

Divorce Bonds: Reflexivity of the Researcher and Its Impact on Adolescents and Families in Kerala

Aneesh T

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur

Sujata Sriram

Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai

This study explores the psychological, emotional, and social ramifications of divorce on adolescents and families in Kerala, a region marked by progressive development indicators yet experiencing rising marital disintegration. Employing a qualitative exploratory design, supplemented by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), the research investigates the lived experiences of adolescents, custodial and non-custodial parents, and key informants, including family court counsellors. The study conducted in the Ernakulam district reveals how divorce impacts adolescents' emotional well-being, academic engagement, and familial relationships. Findings highlight themes of emotional suppression, social stigma, financial insecurity, institutional barriers, and gendered vulnerability, especially among single mothers. The reflexivity of the researcher, a clinical psychologist, offers a dual lens of therapeutic insight and scholarly inquiry, emphasising the ethical and emotional complexities of fieldwork. The study concludes that divorce is not merely a legal dissolution but a multi-layered psychosocial event with long-term effects on children and families. It underscores the need for systemic reforms, reorientation of premarital education, and early psychosocial intervention to support affected populations. The research calls for culturally contextualised, empathetic responses within institutional and community frameworks to mitigate the adverse impacts of divorce.

Keywords: Divorce, Adolescents, Reflexivity, Stigma, Researcher

Parental divorce in Kerala and other parts of India has emerged as a salient psychosocial and public health concern, with empirical work documenting its impact on adolescents' emotional well being, behaviour, and social functioning. While global research has long established links between divorce and adverse child outcomes, Indian studies highlight how these processes are filtered through local structures of patriarchy, religiosity, and collectivist family norms, making divorce not only a legal event but a moral and relational rupture (Maiti, 2024; Joseph & Nair, 2024; Thadathil & Sriram, 2019; Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Das & Menon, 2021). Against this backdrop, the present study focuses on adolescents and families

navigating divorce in Ernakulam District, Kerala. It examines the researcher's reflexivity as a clinician-researcher who is both embedded in and critically observing this socio-cultural field. By foregrounding reflexivity, the study aims to demonstrate how the researcher's positionality influences access, interpretation, and ethical decision-making in work with vulnerable families affected by marital dissolution.

International literature consistently indicates that parental divorce is associated with elevated risks of internalising and externalising problems, academic difficulties, and strained peer and parent-child relationships across developmental stages

(Jena & Pradhan, 2025). Meta analytic and longitudinal research demonstrates that, for a substantial subset of children, these difficulties persist into adolescence and adulthood, manifesting as anxiety, depressive symptoms, conduct problems, and compromised social adjustment (Thadathil & Sriram, 2019; Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Das & Menon, 2021). Recent cohort data suggest that mental health problems often intensify after the legal separation rather than in the pre divorce phase, underscoring the long term psychosocial consequences of family disruption and the need to understand children's post decree trajectories. Studies of subjective well-being and adjustment further show wide variability, with some adolescents demonstrating resilience or even relief when divorce terminates chronic high-conflict marriages (Aneesh & Sriram, 2024; Mathew & Kuruvilla, 2021), highlighting the importance of contextual and relational moderators, such as the quality of parenting, economic stability, and extended family support.

Within India, scholarship on divorce, families, and adolescents has grown. Still, it remains limited in comparison to the scale of marital disruption, particularly in terms of in-depth, qualitative documentation of adolescents' lived experiences. Research in Kerala and other Indian states indicates that adolescents of divorced parents frequently report heightened academic disengagement, school behaviour problems, social withdrawal from community and religious events, and conflicted loyalties between parents (Thadathil & Sriram, 2019; Joseph, 2023; Maiti, 2024). Case studies and small-sample qualitative work from Bihar, Kashmir, and southern states similarly highlight narratives of parentification, economic strain, and disruptions in schooling that are often compounded by judicial processes, repeated court appearances, and the absence of child-centred custody decision-making. However,

these studies tend to focus either on children's or on mothers' outcomes, with fewer attempts to simultaneously integrate adolescent voices, custodial and non-custodial parents, and institutional actors within a single, contextually grounded design (Jena & Pradhan, 2025).

Kerala offers a distinctive socio legal context in which to study divorce and its aftermath, as the state combines high literacy, strong women's education, and relatively progressive legal awareness with entrenched norms around family honour, religious authority, and gendered respectability. Empirical and media reports describe Kerala as having among the highest per capita divorce rates in the country, with a visible rise in marital petitions alongside emerging discourses that partially destigmatise separation for women. Studies of divorced and maritally separated women in Kerala and neighbouring regions document the intersection of economic precarity, housing insecurity, workplace stigma, and safety concerns, especially for single mothers heading households. At the same time, work on young marriage and divorce among marginalised youth in India illustrates how early unions, limited premarital preparation, and structural inequalities shape both the decision to separate and the resources available for post divorce adaptation (Maiti, 2024; Joseph, 2023; Joseph & Nair, 2024). These strands of evidence underscore the need to locate adolescents' psychological outcomes within broader regional patterns of gender, class, and institutional response (Das & Menon, 2021; Mathew & Kuruvilla, 2021).

A further gap in the Indian divorce literature concerns the dynamics of premarital counselling, family court mediation, and community based support services, which frequently operate within religious or ritualised frameworks rather than evidence based relational skill building (Maiti,

2024; Thadathil & Sriram, 2019). Studies of custody disputes and divorce related trauma in India show that children's voices are often marginalised in legal processes, with limited mental health referral, minimal child involvement in decision making, and coercive visitation practices that can exacerbate distress (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Mathew & Kuruvilla, 2021; Das & Menon, 2021). Parallel work on the challenges faced by divorced women in Kerala points to the inadequacy of institutional protection and the dominance of moralising discourses that position women as responsible for preserving marital harmony, regardless of abuse or incompatibility (Jena & Pradhan, 2025; Joseph & Nair, 2024). These findings resonate with the present study's themes of ritualistic premarital counselling, institutional control, and gendered gatekeeping, suggesting that systemic practices around marriage and divorce in Kerala may inadvertently reinforce stigma and limit access to psychosocial support for adolescents and mothers.

The present study is situated at the intersection of these empirical and methodological developments, offering a Kerala based, concurrent mixed methods exploration of adolescents and families affected by divorce, while explicitly thematising the researcher's reflexive engagement as a male clinical psychologist working with vulnerable populations. By bringing together adolescents, custodial and non custodial parents, and key informants such as family court counsellors and mediation officials in Ernakulam, the study extends prior Indian work that has tended to focus on a single group and foregrounds how emotional distress, stigma, institutional barriers, and financial strain are experienced and narrated across family roles. The reflexive lens enables a critical examination of the emotional toll, ethical dilemmas, gendered access barriers, and power asymmetries that shape the research

process in a culturally sensitive yet underdocumented domain. In doing so, the study aims to contribute to both the empirical literature on divorce and adolescent mental health in India, as well as to methodological debates on reflexivity, insider positionality, and researcher well-being in qualitative and mixed-methods research.

Divorce, though a legal dissolution of marriage, often leaves behind complex emotional, social, and economic ramifications that ripple through the lives of all involved, particularly women and children (Aneesh & Sriram, 2024; Amato, 2018; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Tullius et al., 2022; Prevoo & Weel, 2015). In the Indian sociocultural context, where familial structures and community perceptions are deeply embedded in tradition and honour, the consequences of marital breakdown extend beyond the couple to impact broader social relationships (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Maiti, 2024; Mbiti, 1969; Konstam et al., 2016). Adolescents bear the brunt of these shifts, often without the emotional vocabulary or safe spaces to express their internal turmoil (Mathew & Kuruvilla, 2021; Corrigan & Rao, 2012; John, 2023). This study, situated within Kerala's socio-legal framework, aims to explore the lived experiences of families navigating post-divorce realities, with a focus on adolescents and single mothers.

As a clinical psychologist entering the realm of qualitative research, the researcher's dual role offered depth and vulnerability (Das & Tampubolon, 2022; Konstam et al., 2016; Corrigan & Rao, 2012; John, 2023). The therapeutic lens enabled a richer understanding of participants' narratives, yet the emotional resonance of these stories posed unique ethical and personal challenges (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Tullius et al., 2022; Amato & Booth, 1997; Prevoo & Weel, 2015). The insights gathered during this fieldwork illuminated not only the psychological consequences of

divorce but also the institutional, cultural, and gendered barriers that shape these experiences (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Jena & Pradhan, 2025; Maiti, 2024; Amato, 2018; Das & Menon, 2021; Das & Tampubolon, 2022; Konstam et al., 2016). By centring participant voices and integrating verbatim accounts, the study aims to contribute a nuanced, emotionally authentic perspective to existing literature on family disruption and psychosocial outcomes.

Research Problem

While existing literature has discussed the causes and consequences of divorce, fewer studies have explored the perspectives of adolescents and parents post-divorce in the Indian socio-cultural context. This research specifically addresses the emotional, behavioural, and relational dimensions of divorce as experienced by adolescents and both custodial and non-custodial parents.

Objectives

- To explore adolescent and parental perspectives on the causes of divorce.
- To assess parenting challenges and adaptation strategies post-divorce.
- To evaluate the role of societal attitudes, stigma, and institutional barriers affecting the divorced population.

Method

Design

A concurrent mixed-methods design was employed, combining qualitative exploratory inquiry with quantitative assessment tools, notably the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). This methodological triangulation enabled a richer understanding of participants' lived experiences while also facilitating the identification of behavioural and emotional patterns across cases. The qualitative component provided depth and

contextual nuance, while the SDQ offered measurable insights into psychosocial functioning. Such integrative designs are increasingly recognised for their capacity to enhance validity and comprehensiveness in mental health research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Goodman et al., 2020). This approach was particularly suitable given the complexity and sensitivity of divorce-related psychosocial phenomena.

Methodologically, there is a growing recognition that mixed methods designs and reflexive qualitative inquiry are particularly suited to researching sensitive topics such as divorce and childhood trauma in India. The integration of standardised tools, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, with narrative interviews enables researchers to triangulate behavioural indicators with subjective accounts, capturing both common patterns and idiosyncratic meanings in adolescents' responses to parental separation. At the same time, work on reflexivity and positionality in child and family research in India emphasises that insider-outsider dynamics, gender, professional identity, and power differences critically shape sampling, rapport, data quality, and ethical risk. Reflexive accounts from Indian and Global South contexts show how researchers must continually negotiate access with state institutions, schools, and gatekeepers, especially when engaging stigmatised populations such as divorced women and their children, and how these negotiations become part of the analytic story rather than mere procedural background.

Sampling

Ernakulam district was chosen for its diverse socio-economic and cultural landscape, which reflects the broader socio-cultural dynamics of Kerala. The sample included Adolescents (aged 11–17) from divorced families, Custodial and non-

custodial parents (20 Males and 20 Females), and Key informants such as family court counsellors and mediation officials (19 Professionals).

Tools for Data Collection

- *Semi-structured Interview Schedules* for adolescents, custodial and non-custodial parents
- *The SDQ* is a widely used tool for assessing emotional and behavioural difficulties in children and adolescents. It was administered to custodial parents and adolescents to measure their psychological well-being quantitatively.
- Key Informant Interviews with legal professionals and family counsellors

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were thematically analysed using Atlas-Ti, and quantitative SDQ data were processed via SPSS to identify behavioural and emotional difficulties. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process to acknowledge the researcher's dual role as clinician and investigator, especially given the sensitive and emotionally charged nature of the data. The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings enabled a comprehensive understanding of the psychological, social, and institutional

challenges faced by participants after divorce.

Ethical Clearance

This study received ethical clearance from the Institute Ethics Committee (IEC) at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, and all procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the Institute's guidelines for safeguarding the dignity, rights, safety, and well being of research participants.

Results and Discussion

The table below presents the core themes and subthemes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of narratives collected from adolescents and women who have been affected by divorce. These themes reflect the emotional, social, financial, and institutional dimensions of post-divorce life as experienced by participants. The data highlights both internal psychological struggles and external systemic challenges, revealing a complex interplay between personal pain and societal response. Several patterns, such as emotional bottling in adolescents and stigma-driven masking among women, were consistently observed across narratives. This thematic structure forms the basis for interpreting the lived realities of participants within a broader psychosocial and cultural framework.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes Derived from Qualitative Analysis of Divorce-Impacted Families

Theme No.	Theme	Subthemes
1	Emotional Ventilation and Psychological Distress in Adolescents	1.1 Inability to share with an emotionally fragile parent 1.2 Internalised emotional pain and social masking 1.3 Psychosomatic symptoms and academic withdrawal
2	Fear, Stigma, and Social Masking in Women	2.1 Use of symbolic objects to maintain marital continuity 2.2 Concealment to avoid societal judgment 2.3 Protecting children through constructed narratives

3	Failures in Premarital Counselling and Unrealistic Ideals	3.1 Religious ideology over relationship skills 3.2 Endorsement of gender roles and suppression of autonomy 3.3 Discrepancy between values and lived reality
4	Institutional Control and Loss of Autonomy	4.1 Denial of access due to organisational fear 4.2 Employer surveillance and reputational fear 4.3 Institutional restrictions on autonomy
5	Financial Insecurity and Economic Strain Post-Divorce	5.1 Food scarcity and maternal sacrifice 5.2 Workplace gendered insults and dependency on informal support networks
6	Shame, Family Honour, and Participation Barriers	6.1 Family-imposed withdrawal 6.2 Internalised guilt and perceived burden 6.3 Patriarchal gatekeeping in collectivist settings
7	Gender-Based Institutional Discrimination	7.1 Denial of access based on the researcher's gender 7.2 Bureaucratic resistance to male researchers
8	Positive Gatekeeping and Systemic Insight	8.1 Legal officials' recognition of psychosocial dimensions 8.2 Critique of ritualistic counselling 8.3 Advocacy for compatibility-focused interventions
9	Silent Withdrawals and Ambivalence	9.1 Sudden disengagement after agreement 9.2 Internal conflict between wanting to share and fear of exposure
10	Researcher Reflexivity and Emotional Challenges	10.1 Emotional toll of fieldwork 10.2 Ethical dilemmas during data collection 10.3 Managing the dual role of therapist and researcher

Case Discussions with Researcher Reflexivity

As a clinical psychologist entering the research space, I found the emotional weight of fieldwork both unexpected and transformative. The lived experiences of families, especially adolescents, revealed systemic intricacies of post-divorce dynamics. My therapeutic background often intersected with my role as a researcher, enriching the narratives while posing deep emotional and ethical challenges.

Emotional ventilation emerged as a significant theme, particularly among adolescents. A 12-year-old boy expressed an intense inability to communicate with his mother due to her emotional fragility, saying, "I cannot share with my mother. She cries." His lived experience of insomnia, headaches, and withdrawal from academics pointed to internalised psychological distress. Another participant, a 13-year-old girl, said, "I feel like I'm drowning inside, but I smile so Amma doesn't worry." A third adolescent stated, "I cry into my pillow at night; no one must know."

These expressions of emotional bottling, psychosomatic symptoms, and academic disengagement among adolescents reinforced how the aftershocks of divorce manifest through behavioural and cognitive difficulties (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Tullius et al., 2022).

Fear and social masking were evident in the narratives of divorced women who went to great lengths to maintain the illusion of a husband's presence. One participant used her husband's clothing as a symbolic artefact, creating a semblance of marital continuity to ward off social judgment and potential threats. "I hang his shirt on the balcony. People think he is still with us," she shared. Another woman mentioned, "If they know I live alone, someone will surely come to harm us." A third stated, "My child believes his father will return soon because I never removed his photos." This symbolic act illustrated how women navigated stigma and vulnerability by employing imaginative strategies to preserve their safety and dignity (Jena & Pradhan, 2025; Konstam et al., 2016).

Stigma was encountered not only in participants' narratives but also during the research process itself. One potential respondent, visibly distressed, verbally lashed out at me, reflecting the depth of distrust and accumulated trauma from repeated social invalidation. She said, "You men are all the same. You write and go. We are left with the shame!" Another woman exclaimed, "Why should I open my wounds again? So you can make papers out of our pain?" A third declared, "This society finished me. You can do nothing about it." Her outburst was less about the research and more a defence mechanism against perceived intrusion, underscoring the corrosive effect of stigma and marginalisation (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Jena & Pradhan, 2025; Aneesh & Sriram, 2024; John, 2023).

Financial insecurity was a prevalent theme among single mothers post-divorce. One mother working at a petrol station described her inability to afford rent and dependence on charity for essentials. "Sometimes, we eat only rice water at night. I skip meals so my son can eat," she said. Another participant shared, "They call me names at work. Just because I don't have a husband." A third noted, "Every month is a struggle. I borrow money from neighbours to pay school fees." The economic ramifications of divorce, especially for women-led households, reflected the disproportionate burden they carry in patriarchal societies (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Thadathil & Sriram, 2019; Amato, 2018).

Social fear and institutional control shaped participant engagement with the research process. In one case, a willing participant later withdrew due to pressure from her employer. Though she had consented to the interview, she later said, "My supervisor asked me if I was telling the world I'm a failure. I can't lose my job." Another stated, "My workplace monitors what we do outside. They won't like me talking to you." A third woman said, "I want to speak. But please don't mention my name anywhere. They'll ask me questions." This illustrates how organisational gatekeeping often compromises autonomy and fear of reputational damage (Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991).

Shame and family pressure also led to multiple participant withdrawals. In one case, a young woman was forcibly prevented from participating by her grandmother, who feared social judgment. The participant said, "Amma said our family name will be ruined if I talk." Another reflected, "I feel like a burden to my family because I divorced. They already look at me differently." A third shared, "I wanted to help your study, but my uncle said no good will come out of it." This internalised shame, fuelled by rigid family honour systems,

discouraged even voluntary participation in non-threatening conversations. Such barriers are well-documented in collectivist societies where familial identity supersedes individual autonomy (Maiti, 2024).

Institutional barriers further hampered access to valuable data sources. An ICDS officer denied access to anganwadi teachers due to my gender, despite formal requests and ethical clearance. He said, "Why should our women talk to a man about divorce? It's inappropriate." Another official stated, "We cannot allow external people to question our teachers. They are busy." A third response was, "Come back with a female colleague, and we will think about it." This reflected not only bureaucratic resistance but also gender bias within institutional settings that are expected to be gatekeepers of community knowledge. The lack of cooperation from public institutions dealing with women and children highlights systemic challenges in researching sensitive issues, such as divorce (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Maiti, 2024; Das & Menon, 2021; Prevo & Weel, 2015).

In contrast, unexpected support came from a senior official at the Kerala Mediation Centre, who provided deep insight into the legal and psychosocial aspects of divorce. He said, "Most cases are preventable. But we focus only on legality, not compatibility or mental health." He added, "Premarital counselling is often ritualistic, not preventive." Another comment was, "Divorce is rising, but the system is blind to the reasons." His contribution helped position individual narratives within a broader systemic and legal context. This moment of openness highlighted the variability in institutional receptivity and the value of collaborative gatekeeping (Das & Menon, 2021; Das & Tampubolon, 2022; Joseph & Nair, 2024).

Another key theme was the unrealistic ideals promoted through premarital counselling, especially those rooted in religious ideologies. Participants noted that

such counselling often emphasised idealistic expectations rather than equipping couples with skills to navigate conflict. One woman said, "They told me he would lead, and I should follow. But he crushed me." Another mentioned, "Our course said God solves all marriage problems. But I prayed and still got beaten." A third reflected, "We learnt about sacrifice, not boundaries or respect." As a result, they entered marriage with a fragile foundation that quickly collapsed under the pressures of real life (Amato & Booth, 1997).

Finally, silent withdrawals were a common phenomenon. Several participants initially agreed to interviews but later became unreachable, ignoring calls or providing vague reasons. One participant wrote, "Sorry, I cannot continue. Family doesn't support this." Another message, "Thank you, but I feel scared now." A third participant blocked my number after an initial warm conversation. This silent refusal reflected an internal ambivalence, wanting to be heard but fearing judgment, further marginalisation, or breach of confidentiality. Such behaviour aligns with patterns observed in stigma-sensitive research where participants protect themselves by disengaging quietly (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Corrigan & Rao, 2012).

The repercussions of divorce on adolescents and their families

The findings of this study offer a multifaceted perspective on the repercussions of divorce on adolescents and their families within the socio-cultural context of Kerala. The data gathered through qualitative interviews highlight the silent struggles and remarkable resilience of children, especially adolescents, as they navigate emotional turmoil, economic hardship, stigma, and altered family dynamics. These lived experiences also illuminate the complexity of post-divorce parenting, the role of extended families, and the inadequacies in institutional support systems.

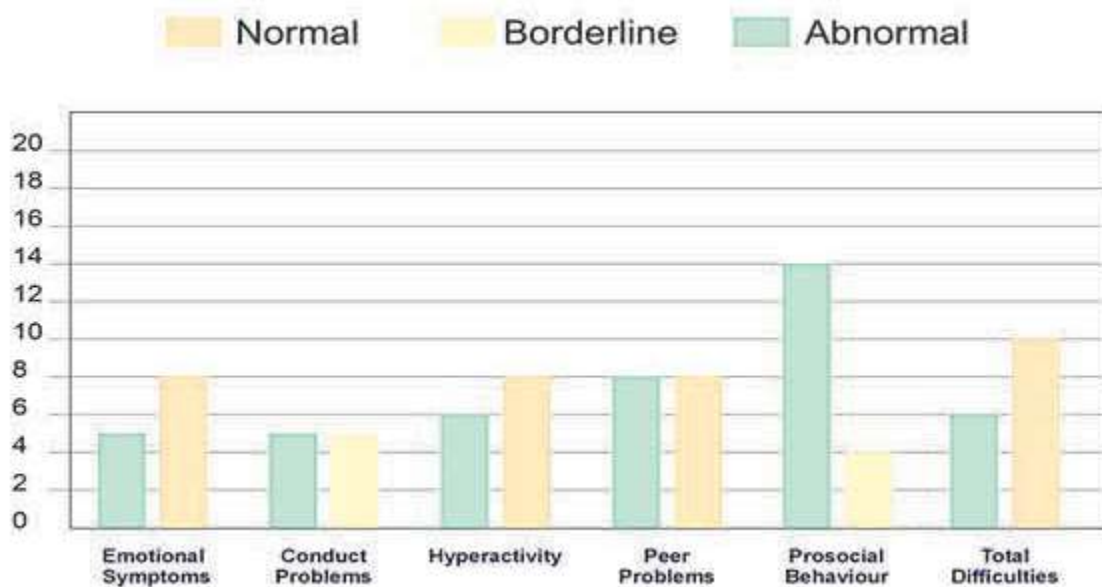
Table 2. showing the SDQ-C Scores of Adolescents from Divorced Families

SDQ Subscale	Mean	SD	Normal(n%)	Borderline(n%)	Abnormal(n%)
Emotional Symptoms	5.2	2.1	5 (25%)	7 (35%)	8 (40%)
Conduct Problems	3.9	1.7	10 (50%)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)
Hyperactivity/Inattention	6.1	2.4	6 (30%)	6 (30%)	8 (40%)
Peer Relationship Problems	4.4	1.9	7 (35%)	5 (25%)	8 (40%)
Prosocial Behaviour	6.5	2.0	14 (70%)	4 (20%)	2 (10%)
Total Difficulties Score	19.6	5.3	4 (20%)	6 (30%)	10 (50%)

Adolescents who participated in the study exhibited symptoms of emotional distress such as anxiety, sadness, and academic disengagement; findings that were reinforced through the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997). Many adolescents expressed feelings of abandonment or guilt, while others reported

increased responsibilities within the household. These findings align with previous literature suggesting that children often internalise familial conflict, particularly in the absence of structured emotional support (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Aneesh & Sriram, 2024; Das & Menon, 2021; Amato, 2000).

Diagram 1, showing the results of the SDQ-P Subscale based on the data received



The study also found that divorced women, particularly custodial mothers, often face intensified social stigma and safety concerns. Instances such as fabricating the illusion of a husband's presence to deter societal judgment or withdrawing from

interviews due to family disapproval underscore the immense social pressure that accompanies marital dissolution in Kerala. This aligns with gendered understandings of post-divorce experiences, where women disproportionately bear the brunt of social

condemnation (Aneesh & Sriram, 2025; Jena & Pradhan, 2025; Das & Menon, 2021; Thadathil & Sriram, 2019).

A significant insight is the institutional apathy and resistance that researchers often encounter when studying sensitive issues, such as divorce. From the denial of official records by the High Court to bureaucratic excuses by ICDS officers, these instances highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms to ensure greater transparency and sensitivity in public institutions (Joseph & Nair, 2024; Maiti, 2024; Patton, 2015).

Interestingly, some participants, particularly those with higher awareness or exposure to mediation services, offered constructive feedback and reflected positively on their journey post-divorce. These responses provide a glimpse into the evolving attitudes toward separation and remarriage, particularly in urban Kerala. However, the pervasive influence of religious premarital counselling, which often instils rigid expectations, was cited by several participants as a contributor to marital strain. These findings suggest the need for reform in such programs to present realistic portrayals of marital life (Mathew & Kuruvilla, 2021; Erikson, 1968).

Overall, this study underscores the necessity of early psychosocial intervention, structured counselling, and community-level education to mitigate the adverse effects of divorce on children and their families (Mathew & Kuruvilla, 2021; Joseph & Nair, 2024). It also highlights the importance of incorporating cultural and contextual factors in developing support programs for divorced families in India.

Implications for the Indian context

The findings of this study have several critical implications for the Indian context, where divorce is still experienced against a backdrop of strong collectivist norms, family

honour, and entrenched gender hierarchies. Evidence from Kerala and other Indian settings shows that adolescents from divorced families frequently experience academic disruption, emotional distress, and withdrawal from social and religious activities, yet receive little structured psychosocial support from schools, courts, or community institutions. By documenting adolescents' internalised distress, parentification, and ambivalent loyalties, this study underscores the urgent need to integrate child centred mental health services into family court processes, school counselling systems, and community programmes, so that divorce is addressed not merely as a legal matter but as a developmental and public mental health concern in India.

For Indian women, particularly single mothers, the study's themes of stigma, financial strain, and safety concerns align with broader evidence that divorced and single mothers face subtle social exclusion, precarious employment, and limited access to welfare, even as they bear primary responsibility for children's care. In this context, the results highlight the need for policy-level interventions, such as targeted social protection for single-mother households, gender-sensitive workplace policies, and reforms in custody and visitation practices that genuinely prioritise the child's best interests rather than formalistic parental rights. Finally, by foregrounding researcher reflexivity in a sensitive Indian field, the study calls for ethics frameworks, training, and institutional support that recognise the emotional labour, gendered access barriers, and power asymmetries involved in qualitative work with vulnerable divorce affected families, thereby strengthening both methodological rigour and participant protection in Indian social science research.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the profound emotional, social, and economic consequences of divorce on adolescents and their families in Kerala. Through rich qualitative narratives and structured assessments, it was evident that divorce is far more than a legal event; it is a disruptive force that reverberates across multiple layers of family life. Adolescents experience a range of internalised and externalised symptoms, while parents, particularly mothers, grapple with societal stigma, financial instability, and limited institutional support.

The qualitative design of this research allowed for an in-depth understanding of these lived realities, and the use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire provided a measure of consistency in examining emotional and behavioural outcomes. Institutional resistance and community-level stigma, however, emerged as significant barriers, not only for the participants but also for the researcher. These barriers emphasise the urgent need for systemic reforms in both legal and social frameworks.

In conclusion, a culturally contextualised, empathetic, and systemic approach is essential for addressing the fallout of divorce on adolescents. Future research and policy efforts must prioritise mental health support, legal access, and community education to ensure that families undergoing divorce are supported, not stigmatised.

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Aneesh T, Clinical Psychologist, Center for Mental Health and Wellbeing (CMHW), Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK), Email: aneesht@iitk.ac.in, Mob: 7045616525

Sujata Sriram, Professor and Dean at the School of Human Ecology (SHE), Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, Email: sujatas@tiss.ac.in