

Research Paper

## The Psychology of Polygamy: Mental Health, Family Dynamics, and Social Contexts

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Polygamy, the practice of having multiple spouses simultaneously, continues to exist in various societies despite being legally restricted in many countries, including India. This study explores the psychological impact of polygamy on individuals and families, with a focus on mental health, family dynamics, and broader societal implications. Cultural justifications and legal contexts are also analyzed to understand the persistence of polygamy in certain communities. **Methods:** The article adopts a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating psychological analysis, legal review, and ethnographic insight. It draws on data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), regional studies, and existing literature to examine the psychological and social consequences of polygamy. Comparative analysis is conducted between monogamous and polygamous family structures, and particular attention is given to tribal populations where polygamy is more prevalent. **Results:** Findings reveal that polygamous family arrangements are associated with heightened emotional distress among spouses, particularly women. Reported psychological outcomes include increased anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and interpersonal conflict. Children in such households face challenges in identity formation, behavioral stability, and emotional security due to fragmented parental attention and ongoing family tension. Monogamous families, in contrast, report greater consistency in parenting and higher levels of spousal satisfaction and psychological well-being. **Conclusion:** Polygamy in India, while culturally and economically rationalized in some communities, poses significant psychological challenges for both spouses and children. The integration of legal, cultural, and psychological perspectives highlights the need for targeted social and mental health interventions. Understanding the nuanced dynamics of polygamous families is essential for developing informed policy and support systems, particularly in regions where the practice remains prevalent.

**Keywords:** *Polygamy, Mental Health, Family Dynamics, Cultural Justifications, Psychological Impact, Gender Inequality, Child Development, Legal Frameworks*

Polygamy, the practice of having more than one spouse simultaneously, is a multifaceted and culturally significant institution that continues to evoke debate across psychological, legal, and sociological domains. While monogamy is the legal and cultural norm in many parts of the world, polygamy persists in various regions under religious, traditional, and socio-economic frameworks. It is particularly common in

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patriarchal societies where male dominance is structurally reinforced and women's roles are primarily defined within the boundaries of familial reproduction and domestic responsibilities. Among the various forms of polygamy, polygyny where one man has multiple wives is the most prevalent and has been the subject of extensive anthropological and psychological study (Al-Krenawi 2013). Although polygamy is often contextualized as a cultural or religious right, modern research increasingly underscores the psychological, emotional, and developmental consequences for individuals, especially women and children, who live within such marital arrangements.

Historically, polygamy has played a role in ensuring lineage continuity, managing labor in agrarian societies, and maintaining social hierarchies. In many ancient civilizations, including those of Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia, polygamy served strategic purposes such as cementing alliances, increasing family workforce, and expanding property rights. Classical anthropologists like Murdock (1949), Evans-Pritchard (1951), and Goody (1976) documented how polygamy was not merely a lifestyle choice but a systemic institution rooted in the socio-economic fabric of communities. Religious texts and customary laws across different cultures also gave legitimacy to this practice, embedding it deeply within societal norms. However, with the evolution of legal frameworks, modernization, and the global spread of egalitarian values, polygamy has come under scrutiny, particularly due to its implications for mental health and gender equity.

In contemporary society, polygamy poses a critical paradox. On one hand, it is legally sanctioned and culturally protected in several regions, particularly under Islamic jurisprudence and tribal governance systems. On the other hand, its effects on emotional well-being, familial stability, and child development are increasingly seen as areas of concern. Empirical studies suggest that individuals in polygamous households often experience heightened levels of psychological distress (Bahari et al. 2021). Women, especially junior wives or those in economically dependent roles, face increased risks of depression, anxiety, marital dissatisfaction, and social isolation. Children from polygamous families also report lower levels of academic achievement, emotional security, and interpersonal confidence compared to their monogamous peers.

India offers a particularly complex context in which to study polygamy. While officially outlawed under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 for Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists, polygamy remains legally permissible under Muslim Personal Law, which allows a Muslim man to marry up to four wives. Among tribal groups, especially in northeastern and central Indian states, the practice is often accepted as part of indigenous traditions. According to data from the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–2021), polygamy still persists in pockets of Indian society, with Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians reporting higher incidence rates compared to the general population (Bahari et al. 2021). These regional disparities underscore the need for a nuanced and intersectional approach that recognizes the diversity of India's social fabric.

This article seeks to critically examine the psychological and sociological ramifications of polygamy, with a particular focus on the Indian socio-legal context. Drawing from contemporary psychological literature, national data, ethnographic accounts, and legal frameworks, it analyzes the mental health implications for women, children, and men in polygamous families. It also delves into family dynamics, regional patterns, and the gendered impact of such marital systems. By juxtaposing polygamy with monogamy, the article offers a comparative insight into how different marital frameworks shape individual

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well-being, interpersonal relationships, and societal cohesion. Ultimately, the discussion aims to inform policy, legal reform, and mental health strategies that address the broader consequences of polygamous practices in modern societies.

### Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Anthropological studies reveal that polygamy was once widespread across various continents. Murdock (1949) and Levi-Strauss (1969) document polygamy's role in traditional societies, emphasizing kinship systems and lineage. While historically functional, the practice has evolved differently across regions. In many African and Middle Eastern countries, polygamy is legally and religiously permissible. In contrast, Western legal systems increasingly criminalized the practice, associating it with patriarchal control.

India presents a unique case where polygamy exists at the confluence of traditions, religious personal laws, and post-colonial legal reforms. According to NFHS-5 (2019–21), polygamy continues to exist in parts of India, particularly among Scheduled Tribes (2.4%) and some religious minorities like Muslims (1.9%) and Christians (2.1%). Hinduism, despite cultural traces of polygamy, legally prohibits the practice under the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955.

### Psychological Effects on Women

Women in polygamous marriages often experience significant psychological burdens. Studies by Al-Krenawi (2013) and Bahari et al. (2021) highlight increased rates of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Women in such unions frequently encounter unequal treatment, rivalry among co-wives, and decreased spousal intimacy. According to a 2022 nationwide survey by the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), 84% of Muslim women in polygamous marriages desired its outlawing, and 50% reported symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation (BMMA Report, 2022).

In India, this mental distress is compounded by financial insecurity and limited legal protection. According to the Times of India (2022), 73% of women in polygamous households reported economic neglect, and 45% experienced marital coercion. These figures underscore the psychological cost borne disproportionately by women in such arrangements.

### Impact on Children and Adolescents

Children growing up in polygamous households often face emotional and behavioral issues. Al-Sharfi et al. (2015) found that such children are more prone to anxiety, low academic performance, and difficulties in peer relationships. Khosravi Shastan et al. (2023) documented that adolescents from polygamous families show higher hostility and lower overall mental well-being compared to peers from monogamous families.

In the Indian context, the BMMA survey (2022) revealed that 38% of children from polygamous families exhibited signs of emotional distress, including withdrawal and aggression. Sociologists argue that unequal treatment among step-siblings and maternal neglect from overburdened mothers are key factors contributing to these issues.

### Effects on Men and Patriarchal Roles

While often framed as a privilege for men, polygamy can impose psychological strains on husbands as well. Managing multiple relationships can lead to stress, financial burdens, and feelings of guilt, especially if intra-household harmony deteriorates. Al-Krenawi (2012) noted that men in polygamous marriages may experience chronic stress due to interpersonal conflicts and economic pressures.

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In India, patriarchal norms reinforce male dominance, yet emotional dissatisfaction and social scrutiny sometimes burden polygamous men. Additionally, with growing public awareness and urbanization, men increasingly face moral and legal repercussions, particularly in communities transitioning toward monogamy.

### Family Dynamics and Interpersonal Relationships

Family structures in polygamous households are often complex and hierarchical. Goody (1976) and Murdock (1949) describe these as kin-based, with senior wives wielding greater authority. However, modern psychological studies report that such hierarchies often produce resentment, jealousy, and emotional detachment among co-wives and their children.

The study carried out by The Indian Express (2021) explains how legal pluralism creates ambiguities in family rights, inheritance, and spousal responsibilities. This legal opacity exacerbates interpersonal tensions, leading to emotional alienation and fractured kinship networks. The absence of a unified civil code in India further complicates these familial dynamics.

### The Legal Landscape of Polygamy in India

India's legal approach to polygamy is complex and marked by a dual system that incorporates both secular criminal laws and religion-specific personal laws. This fragmented framework results in differential treatment based on religious affiliation, particularly in matters of marriage and family structure.

For individuals belonging to the Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, and Sikh communities, the practice of polygamy is explicitly prohibited under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955. This legislation mandates monogamy, and violations are subject to criminal prosecution under Sections 494 and 495 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), which classify bigamy as a punishable offense. These provisions reflect the post-independence reformist agenda aimed at promoting equality and legal uniformity within these religious groups.

In contrast, Muslim personal law, as codified under the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act of 1937, permits Muslim men to marry up to four wives, provided certain conditions are met. This allowance is derived from interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence and is not regulated by the Indian Penal Code, thereby placing Muslim marital practices in a legally distinct category.

This legal bifurcation has drawn significant criticism from legal experts, human rights advocates, and gender justice proponents. Critics argue that the coexistence of these divergent legal standards undermines the constitutional promise of equality before the law, particularly in relation to gender rights. They contend that allowing polygamy under any personal law creates a system that legitimizes gender inequality and subjects women of certain communities to potentially exploitative marital arrangements.

A landmark development in this discourse occurred with the Supreme Court's 2017 verdict in *Shayara Bano v. Union of India*, wherein the practice of *triple talaq* a form of instant divorce in Muslim law was declared unconstitutional. The judgment emphasized that religious practices must conform to constitutional principles, including gender equality and individual dignity. Though the verdict focused on divorce, it set a precedent suggesting that polygamy, too, may not qualify as an essential religious practice and, therefore, may be subject to constitutional scrutiny.

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In the aftermath of the Shayara Bano ruling, calls for the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) have gained renewed momentum. Proponents argue that a UCC would harmonize personal laws across communities, ensuring a consistent legal standard for marriage, divorce, and inheritance, regardless of religious background. They view this as a critical step toward eliminating legal loopholes that permit gender-discriminatory practices, including polygamy.

The current legal framework in India reflects a tension between constitutional ideals and religious personal laws. As debates around secularism, gender justice, and legal uniformity continue to evolve, the issue of polygamy remains a focal point in the broader quest for an equitable and inclusive legal system.

### Statistical Patterns and Regional Disparities in Polygamy

Recent demographic data suggest a gradual national decline in the prevalence of polygamous marriages in India. According to findings from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the incidence of polygamy has decreased from 1.9% in 2005–06 to 1.4% during the 2019–21 period. While this downward trend reflects progress on a broader scale, it conceals notable regional and cultural variations that complicate the picture.

Certain northeastern states, such as Meghalaya and Tripura, continue to report disproportionately higher rates of polygamous unions, with Meghalaya recording a significant 6% prevalence and Tripura 2.3%. These figures are particularly pronounced among tribal communities, where polygamy may be embedded in traditional social structures. According to a 2022 report by the *Times of India*, these pockets of higher prevalence underscore the intersection of cultural norms, autonomy of tribal governance, and historical practices.

Interestingly, historical data from the 1961 Indian Census as cited by The Indian Express (2017) indicate that polygamy was once equally practiced among Hindus and Muslims, with both communities showing similar prevalence rates in the range of 5–6%. This contradicts common assumptions that polygamy is exclusively linked to Islamic tradition, highlighting that its roots in India are more complex and culturally diffuse.

Furthermore, specific communities, such as the Ziona sect in Mizoram, exemplify how polygamy can persist within closed religious or familial networks. As noted by *Wikipedia* (2024), the sect is known for encouraging polygamous relationships, particularly among economically and socially dominant male leaders. These localized traditions, often driven by patriarchal leadership or cultural prestige, present a unique challenge for legal uniformity and enforcement across the country.

### Gendered Impact: Domestic Violence and Coercive Marital Dynamics

Beyond statistical figures, the psychological and physical consequences of polygamy on women are increasingly documented through empirical research. Studies published in *Tandfonline* (2022) reveal that women in polygamous households are significantly more vulnerable to spousal violence than their counterparts in monogamous marriages. The emotional strain resulting from competition for attention, affection, and economic resources often manifests in abusive behaviors by the husband or between co-wives.

This is further supported by data from the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), which in 2022 reported that 58% of women living in polygamous unions experienced some

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form of domestic violence, compared to 36% in monogamous relationships. The disparity points to a clear correlation between polygamy and heightened risk of physical and emotional abuse. The structural inequality inherent in such marital arrangements often leaves women with little agency, increasing their dependency and reducing their ability to seek help or exit abusive environments.

These findings highlight polygamy not only as a psychological burden but also as a public health and human rights concern. The interplay between economic neglect, emotional deprivation, and coercive control necessitates a robust response both from the legal system and from social welfare mechanisms. Tackling these issues requires not only legal prohibitions but also targeted interventions, including support services, educational outreach, and community engagement.

### *Comparative Insights: Polygamy vs. Monogamy*

A comparative analysis of polygamy and monogamy reveals distinct psychological, relational, and developmental implications. While polygamy introduces complex family dynamics and potential emotional strain, the determining factor of well-being often lies not solely in the marital structure, but in the quality of interpersonal relationships, cultural norms, and the availability of economic and social support systems. The following table highlights key differences across critical domains:

**Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Polygamous and Monogamous Family Structures Across Key Psychological and Social Domains**

Domain	Monogamy	Polygamy
<b>Mental Health</b>	Generally associated with lower rates of depression and anxiety.	Elevated psychological stress, particularly for women and children; outcomes vary for men.
<b>Marital Satisfaction</b>	Higher average satisfaction due to emotional exclusivity and stability.	Lower satisfaction, especially among junior or later-added spouses due to rivalry and neglect.
<b>Child Outcomes</b>	More favorable emotional well-being and academic performance.	Increased risk of behavioral issues and reduced academic achievement due to fragmented attention.
<b>Gender Equality</b>	Greater balance and mutual respect, particularly in modern societal settings.	Typically male-dominated, with women facing diminished autonomy and hierarchical roles.

This comparison underscores the psychological and social complexities inherent in polygamous unions when contrasted with monogamous frameworks.

### *The Path Ahead: Integrated Policy and Psychological Strategies*

Effectively addressing the psychological ramifications of polygamy demands a comprehensive and multi-tiered approach that encompasses legal, social, and mental health dimensions. The following measures are essential for sustainable change:

#### **1. Legal Reforms through a Uniform Civil Framework**

A significant step towards ensuring equality and justice is the implementation of a Uniform Civil Code that upholds monogamous marriage as a standard across all religious communities. Legal uniformity would help eliminate existing inconsistencies that allow polygamous practices to persist under personal laws, reinforcing the principle that individual rights and gender equity transcend religious boundaries.

## 2. Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Support Services

There is an urgent need for both governmental and non-governmental bodies to provide structured mental health services tailored to the unique needs of women and children emerging from polygamous family settings. This should include accessible counseling services, psychological therapy, and long-term rehabilitation initiatives that foster emotional healing and social reintegration.

## 3. Community Education and Public Sensitization Campaigns

Public awareness initiatives must be launched to educate society about the often-overlooked emotional, psychological, and developmental consequences of polygamy. These campaigns should target both urban and rural populations and be integrated into educational systems to foster early understanding of healthy family dynamics, gender equality, and the mental toll of unstable domestic environments.

## 4. Ongoing Research and Narrative-Based Documentation

Sustained academic and field-based research is crucial to capture the complex realities of individuals especially women and children who have lived within polygamous households. Detailed documentation and case studies will not only enrich the sociological understanding of the issue but also inform future policy and therapeutic models tailored to the Indian socio-cultural landscape.

## CONCLUSION

Polygamy in contemporary society is not merely a vestige of cultural tradition but a complex psychological, legal, and ethical issue warranting urgent scrutiny. Beyond religious justification or idealized portrayals, the lived experiences of individuals, particularly women and children in polygamous unions are often characterized by emotional neglect, psychological distress, and systemic disempowerment. Although framed as tradition or personal choice, polygamy frequently masks patriarchal structures that entrench gender inequality, provoke intra-familial conflict, and hinder children's cognitive and emotional development.

As India progresses toward social equity and legal modernization, the normalized silence around polygamy must be critically challenged. Legal exemptions under personal laws not only contravene constitutional principles of gender justice and human dignity but also blur normative standards of consent and marital equality. Addressing this issue requires more than punitive legal reform it demands a multidimensional response. This includes integrating mental health care into primary health systems, expanding social welfare for affected families, and embedding gender-sensitivity education into school curricula and civil service training. Community-driven engagement is vital to dismantle the patriarchal valorization of polygamy. Cultivating male accountability, female agency, and intergenerational dialogue is essential. While the Uniform Civil Code remains contested, it offers a potential pathway to reconcile civil liberties with cultural pluralism through inclusive and empathetic policymaking.

### *Future Directions*

Future efforts should prioritize interdisciplinary research on the psychological impact of polygamy, especially among women and children. Policy reforms must integrate gender-sensitive education, mental health support, and social welfare programs. Community-based interventions should foster awareness, promote male accountability, and support women's

empowerment. Additionally, inclusive dialogue on a Uniform Civil Code can help align legal frameworks with constitutional values and evolving societal expectations.

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The author declared no conflict of interest.

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