

## A Systematic Review on the Psychological Impact of Manipulative Parenting on children in the Indian Sociocultural Context

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### ABSTRACT

Manipulative parenting, though often camouflaged as concern, discipline, or moral upbringing in Indian households, can have profound and lasting psychological effects on children and young adults. This systematic review critically explores the covert emotional tactics used by parents—such as gaslighting, guilt-tripping, conditional affection, emotional blackmail, and forced comparison—that are frequently normalized within the Indian sociocultural framework. While such behaviours may appear benign or culturally appropriate, they contribute significantly to the erosion of a child's emotional well-being, identity development, and autonomy. This review synthesizes findings from 27 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2000 and 2024, drawing from both global and Indian contexts, to analyze the psychological consequences of manipulative parenting. The research reveals consistent associations between manipulative parenting and outcomes such as low self-esteem, emotional confusion, boundary issues, attachment insecurity, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships during adulthood. The study also highlights the cultural mechanisms like reverence for elders, emphasis on obedience, and lack of emotional literacy that sustain and legitimize emotional manipulation, making it difficult for victims to recognize or challenge the abuse. The impact of such parenting is often internalized, leading to a cycle of emotional suppression, self-blame, and delayed psychological healing. The review underscores the urgent need for culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions, emotional education, and family counselling practices that acknowledge covert emotional abuse. By challenging the normalization of manipulative parenting in Indian society, this review advocates for a shift toward healthier parent-child relationships grounded in empathy, respect, and emotional validation.

**Keywords:** *Manipulative parenting, Emotional abuse, Indian families, Qualitative research, psychological impact*

Parenting is one of the most significant environmental influences shaping a child's emotional, cognitive, and social development. The style of parenting adopted by caregivers not only determines immediate behavioural outcomes but also profoundly impacts an individual's psychological well-being throughout the lifespan (Baumrind, 1966). Among the various parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and

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neglectful—authoritative parenting has consistently been associated with positive psychological outcomes such as self-regulation, self-esteem, and resilience. In contrast, maladaptive parenting styles, particularly those involving emotional manipulation and psychological control, are increasingly recognized as detrimental to the mental health and identity development of children. One such form is *manipulative parenting*—a covert and emotionally corrosive approach that employs guilt, fear, conditional affection, emotional invalidation, and psychological control to enforce obedience and dependence.

Unlike overt abuse, manipulative parenting often escapes detection and critique, especially in cultures where family hierarchies, obedience, and parental authority are held in high regard. In the Indian sociocultural context, emotional manipulation is frequently embedded within the moral fabric of parenting and normalized under the guise of discipline, love, and familial responsibility (Sharma & Gupta, 2020). This normalization makes it difficult for both children and adults to identify manipulation as a form of emotional abuse. Socially endorsed norms like *respect for elders*, *family honour*, and *parental sacrifice* are frequently used to silence dissent and invalidate emotional boundaries. Statements such as “We did everything for you,” “Don’t bring shame to the family,” or “You are the reason for our suffering” reflect manipulative strategies disguised as culturally acceptable expressions of concern. These tactics may be emotionally invalidating, fostering guilt, confusion, and helplessness in children, which gradually erodes their autonomy, identity, and emotional security.

The long-term psychological impact of manipulative parenting is well-documented in Western psychological frameworks, particularly within attachment theory, identity development, and social learning theory. According to Bowlby (1980), emotionally inconsistent or controlling parenting may inhibit the development of secure attachment styles, leading to anxious or avoidant patterns in adult relationships. Erikson’s (1950) psychosocial theory emphasizes the role of early parental interactions in shaping ego identity; manipulative parenting disrupts this process by inducing shame and self-doubt during critical developmental stages. Similarly, Bandura’s (1977) concept of self-efficacy highlights how children who are repeatedly invalidated or controlled may internalize helplessness and question their ability to make autonomous decisions. Over time, such individuals may develop heightened anxiety, low self-esteem, emotional dysregulation, and difficulties in forming healthy interpersonal relationships.

Despite the extensive theoretical grounding in Western contexts, there is limited empirical research addressing manipulative parenting within the Indian cultural framework. Indian psychological literature and public discourse continue to focus primarily on overt forms of abuse, such as physical punishment, academic pressure, and neglect, while covert emotional abuse remains vastly underrepresented (Bhargava & Sinha, 2015). This absence is particularly concerning given the collectivistic nature of Indian society, where emotional control and parent-child enmeshment are common, but rarely problematized. In many Indian families, psychological control is seen as an expression of concern or protection rather than an infringement on the child’s emotional independence. As a result, children who experience manipulative parenting may internalize these dynamics as “normal,” failing to recognize the emotional harm inflicted upon them until much later in life, often during periods of personal crisis, therapy, or relational difficulties.

The invisibility of manipulative parenting in academic and clinical literature poses a serious challenge to mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers. Without a culturally

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nuanced understanding of covert abuse, mental health practitioners may misdiagnose or minimize the psychological distress caused by manipulative parenting. For instance, adults raised in such environments may present with symptoms of anxiety, depression, perfectionism, or relational dysfunction, but the root causes often remain unexplored due to cultural stigma and lack of vocabulary around emotional abuse. Moreover, the existing therapeutic models, which are largely adapted from Western contexts, may not be fully equipped to address the complex interplay of guilt, duty, and emotional dependence that characterizes manipulative parenting in India. This calls for the development of culturally sensitive interventions and awareness programs that validate the lived experiences of individuals navigating such dynamics.

In addition to individual psychological consequences, manipulative parenting has broader social implications. When children grow up in emotionally controlling environments, they may either replicate these behaviours in future relationships or develop maladaptive coping strategies such as emotional suppression, excessive people-pleasing, or self-sabotage. In high-context societies like India, these patterns are rarely challenged due to the emphasis on family cohesion and loyalty. Consequently, the cycle of emotional manipulation often continues across generations, reinforcing dysfunctional family dynamics and inhibiting emotional growth at a systemic level. Addressing this issue, therefore, requires not only therapeutic intervention but also a cultural shift in how parenting, authority, and emotional boundaries are understood and practiced.

Given this backdrop, the present systematic review aims to critically assess existing global and Indian scholarly literature on manipulative parenting. The review seeks to:

1. *Define manipulative parenting* and distinguish it from other maladaptive parenting styles.
2. *Examine its psychological impact* on children and adults, focusing on long-term emotional, cognitive, and social consequences.
3. *Explore how cultural norms in India* normalize and perpetuate manipulative parenting behaviours.
4. *Identify gaps in Indian literature and practice*, particularly concerning covert emotional abuse.
5. *Discuss implications for mental health professionals, caregivers, and policymakers*, and suggest culturally grounded strategies for prevention and intervention.

By synthesizing theoretical models, empirical findings, and cross-cultural comparisons, this review highlights the need to expand our understanding of parenting beyond traditional binary classifications of “good” and “bad” parenting. It urges psychologists, educators, and stakeholders in the social sector to consider the nuanced, invisible forms of harm that manipulative parenting can inflict—often with lifelong repercussions. The goal is not to vilify caregivers but to foster critical awareness, promote emotional literacy, and advocate for conscious, compassionate parenting practices that honour both cultural values and psychological well-being.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Parenting styles have long been studied for their role in shaping child development, with Baumrind's (1966) typology laying foundational work in distinguishing authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive styles. However, manipulative parenting, which employs emotional control and covert abuse, has remained less explored, especially in collectivist

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societies like India. Globally, researchers have increasingly recognized the detrimental effects of psychological control (Barber, 2002), gaslighting (Stern, 2007), and emotional neglect (Glaser, 2002), but Indian research has traditionally focused on academic stress, authoritarian discipline, and overt physical punishment.

Indian parenting, deeply influenced by cultural constructs like *seva*, *dharma*, and *Sanskar*, often frames obedience and sacrifice as virtues, leading to normalization of manipulative behaviours under the guise of love and discipline (Sharma & Gupta, 2020). For example, Bhargava and Sinha (2015) note that while parental expectations can be academically motivating, they often spill over into guilt-inducing and conditional approval practices.

International literature has documented how manipulative parenting undermines autonomy and fosters *internalized shame*, *emotional dysregulation*, and *insecure attachment styles* (Spinazzola et al., 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). However, in Indian contexts, such parenting is frequently misinterpreted as concern, especially in hierarchical families where children are not encouraged to challenge adult authority (Rao & Chen, 2019).

While cross-cultural studies have started to highlight how emotional abuse operates differently across societies, there is a scarcity of qualitative research that delves into the lived experiences of Indian young adults who have grown up under such parenting. This review, therefore, aims to bridge that gap by focusing specifically on how culturally normalized manipulative parenting affects psychological well-being in the Indian context.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A comprehensive systematic review was conducted following the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). Relevant studies were identified through searches of electronic databases including PubMed, APA PsycNet, ScienceDirect, EMBASE, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Science Gate. Keywords used included: “manipulative parenting,” “emotional abuse,” “conditional love,” “gaslighting,” “guilt-tripping,” “emotional blackmail,” “Indian families,” and “psychological impact.” Boolean operators were used to expand search results, and terms were refined iteratively.

#### **Inclusion Criteria:**

- Empirical studies (qualitative or quantitative) from 2000 to 2024
- Focus on manipulative parenting and emotional/psychological effects
- Studies involving Indian or South Asian participants, or culturally comparable populations
- Articles published in peer-reviewed journals in English

#### **Exclusion Criteria:**

- Articles unrelated to parenting styles or emotional abuse
- Grey literature, blog posts, and unpublished theses

A total of 98 articles were initially identified. After screening abstracts and reviewing 45 full texts, 27 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final review.

#### **Key Findings**

This systematic review revealed five major manipulative parenting tactics—gaslighting, guilt-tripping, conditional affection, emotional blackmail, and forced comparison—that are

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commonly normalized within Indian families under the guise of discipline, concern, or tradition. These covert strategies significantly impact the psychological development of children, contributing to long-term issues such as low self-esteem, emotional suppression, attachment insecurity, boundary confusion, and chronic self-doubt.

### DISCUSSION

The literature revealed consistent associations between manipulative parenting and several psychological and relational outcomes. The discussion below elaborates on the key manipulative tactics and their psychological effects, particularly within Indian sociocultural frameworks.

#### 1. Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a psychological manipulation technique wherein the abuser distorts reality, causing the victim to doubt their perceptions, memories, or sanity (Stern, 2007). In Indian households, this often takes subtle forms, such as parents denying hurtful behaviours or reframing them as acts of love—e.g., “You’re too sensitive” or “We did this for your good.” Such statements invalidate the child’s emotions and create confusion about what is real or acceptable to feel. Over time, this fosters chronic self-doubt, emotional suppression, and a loss of trust in one’s own judgment. Culturally, gaslighting may be normalized under the ideals of obedience, family honor, or parental sacrifice. When children question unfair treatment, they are often labeled as ungrateful or disrespectful, making it harder to recognize or challenge manipulation. This emotional dismissal, especially when repeated, can lead to anxiety, people-pleasing tendencies, and difficulty setting boundaries in adulthood. Furthermore, gaslighting can perpetuate intergenerational trauma, as emotionally invalidated parents may unknowingly pass down the same patterns, believing they are building strength or discipline. As a covert yet powerful tool in manipulative parenting, gaslighting distorts emotional realities and hinders healthy psychological development.

#### 2. Guilt-Tripping

Guilt-tripping is a manipulative tactic wherein parents make children feel responsible for their emotional state, often using statements like “I sacrificed everything for you” or “This is how you repay me?” (Barber, 2002). In the Indian context, such messages are intensified by cultural ideals of *seva* (service) and *Sanskar* (values), which emphasize obedience and gratitude. These ideals are often invoked to silence dissent and discourage emotional autonomy. Children subjected to guilt-tripping may grow up feeling chronically indebted or emotionally burdened. They often struggle with self-worth, fearing rejection if they assert their needs. This internal conflict creates confusion between care and obligation. Over time, they may develop difficulty setting personal boundaries. Indecisiveness, emotional over-responsibility, and suppressed anger are common outcomes. Guilt becomes a tool of control disguised as love. As with gaslighting, its covert nature makes it difficult to recognize and challenge.

#### 3. Conditional Affection

Conditional affection refers to love or praise being given only when the child meets expectations. Indian students report receiving approval only for academic success or

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obedience (Bhargava & Sinha, 2015). This fosters low self-worth, with adults often seeking validation from external sources to feel accepted or loved.

### 4. Emotional Blackmail

This manipulative style involves using fear, obligation, or threats to control behaviour (Forward & Frazier, 1997). For example, a parent might say, “If you go against us, something bad will happen to me.” Indian families often use such rhetoric to enforce compliance with arranged marriages, career choices, or gender roles, leading to emotional paralysis and resentment.

### 5. Forced Comparison

Frequent comparisons with siblings or peers “Look at Sharma ji’s son” are normalized in Indian homes as motivational tactics. However, research shows that such comparisons damage identity development and induce chronic inferiority complexes (Kapur, 2018).

### *Cultural Normalization*

The invisibility of emotional manipulation in Indian families stems from deep-rooted values like family honour, obedience, and respect for elders. Emotional literacy is also low, making it difficult for children to name or resist covert abuse (Rao & Chen, 2019). Children often internalize blame and believe manipulation is a normal form of love, delaying healing until adulthood.

### *Psychological Outcomes*

Numerous studies reviewed (e.g., Spinazzola et al., 2014; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) show that individuals exposed to emotional manipulation during formative years exhibit low self-esteem, attachment insecurities, trust issues, and poor emotional regulation. Indian adults particularly report people-pleasing behaviours, emotional dependency, and confusion about their self-worth.

### *Therapeutic and Social Implications*

Research advocates for interventions that include culturally sensitive therapy models, family-based counselling, and emotional education in schools (Sharma & Gupta, 2020; Rao & Chen, 2019). Cognitive-behavioural approaches, attachment-based therapy, and psychoeducation about emotional boundaries are particularly recommended.

### *Cultural Double Bind*

A major theme across reviewed literature is the *double bind* experienced by children: loving and depending on parents who are also the source of emotional harm. This leads to *internal conflict, cognitive dissonance, and identity diffusion*. Children learn to suppress emotional needs to maintain harmony, often replicating similar patterns in their future relationships.

### *Silence and Emotional Illiteracy*

The *lack of emotional vocabulary* in Indian families compounds the issue. Many participants across qualitative studies did not recognize manipulation until exposed to psychology courses or therapy. This highlights the *urgent need for emotional education*, not just for children but also for caregivers.

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### *Gendered Experiences*

Some studies also reveal *gendered differences* in how manipulation is enacted and experienced. Girls often face more control around autonomy and romantic relationships, while boys experience emotional distance and suppressed vulnerability.

### **CONCLUSION**

This systematic review highlights how *manipulative parenting*, often normalized within Indian sociocultural frameworks, can lead to *profound and enduring psychological consequences*. From disrupted identity formation and low self-worth to emotional dependency and insecure adult relationships, the effects of such parenting extend far beyond childhood.

Given that such manipulative behaviours are frequently disguised as moral guidance or cultural discipline, there is a pressing need to *challenge these norms at the societal, familial, and policy levels*. Raising awareness about covert emotional abuse, improving emotional literacy, and offering culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions are crucial steps forward. Additionally, institutions such as schools, counselling centres, and media platforms should actively engage in *psychoeducation about healthy parenting*, boundaries, and emotional communication. Empowering youth to name and resist manipulation, without vilifying their parents, is key to *healing intergenerational trauma*.

In sum, this review calls for a *paradigm shift in how Indian families understand love, discipline, and emotional health*, moving toward more authentic, emotionally attuned, and autonomy-supportive parenting styles.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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