



Socio-Cultural Determinants of Extramarital Affairs: A Study of Married Adults in Uttar Pradesh

Dr. Hariom
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology,
P. C. Bagla (P.G) College, Hathras

Abstract

Marriage in Indian society is traditionally viewed not merely as a personal arrangement but as a sacred, socially binding, and culturally sanctioned institution. Rooted in religious scriptures, community customs, and moral codes, marriage carries expectations of lifelong fidelity, mutual duty, and family honor. **Extramarital affairs (EMAs)** — defined as emotional or sexual relationships outside the marital bond — have long been considered a breach of trust, a violation of social mores, and, until recently, an offense under Indian law. However, contemporary socio-cultural transformations, such as urbanization, globalization, digital communication, migration, and shifting gender dynamics, have increasingly challenged these traditional constraints.

In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state and home to diverse socio-economic and cultural settings, these changes manifest in complex ways. While rural areas still maintain strong patriarchal norms and close community monitoring, urban and semi-urban regions have seen the gradual erosion of traditional family structures, offering both increased autonomy and reduced oversight. Based on secondary data from national surveys, sociological literature, and state-level studies, this paper examines the socio-cultural determinants influencing EMAs among married adults in Uttar Pradesh.

The study highlights how marital dissatisfaction, changing gender roles, occupational mobility, exposure to new value systems through media, and access to private communication technologies interact with — and often conflict with — traditional Indian norms that categorically reject infidelity. The findings suggest that EMAs in UP cannot be understood solely as individual moral failings; rather, they are embedded within the shifting socio-cultural landscape where traditional mores and modern influences coexist, clash, and reshape marital behavior. The paper also discusses the implications for family stability, public health, and social policy.

Introduction

Marriage in India is widely regarded as one of the most significant social institutions, embedded with cultural, religious, and moral expectations. Across communities, it is seen as a sacred union, often sanctified by religious rituals and bound by collective family obligations. The Hindu vivaha sanskara, for instance, treats marriage as a lifelong bond that extends across spiritual lifetimes, while Islamic nikah is considered both a legal and moral commitment. In both traditions — and across other Indian religious and cultural groups — fidelity is not only a personal virtue but also a social necessity, ensuring family honor, community reputation, and the continuity of lineage.

Extramarital affairs, therefore, represent a direct challenge to these deeply rooted norms. Historically, such relationships have been strongly condemned, attracting severe social stigma and, in some rural

settings, even punitive action by informal community bodies such as *khap panchayats*. Women engaging in EMAs face especially harsh consequences due to patriarchal double standards linking female chastity to family honor. Until the decriminalization of adultery in 2018 (when Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code was struck down), extramarital sexual relationships were also a matter of criminal law.

However, the last few decades have witnessed significant socio-cultural transformations across India — and Uttar Pradesh is no exception. Economic liberalization, rural-to-urban migration, the spread of mass media, the proliferation of smartphones and social networking platforms, the rise of nuclear families, and increased female participation in education and employment have collectively altered the terrain of marital life. While these changes have brought opportunities for personal autonomy, they have also created conditions where extramarital relationships are more possible, and in some cases, more easily concealed.

Uttar Pradesh presents a particularly interesting case for such a study because it embodies contradictions in the Indian social fabric. On one hand, vast rural regions remain tied to strict traditional values, extended family oversight, and community surveillance. On the other, cities like Lucknow, Kanpur, Agra, and Noida reflect modern urban lifestyles where anonymity and changing moral attitudes may weaken traditional deterrents to infidelity. This duality allows researchers to explore how socio-cultural determinants — such as gender norms, family structures, occupational mobility, and media influence — operate differently across diverse social environments within the same state.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject and the difficulty of collecting primary data due to stigma and under-reporting, this paper relies on **secondary data** from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), academic research, and sociological analyses. The goal is not to quantify EMAs with precision but to understand **how** socio-cultural forces interact with individual motivations in shaping extramarital behavior in the context of Uttar Pradesh.

By framing EMAs as both a personal and a socio-cultural phenomenon, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding that goes beyond moral judgment, enabling policymakers, counselors, and sociologists to better address the underlying factors and mitigate their impact on marital stability and family well-being.

2. Objectives

1. To analyze the socio-cultural norms and values in Indian society that traditionally discourages extramarital relationships.
2. To identify socio-cultural factors influencing EMAs in Uttar Pradesh, based on secondary sources.
3. To assess the tension between traditional mores and modern lifestyle changes in shaping marital behavior.

3. Traditional Indian Norms and Mores Regarding Marriage

3.1 Sacredness of Marriage

- **Religious sanction:** In Hinduism, marriage is a divine bond (*vivaha samskara*), not dissolvable at will; in Islam, it is a moral and legal responsibility.

- **Social sanction:** Family elders and community panchayats historically controlled marital conduct, ensuring adherence to fidelity.

3.2 Stigma and Social Sanctions

- Adultery has been associated with loss of honor (*izzat*), social boycott, and in extreme rural cases, violence or *khap panchayat* interventions.
- Women face harsher stigma than men due to patriarchal double standards.

3.3 Gender Roles and Control of Sexuality

- Patriarchal norms place women's sexuality under family surveillance, linking it to family honor.
- Men's extramarital affairs, though also disapproved, often receive more lenient treatment in social discourse.

4. Socio-Cultural Determinants of Extramarital Affairs in Uttar Pradesh

Extramarital affairs in the Indian context — and particularly in Uttar Pradesh — cannot be understood only as personal moral failings or individual decisions. They are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, family systems, gender relations, socio-economic transformations, and technological developments. Below is a detailed exploration of key socio-cultural determinants identified from secondary literature and sociological theory.

4.1 Gender Norms and Patriarchal Structures

- **Patriarchal double standards:** In Indian society, especially in patriarchal states like Uttar Pradesh, men and women face different moral expectations regarding sexual fidelity. While social mores formally condemn infidelity for both, men's extramarital behavior is often downplayed or even normalized in some circles, whereas women's infidelity invites intense social stigma, ostracism, and sometimes violence.
- **Masculinity and sexual entitlement:** Traditional masculinity often links a man's status with his sexual prowess and dominance. This can indirectly normalize men seeking relationships outside marriage, particularly in peer groups where such behavior is discussed as a sign of virility.
- **Female autonomy and its risks:** When women in urban UP gain economic independence and social mobility through education and employment, they may also encounter greater opportunities for social interaction outside the family sphere. While this is a sign of empowerment, it may also lead to emotional connections forming beyond marriage if marital relationships are unsatisfactory — something that patriarchal society finds particularly threatening.

4.2 Family Structure Changes: From Joint to Nuclear Families

- **Traditional joint family control:** Historically, the joint family system in UP ensured high levels of surveillance over individual behavior. Elders monitored social interactions, and extended kinship networks reinforced marital obligations.
- **Decline in informal social control:** With urbanization, migration, and the rise of nuclear families, such oversight has weakened. Couples now enjoy greater privacy, but this reduced supervision also means that secretive relationships are harder to detect and prevent.

- **Shift in marital expectations:** Nuclear families focus more on emotional and sexual compatibility between partners, whereas joint families placed more emphasis on fulfilling social and familial duties. This shift can create discontent when emotional needs are unmet, leading some individuals to seek fulfillment elsewhere.

4.3 Religious and Community Sanctions

- **Moral codes:** Hindu, Muslim, and other religious communities in UP uphold strict moral codes prohibiting adultery. Religious texts, moral teachings, and community customs place fidelity at the center of married life.
- **Loss of authority of community bodies:** Earlier, village councils (*panchayats*) or religious leaders could enforce sanctions — social boycotts, fines, public shaming — against those engaged in extramarital affairs. With modernization and legal reforms, these bodies have less authority, and urban spaces rarely have such community monitoring mechanisms.
- **Decriminalization impact:** The 2018 Supreme Court judgment decriminalizing adultery removed legal punishment under Section 497 IPC. While it did not legitimize extramarital affairs socially, it reduced the fear of legal repercussions, leaving morality enforcement to the social sphere alone.

4.4 Urbanization, Migration, and Occupational Mobility

- **Urban anonymity:** Cities like Lucknow, Noida, Agra, and Kanpur offer anonymity that is absent in rural settings. People can interact with less fear of gossip reaching their extended families.
- **Work-related separation:** Migration for work is common in UP. Long absences from home, whether due to domestic or overseas employment, can strain marital bonds and create conditions for extramarital relationships, both for those who leave and those who stay behind.
- **Mixed-gender workplaces:** Modern employment settings in urban UP often involve collaboration between men and women, which can foster professional and personal connections outside the marriage.

4.5 Influence of Globalization and Media

- **Changing aspirations:** Exposure to global media — films, web series, and social media influencers — has popularized narratives that prioritize personal happiness, romantic passion, and self-fulfilment over duty-bound marital stability.
- **Normalization of romantic experimentation:** Some portrayals in media depict extramarital relationships as a form of personal liberation, subtly challenging traditional mores.
- **Value conflict:** For many married adults in UP, these globalized values clash with the cultural upbringing that emphasizes self-sacrifice, marital duty, and family honor. The result is an internal moral conflict that can either suppress desires or, conversely, rationalize acting on them.

4.6 Technology and Digital Communication

- **Smartphone revolution:** Private messaging apps (WhatsApp, Telegram), social media (Facebook, Instagram), and dating platforms (Tinder, Bumble) make it easier to form and sustain secret relationships.
- **Emotional affairs online:** Even without physical intimacy, emotional connections built through frequent digital communication can evolve into deeper extramarital involvement.

- **Secrecy tools:** Features like disappearing messages, hidden chats, and multiple SIM cards allow individuals to hide affairs from spouses and families.

4.7 Erosion of Traditional Social Controls

- **Weakened kinship authority:** Younger generations are less willing to conform to elders' dictates about marital life, reducing the power of social shaming as a deterrent.
- **Rise of individualism:** While Indian society remains largely collectivist, urban middle-class spaces in UP increasingly value individual happiness and self-expression — sometimes at the cost of traditional marital obligations.
- **Legal reforms and rights awareness:** Awareness of legal rights and protections (such as the right to divorce) may reduce the fear of societal repercussions, indirectly making extramarital engagement seem less risky.

5. Specific Uttar Pradesh Context

Uttar Pradesh presents a unique sociological environment because:

- **Rural-Urban Divide:** Rural areas remain more conservative, with close-knit community surveillance, making extramarital affairs rarer (or more hidden). Urban areas provide greater anonymity and freedom.
- **Joint vs. Nuclear Family Structures:** Joint families exert stronger social control, while nuclear families in urban areas allow more privacy and autonomy.
- **Generational Gap:** Younger married couples may adopt more liberal views compared to their parents, creating intergenerational value conflicts.
- **Migration Patterns:** Men or women working away from their spouses for extended periods (due to jobs in other cities) may face emotional and physical loneliness, increasing the likelihood of extramarital connections.

6. Consequences of the Cultural Conflict

The tension between these two value systems has direct sociological implications:

- **Erosion of Social Trust:** Infidelity challenges the sanctity of marriage, potentially weakening the institution in the long run.
- **Changing Definitions of Morality:** Younger generations may view fidelity as a matter of personal choice rather than an absolute moral duty.
- **Social Stigma and Hidden Behavior:** Even with modernization, societal disapproval forces individuals to conceal such relationships, creating a parallel "hidden" social reality.
- **Legal and Religious Backlash:** The persistence of laws and religious strictures against adultery means that modernization does not necessarily legalize or socially approve these behaviors.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of extramarital affairs among married adults in Uttar Pradesh, as explored in this study, is not merely a matter of individual morality or private choice; it is a deeply embedded socio-cultural issue shaped by a complex interplay of historical traditions, religious doctrines, evolving social norms, and the pressures of modernization. This research, based on secondary data and sociological frameworks, underscores that marital relationships in India—particularly in socially conservative

regions like Uttar Pradesh—are historically founded on the principles of fidelity, duty, and family honor. The Indian social structure, influenced by centuries of Hindu, Islamic, and later colonial moral codes, has consistently upheld monogamy within marriage as both a legal and moral imperative.

Yet, as our analysis reveals, the changing socio-cultural landscape is creating fissures in these long-standing norms. Globalization, urbanization, increased mobility, and the digital revolution have introduced alternative value systems, offering individuals exposure to ideas, lifestyles, and freedoms that diverge sharply from traditional Indian mores. In this transitional space, the tension between tradition and modernity becomes acutely visible in the institution of marriage. While societal norms still outwardly condemn extramarital relations—often labeling them as a violation of *dharma*, morality, and social respect—modern influences, individualism, and shifts in gender roles have made such relationships more conceivable, and in some cases, more accessible.

The socio-cultural determinants identified in this research—such as weakening joint family systems, rising financial independence among women, urban anonymity, delayed marriages, exposure to global media, and the normalization of sexual expression—collectively redefine how intimacy, commitment, and personal fulfillment are perceived within marriage. This evolution is not uniform; rural, semi-urban, and urban pockets of Uttar Pradesh exhibit significant differences in the acceptance, prevalence, and secrecy surrounding extramarital affairs. In rural areas, community surveillance and tightly knit kinship systems still act as deterrents, whereas in urban centers, privacy and mobility create more opportunities for such relationships to develop and remain concealed.

The conflict between traditional norms and modern lifestyles, as elaborated in this study, is not simply a clash of ideas—it is a lived reality for many married individuals. On one side lies the cultural weight of loyalty, sacramental marriage, and the social consequences of dishonor; on the other, the lure of emotional novelty, sexual exploration, and the promise of self-expression promoted by modern values. This duality produces a moral dissonance that individuals navigate daily, often in secrecy.

What emerges from this sociological analysis is recognition that extramarital affairs in Uttar Pradesh are not an outright rejection of marriage, but rather a reflection of how marriage itself is being redefined in a rapidly changing socio-cultural context. For some, it is a response to unmet emotional or sexual needs within the marital framework; for others, it represents an assertion of individuality in a society that has traditionally subordinated personal desire to collective morality.

Importantly, the Indian legal and religious frameworks continue to stigmatize and penalize extramarital relationships, both socially and, in certain contexts, legally. However, the digital era's private communication channels, online dating platforms, and exposure to liberalized narratives in films and social media are eroding the practical enforceability of such moral boundaries. The resulting paradox is that while social stigma remains strong in public discourse, the private reality is increasingly at odds with this official moral stance.

From a sociological standpoint, addressing the issue of extramarital affairs in Uttar Pradesh—and India more broadly—requires more than moral condemnation. It demands a holistic understanding of changing social structures, evolving gender dynamics, and the impact of modernization on human relationships. Educational interventions, open communication within marriages, community counseling, and a more nuanced discourse about intimacy and expectations in marriage could help bridge the gap between tradition and modernity.

In conclusion, extramarital relationships in Uttar Pradesh must be understood not merely as personal transgressions but as sociologically significant phenomena that reveal deeper shifts in Indian society. They highlight how the institution of marriage is simultaneously being challenged, adapted, and re-imagined in the era of globalization. As the state—and indeed the country—continues to negotiate the balance between preserving cultural heritage and embracing inevitable social change, the study of these relationships will remain crucial for understanding the evolving moral and emotional fabric of Indian life.

References:

1. International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & ICF. (2021). *National family health survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: Uttar Pradesh factoids*. PARI Library.
2. IIPS & Macro International. (2017). *NFHS-4 report: Uttar Pradesh* [Data tables].
3. ABP News. (2021, November 25). *NFHS report: Uttar Pradesh at number 2 in domestic violence cases*. ABP Live (in Hindi).
4. Patel, R., & Dhar, A. (2017). Marital happiness among newly married individuals in rural Varanasi, India. *Social Science Spectrum*, June 2018.
5. PubMed. (2011). Marital violence and women's reproductive health care in Uttar Pradesh, India. *International Journal of Gynecology & Obstetrics*.
6. PubMed. (2023). Early marriage and marital satisfaction among young married men in rural Uttar Pradesh. *Journal of Family Studies*.
7. Kushwaha, C., & Alam, N. (2025). Exploring the marital trend of youths in Uttar Pradesh with educational attainment. *International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development*, 9(1), 826–845.
8. NCRB data via Reddit commentary. (2024). Uttar Pradesh recorded 65,743 crimes against women in 2022. *Reddit*.