esteem, while cultural manifestations like *lajjâ* reveal the social-moral significance in India. Majority of cross-cultural studies support the universal adaptive function of shame, but also acknowledge culturally varied expressions shaped by cultural orientations and related self-construal. A notable lack of qualitative research limits experiential and interpretive insights. The review calls for culturally grounded and context-sensitive approaches that move beyond simplistic positive-negative and universal-cultural binaries.

Keywords: Shame, *lajjâ*, culture, India, self-conscious emotion

Shame is a fundamental human experience that is intricately related to interpersonal-social engagements. According to cognitive-attributional approach, it is a self-conscious emotion characterized by global negative self-evaluation (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), emphasizing its intrapersonal nature. In contrast, evolutionary perspective views it as an adaptation to threats to social standing and social bonds (Elison, 2019), highlighting its interpersonal aspect.

Multidimensionality of shame is reflected in its categorizations such as state-trait shame and internal-external shame. (Gilbert, 2003; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Shame can be both adaptive and maladaptive, depending on its intensity, frequency and context (Sanderson, 2015). However, dispositional approach dominates research on shame and psychopathology, highlighting its maladaptive aspects (Leeming & Boyle, 2004).

Shame is universally present, as it is relevant to people across the globe (Casimir & Schnegg, 2002). However, it is also cultural, as it arises from the appraisals done against the prevailing socio-cultural norms. This recognition calls for understanding shame as embedded within social-cultural contexts (Vanderheiden & Mayer, 2017).

There is a marked difference between Western and Eastern perspectives regarding shame. In individualistic Western cultures, self is perceived as independent and shame is often linked to maladaptive consequences. In contrast, rooted in interdependent self-construal, collectivistic Eastern cultures view it as constructive, as it promotes adherence to social norms and fosters social harmony (Wong & Tsai, 2007).

It is essential to engage with the cultural construct of *lajjâ*, while exploring shame in the Indian context. *Lajjâ* is often used as a

translation of shame in Indian language such as Oriya. It is a desirable virtue that safeguards individual and collective honour. Reflecting its social-moral functions lajjâ is equated with refraining from wrongful deeds, framed as an antidote to anger, with gendered expectations (Bhawuk, 2017; Menon & Shweder, 1994).

In Indian context, shame likely operates beyond socio-moral functions, given its recognized influence on mental health. Within India's socio-cultural diversity, experience and impact of shame may vary across intersections of different social identities. Despite its multifaceted relevance, research on shame in India lacks a comprehensive synthesis. This narrative review seeks to bridge this gap by integrating existing studies to explore how shame is conceptualized, contextualized and culturally framed in India.

Method

Narrative review approach was adopted as it allows integration of diverse empirical and theoretical work, fitting the exploratory and conceptually synthesizing aims of the current review (Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

The literature search was conducted using databases such as PubMed and ProQuest, spanning from May to September 2024, with no restrictions on publication year. Search terms included 'shame Indian studies', 'lajjâ', 'shame & psychopathology', 'shame & stigma', 'shame in mental health settings' and 'self-conscious emotions.' Studies were selected if shame was a key variable or received significant focus in the findings within psychological literature. Cross-cultural studies with Indian samples were included when they offered meaningful insights into the cultural aspects of shame. Data synthesis entailed identifying key details such as objectives, shame conceptualization, context, methodology and findings, which were then thematically organized in relation to existing theoretical frameworks.

Findings and Discussion

The following tables provide an overview of the reviewed studies. Table 1 depicts 12 Indian Studies. Table 2 summarizes 10 cross-cultural studies. Each table outlines the authors, sample and setting, assessment/method, shame conceptualization and key findings.

Table 1. Summary of Indian studies on shame

Author(s)	Sample & Setting	Assessment/Method	Shame Conceptualization	Key Findings
Bansal et al. (2023)	145 young adults (18-25 years)	Test of self-conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3)	Shame proneness in response to scenarios to assess individual differences	Shame linked with reduced emotional well-being and social-focused values.
Bhushan et al. (2020)	Phase 1: 10 young adults Phase 3: 138 undergraduate students	Three phases: developing scenarios, illustrations and rating of emotions.	Shame (Lajja), conceptualized as arising from wrong action, failing to meet personal standards.	Shame emerged from negative appraisal and when reparation was perceived as unattainable.
Cherian & Mukherjee (2022)	20 young adults	Semi-structured interviews	Using objectification theory, body shame is seen as a consequence of sexual-objectification, influenced by societal ideals and medial portrayals.	Body shaming influenced well-being and self-esteem negatively, leading to body shaming others.

Datta (2018)	Two migrant workers in Delhi and their families in rural Bihar.	Case study, semi-structured interviews and observations.	Shame as affective lived experience coexisting with pride in context of migration, working identities and living conditions.	Shame stemmed from poor living conditions, long working hours and shabby-unkept look, contrasting with their well-groomed visits home.
Kaushik & Batra (2022)	362 adults	Body Image Shame Scale	Shame in relation to body image, classified as externalized and internalized body shame.	Body image shame is negatively associated with well-being, while positively correlated with appearance anxiety.
Kumar & Pathak (2022)	240 adults, from Jharkhand	Attitude towards Mental health Problems (ATMHP) scale	Shame in relation to stigma of mental illness, classified as external, internal and reflected shame.	Moderate to low shame reported overall.
La Ferle et al. (2019)	120 adults from Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta and Chennai	Randomly assignment to different conditions	Shame as moral emotion studied in relation to self-construal and reporting intention of bystanders.	Individuals with interdependent self-construal more vulnerable to shame-framed messages, prompting positive reporting intention.
Mallikarjuna (2021)	800 college going students from Bangalore	Guilt & Shame Proneness Scale (GASP)	Shame proneness across range of publicly exposed transgressions.	Self-monitoring positively correlated with shame (negative self-evaluative), while self-esteem is negatively associated.
Muralidharan & La Ferle (2022)	104 adults from Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Calcutta	Random assignment to shame or hope condition in domestic violence prevention ads	Shame as moral, other-focused emotion studied in relation with perceived peer support and reporting intentions.	Individuals with high perceived social support, both were equally influential on reporting intentions.
Parray & Khan (2024)	108 PG & PhD Students, from Jammu- Kashmir, Uttar Prades	Emotional Experience Questionnaire	Using Sherer's component process model, posits that the intensity of shame and its components depend on level of stimulus appraisal.	Increased appraisal intensified bodily, expressive-verbal, and psychological reactions of shame.
Singhal & Chukkali (2023)	806 doctors & nurses, from North	Guilt and shame proneness scale	Shame proneness in relation to moral injury.	Positive correlation of moral injury with

Sinha & Chauhan (2013)	and South India 96 PG students and different professionals including 8 domestic help and 2 drivers.	(GASP) Written narratives, conversations o Lajja. Secondary analysis of representations and creation of semantic maps.	Lajja as a core Indian cultural construct encompassing shame emotion, a moral virtue and its gendered connotation.	shame-proneness Experienced it as shame emotion following violation of norms. As a virtue it upholds morality, honour. Gendered aspect highlighted its imposition more on women as tool of social control.
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Table 2. Summary of cross-cultural studies on shame including Indian participants

Authors	Sample & Setting	Assessment/ Method	Shame conceptualization	Key Findings
Anolli & Pascucci (2005)	133 Indian from New Delhi, 134 Italian undergraduate students	Emotional Experience questionnaire TOSCA	Explored shame as both an emotional state and trait shame.	Indian participants reported shame as more enduring-intense, showed greater shame-proneness and stricter emotional control.
Hejmadi et al. (2000)	48 American undergraduate students and 47 Indian participants from Orissa.	Random assignment to groups. Stimuli consisted of 45 video portrayals of 10 emotions including Lajja.	Lajja as a culture specific positive emotion, translated as, shame, ashamed, bashful, embarrassed, shameful, shy.	Indian participants showed greater accuracy in recognizing the indigenous-culture specific emotions including, Lajja highlighting cultural salience.
Kollareth et al. (2018)	Study 1: 108 participants, Study 2: 120 participants, Study 3: 117 participants; from India, Spain and USA.	Study 1: Responses to non-moral and moral stories. Study 2: Replication of study 1 with different moral stories Study 3: Evaluated dissimilarity of shame from other emotions	Shame as a moral transgression or failure; focuses on cultural-linguistic variations in emotion lexicon and meaning of shame	Study 1 and 2: Shame words in English, Spanish and Malayalam are not equivalent. Study 3: American English shame was seen as more similar to sadness & guilt compared to its counterparts in Malayalam.

Landers et al. (2024)	853 participants from US and India	Two vignettes, with four conditions. Random assignment to one of the 8 conditions.	Shame understood as serving interpersonal functions of minimizing cost of social devaluation	Stronger support for functionalist theory in conceptualizing shame as a response to interpersonal threats of devaluation across cultures.
Leroux et al. (2023)	76 participants from US and 62 participants from India	Random assignment to devaluation or shame condition, responded to 75 scenarios.	According to information threat theory, shame leads to behaving in ways that reduces the chance or impact of devaluation.	Anticipatory shame intensity closely and precisely aligned with audience devaluation across scenarios and countries.
Szycer et al. (2016)	Study 1: 118 from US, 155 from India and 165 from Israel. Study 2: 200 from US and 151 Indian.	Study 1: Participants rated either audience devaluation or own shame in same situations. Study 2: One audience devaluation and three emotion conditions.	According to information threat theory, shame works as an adaptation against social devaluation when negative information becomes public.	Study 1: Found consistent patterns of social devaluation and shame in similar scenarios across cultures, when cultural valuations aligned. Study 2: Shame showed stronger correlation with audience devaluation in both countries.
Young et al. (2021)	1,466 participants from US, China, India, Iran and Spain	GASP	Dimensional, quaternary approach to cultural orientation (HVCI) in understanding shame-proneness to public transgressions.	In India, lower egalitarian and relationship-focused values (low Horizontal collectivism) may contribute to withdrawal tendencies of shame.

Note. HVCI= Horizontal Vertical Collectivism Individualism

The following thematic discussion synthesizes key patterns in how shame is conceptualized and culturally framed.

Conceptualization Patterns: Theoretical Framing and Contextualization

A significant portion of the Indian studies have focused on shame-proneness. It is a trait disposition characterized by the

tendency to experience shame frequently while facing failure or transgressions (Tangney et al., 2009). Shame proneness has received considerable attention as a maladaptive trait associated with low self-esteem, personal distress and psychopathology (Leeming & Boyle, 2004; Tangney et al., 1995). Indian studies similarly link it to negative outcomes including, self-

esteem and self-monitoring, wellbeing, and moral injury (e.g., Bansal et al., 2023). This dominant orientation has been problematized for limiting engagement with socio-cultural dimensions of shame (Leeming & Boyle, 2004). On the contrary, the reviewed cross-cultural studies largely adopt a functionalist approach, framing it as an adaptation to social devaluation (e.g., Sznycer et al., 2016).

Research on shame related to specific sources has received limited attention (Leeming & Boyle, 2004), and in the Indian context remains largely confined to body image and mental illness stigma. Studies underscored both personal and social dimensions as body shame is understood as internal and external shame (Cherian & Mukherjee, 2022; Kaushik & Batra, 2022). Shame related to mental illness, further includes reflected shame on family or self, shaped by anticipated judgements from community (Kumar & Pathak, 2022).

Shame has been examined in contexts of culture, migration, moral injury and prosocial behavior. Findings demonstrate shame's cultural grounding through *lajja* (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013), its interplay with pride in migrant worker's negotiations of urban-rural life (Datta, 2018), its connection to withdrawal in moral injury among health professionals (Singhal & Chukkali, 2023) and its potential to promote prosocial behavior (e.g., Muralidharan & La Ferle, 2022). These findings underscore the other-focused and interpersonal nature of shame.

From the limited body of Indian research on shame, a subset emphasizes its negative consequences following the dispositional framework, while others focus on social-moral aspects. Functionalist approach and work on *lajja* highlight its adaptive value. Despite these attempts, shame remains underexplored across mental health conditions and various socio-cultural settings.

Cultural Manifestations of Shame in India

The socio-cultural norms inform what is considered shameful and the contexts in which it is experienced. In India, shame is closely tied to honor, reflected in terms like, *sharam*, *lajja*, *izzat* and symbols such as *nak*, *matha* and *munh* (Patel, 2018). Overprotection of family honor is commonly found as it ensures avoidance of being shamed in the society.

The difficulty of identifying equivalent lexical representations of shame across cultures sustains debates about its cultural heterogeneity (Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006). In Indian context, this is evident in findings that the Malayalam term, '*nanakedu*' is not equivalent to English shame (Kollareth et al., 2018). Similarly, Shweder et al., (2003) highlights potential inaccuracies in equating *lajja* with shame. Despite these issues of equivalence, several studies employ *lajja* to interpret shame findings in Indian cultural context (Anolli & Pascucci, 2005; Bhushan et al., 2020; Hejmadi et al., 2000; La Ferle et al., 2019; Muralidharan & La Ferle, 2022). For instance, one study emphasizes *lajja* as a culture specific emotion of India, that nonetheless shares similarities with shame, as it is recognized by both Indian and American participants (Hejmadi et al., 2000).

Cross-cultural studies underscore distinct manifestations of shame in India, marked by greater emotional control to preserve social harmony (Anolli & Pascucci, 2005) and withdrawal responses that are shaped by hierarchical values and relational norms (Young et al., 2021).

Shweder (2003) identifies *lajja* as a culture-specific expression of the broader abstract idea of shame. Bhawuk (2017) conceptualizes *lajja* as a virtue involving self-evaluative processes that guide behavior. In line with this, Sinha and Chauhan (2013), describe it as unique Indian cultural concept, reflected as a virtue and gendered

connotations, while also noting its semantic overlap with shame. Possibly drawing on this overlap, Bhushan et al., (2020) suggest that *lajja* may be considered equivalent to shame. This apparent divergence may stem from the positive and negative connotations of *lajja* and shame respectively.

Cultural Specificity and Universality of Shame

The earlier section highlights culture specific expressions of shame in India alongside challenges of equivalent terminology. Cross-cultural studies providing support to evolutionary perspective, reveal common universal patterns of shame. This approach views shame as an adaptive mechanism that protects against social devaluation (Landers et al., 2024). However, one study notes that despite its universality, it may vary culturally, as the cross-cultural similarity of shame activation depend on the alignment of cultural norms and values (Szyner et al., 2016). Leroux et al. (2023) demonstrate that shame not only aligns with devaluation by others, but also with self-devaluation over a disgraceful action. This link with self-devaluation is consistent with claims of attribution theory. This dual focus of devaluation by others and self, indicates possible convergence of personal and social values differ or converge within a shared socio-cultural context.

These findings suggest a co-existence of universal and culturally unique manifestations of shame. Supporting this view, social-functional perspective asserts that while shame is universal, culture shapes when and how it's expressed, fostering conformity to group standards (Goetz & Keltner, 2007).

Cultural Orientations and Socio-Cultural Expressions of Shame in India

Understanding the socio-cultural construction of shame requires close examination of how self is construed in

relation to others within a culture. In independent self-construal typical of Western individualistic cultures, the self is seen as autonomous, defined by stable internal attributes. Whereas in interdependent self-construal, common in eastern collectivistic cultures, self is defined through relationships and social roles, with internal attributes viewed as context-dependent and secondary to maintaining harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

As shame involves self and other evaluations, its expressions are likely shaped by the cultural orientations and related self-construal. However, binary classification of culture as collectivistic-individualistic can oversimplify complexities of shame. India is often described as more collectivistic, due to reliance on interdependence (Hofstede, 2001). However, research suggest that Indian culture demonstrates blend of individualism and collectivism (Jha & Singh, 2011). Factors, such as education, urbanization have fostered independent self-construal and individualistic tendencies, reflecting impacts of globalization (Mishra, 1994; Sinha et al., 2001).

Adding horizontal (equality) and vertical (hierarchy) dimensions to traditional Individualism-collectivism model offer possibilities for nuanced understanding of shame. Triandis (1995) classified India as a vertically collectivistic culture that values interdependence and hierarchy in relation to rank, status and power within the group. Whereas, Sivadas et al., (2008) found that India scored highest in Horizontal collectivism, emphasizing equality within interdependence. Furthermore, low horizontal collectivistic orientation in India is found to correlate with withdrawal behaviour of shame (Young et al., 2021). These differences reflect the flexibility of cultural orientations in India, demonstrating presence of both individualistic and collectivistic tendencies and thereby shaping variations

in self-construal. This would lead to diverse cultural and individualistic manifestations of shame. Similarly, mindscape theory reiterates existence of shared values and behaviours across cultures, emphasizing intracultural and transcultural heterogeneity, over stereotyping entire culture as solely individualist or collectivist (Fatehi et al., 2020).

Where does India Stand in the Perceived Dichotomy of Shame as Positive or Negative?

The view of shame as maladaptive or negative largely arises from association of dispositional shame with different psychopathologies (Leeming & Boyle, 2004). However, shame is often seen as positive in Eastern cultures, including India where it is valued for serving goals of interdependence (Wong & Tsai, 2007). This contrast raises critical questions: Does this perceived dichotomy imply shame is always positively viewed in Indian context, or does it reflect culturally constructed meanings of shame or is it a result of methodological challenge in identifying equivalent terms?

Menon and Shweder (1994), discovered that Hindu Indians associated shame with happiness, while European Americans linked it to anger, indicating cultural difference in shame's valence. Rozin (2003) contended that these differences resulted from how emotions are categorized. Americans grouped emotions by valence, while Indians focused on positive social impacts. Notably, when explicitly asked to categorize by valence or social impacts, both groups responded consistently. The GRID study in India confirmed that shame was consistently identified as negative based on valence (Hejmadi, 2013).

Edelstein and Shaver (2007), assert that shame is always unpleasant at the subjective experience level. Although social significance of shame appears to be universal,

differences exist in degree to which shame is valued. Research on *lajjâ* or *lajya* or shame in India, underscore its cultural significance in preserving social harmony. The positive and negative dimensions of shame are not mutually exclusive, rather possibly coexist, with certain aspect receiving greater weightage in a given culture based on prevailing values.

Implications and Future Directions

Shame remains an under-researched area in the Indian psychological literature. The predominant use of Western models and assessment tools risks overlooking culturally unique expressions of shame. The limited use of qualitative methods further restricts contextual understanding across different settings. Advancing this field warrants development of culturally grounded frameworks beyond existing work on *lajjâ* that can account for shame's multiple facets including internal evaluative, moral regulatory, interpersonal and gendered dimensions and its varied sources. Future research needs to situate shame within intersecting Indian social structures such as, caste, religion, class to better understand its nuances.

The review highlights shame's potential to be both maladaptive and adaptive. Future research should examine conditions under which shame operates constructively or detrimentally, especially in India's current globalizing context. Exploring the interplay of cultural orientations, values, self-construal can enable effective cross-cultural comparisons and offer opportunities for theoretical advancements.

Future research needs to address the persistent challenge of linguistic equivalence by examining how shame is named, expressed and experienced across India's vernacular languages. This focus carries significant methodological and theoretical implications for cross-cultural comparison.

The global shame literature demonstrates relevance of shame in various psychopathologies, yet its role across mental health conditions in India remains underexplored despite country's growing mental health burden (Sahithya & Reddy, 2018). It is essential for clinicians to recognize the co-existence of shame's potentially pathologizing effects and its adaptive functions. Understanding how shame functions for a particular client can inform ways to address shame in the therapy to promote client's well-being.

Conclusion

The review underscores shame in India as a socio-culturally embedded, self and other focused emotion shaped by shifting cultural orientations, social norms and universal adaptive mechanisms. While *lajjâ* as a culturally unique manifestation of shame may function as a moral regulator that upholds honor, it can also lead to negative outcomes such as distress, stigma, withdrawal, depending on context. The review calls for moving beyond simple positive-negative or cultural-universal binaries towards developing culturally grounded, context-sensitive frameworks and their integration into therapeutic practice.

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