

## Introduction

*Diti, a 35 year old manager in a leading organization was hurriedly browsing some important official documents for an upcoming meeting. Amidst her tight schedule Diti was reminded of her teenage son, Siddharth. Diti, a single mother had legally divorced her abusive husband three years back. She picked up the phone to call Siddharth and ask him if he liked the lunch, if he could take some rest after lunch, if he had finished his homework and if he was ready for his math coaching class. Irritated by her questions he hung up the phone saying, “Stop nagging on me mommy”!*

*Siddharth’s words although unintentional hurt Diti. Pausing all her work she looked aimlessly out of the window and a stream of tears rolled down her cheeks, while her mind witnessed a flashback of episodes of tolerating abuse from her ex-husband. The grave silence in the room was interrupted by a colleague’s knock on the door who was accompanying Diti for the meeting. She wiped her tears saying it was a just a yawn, masked her face with an artificial smile and attended the meeting.*

*Diti drove back home after a long day at work and bought some vegetables, groceries and her son’s favorite biscuits on the way. After finishing dinner with Siddharth and kissing him goodnight she managed to sleep, but little.*

*The next day while on her morning walk she told herself, “Life is not as bad as it used to be, that was a reality and these are just memories, I can handle this when I have handled worse”!*

Diti is in the process of experiencing life after divorce which she thinks is not very exciting but better than what she lived while she was married. Having a limited social network her son is the center of her world, until when she is not sure. Although being highly successful in her career, what makes her happy is something else. Diti craves for emotional warmth like any normal human being which she never confesses because she knows that the only person who can give it to her right now is she herself. Each day Diti fights small and big battles with her past, present and future, with her personal, professional and social life yet looks forward to a promising life ahead blended with fear, uncertainty and an undying hope!

The focus of this study was to understand the experiences of divorced and separated women like Diti living in Vadodara city. An experience of divorce is an intense one. It has a strong potential to harm the individual in unimaginable ways. Like any other experience the experience of divorce and marital separation is subjective and depends upon a variety of factors in the person’s

life. Gahler (2006) rightly stated “To divorce is to die a bit...”. According to Dohrenwend, Krasnoff, Askenasy, and Dohrenwend, 1978; Holmes and Rahe, 1967 (cited in Gahler, 2006) from a large number of potential life events, divorce has been rated as one of the most stressful, with a large general impact on the life situation of those who experience it. Additionally, marital separation and divorce have been ranked second and third respectively by Dube and Singh (1983, cited in Pestonjee, 1999) in their studies on stressful life events. Pestonjee (1999) describes life events stress as a feeling that something of importance to an individual is being jeopardized by events in daily life. Marriage being the most established and a proven institution carries significant importance not only for Indians, but for most individuals across the world. Therefore, there is little reason to doubt that divorce or separation puts an individual in a situation which requires emotional, physical, social and financial adjustment and creates a variety of needs across multiple dimensions of their lives.

In a country like India marriage is said to be between two families and not between two individuals. Divorce, on the contrary is between the individual who is experiencing it and too many people, rather the entire society. The concept of divorce is not new in India. What is new is, the steadily rising number. The table 1 presents comparison of data of India census 2001 and 2011 on the number of divorced and separated persons in India.

**Table 1. Number of Divorced and Separated Persons in India in 2001 and 2011**

Year	Category	Number of Males	Number of Females	Total	Total number of Divorced and Separated Persons
2001	Divorce and Separation	988	2,343	3,331	3,331
2011	Divorce	4,527,43	9,095,73	13,623,16	48,97,518
2011	Separation	11,624,48	23,727,54	35,352,02	

Source: India Census (2001 and 2011)

There are three features which are noteworthy in the table 1. The first is that India has witnessed a 1470 times rise in the number of divorce and separation cases from 2001 to 2011. Second, the data of census 2001 represented divorced and separated numbers jointly whereas a

separate number of divorced and separated individuals was represented in the census of 2011. The third point which is most important for the study is that irrespective of the census data of 2001 or 2011 the number of divorced and separated women are remarkably more in comparison to divorced and separated men. According to Nagarajan (2015) one reason for this may be that it is much easier for men to remarry than for women to do so in a patriarchal society.

The divorce rate was just one in 1,000 ten years ago, and is still a relatively low, that is, 13 per 1,000 as compared to US average of 500 per 1,000. Family court officials say that the number of divorce applications has doubled and even tripled in cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, Kolkata and Lucknow over the past five years. In the year 2014, 11,667 divorce cases were filed in Mumbai city compared to 5,245 in the year 2010. Three more family courts were opened in Bengaluru in 2013, to cater to the growing demand, taking the total number of such courts to six (Dutt, 2015).

At this point it will be useful to take a look at the divorce rate in some other countries of the world. Plunkett (2014) analyzed the data of United Nation's Demographics and Social Statistics Division to find the ten most divorced nations. The table 2 reflects the countries with the highest divorce rates in the world in 2013.

**Table 2. Countries with Highest Divorce Rates in the World (2013)**

Sr No	Country	Divorce Rate in Percentage
1.	Belgium	71%
2.	Portugal	68%
3.	Hungary	67%
4.	Czech Republic	66%
5.	Spain	61%
6.	Luxemburg	60%
7.	Estonia	58%
8.	Cuba	56%
9.	France	55%
10.	USA	53%

Source: <http://www.therichest.com/rich-list/world/worlds-10-most-divorced-nations/?view=all>

India's divorce rate is much less in comparison to the divorce rate of countries mentioned in the table 2. However, a low divorce rate in India compared to other countries of the world may not indicate that marriages are intact. It may also mean that most people are unwilling to opt for

divorce given the heavy social stigma attached to it, accompanied by legal and financial difficulties. A comparatively low rate of divorce and separation makes the issue appear negligible but it is definitely something which cannot be ignored.

According to the United Nations Demographic Yearbook (2013) divorce, like marriage, is a legal event, and this has implications for international comparability of data. Additionally, the laws pertaining to divorce vary considerably from one country or area to another. The incidence of divorce is affected by the relative ease or difficulty of obtaining a divorce according to the laws of individual countries. The incidence of divorce is also affected by the ability of individuals to meet financial and other costs of the court procedures. Connected with this aspect is the influence of certain religious faiths on the incidence of divorce. For all these reasons, divorce statistics are not strictly comparable as measures of family dissolution by legal means.

### **Research on Divorce and Separation: An Overview**

Desai (1991) reviewed 59 published Indian researches on families with marital problems carried out in different disciplines like sociology, psychology, demography and professions such as psychology, law and social work. She identified a total of 13 researches done on marital breakdown out of which only three were carried out with divorced, separated and deserted women. Based on her review she suggested that further research needs to be carried out on psychological and sociological factors precipitating separation or desertion and legal aid provided to the estranged couples. Gupta (1991) also noted that studies have hardly been conducted in India to investigate problems resulting from disruption of marriage. He reported that there is a plethora of studies on divorce in the Western societies but in India only a few systematic studies have been conducted. Moreover, he discussed that studies in India on divorce and separation have failed to develop any theoretical orientation. Similarly, Bharat (1991) also noted that most studies on families in India lack a theoretical anchoring.

Around the same time a Western researcher, White (1990) reviewed researches related to divorce in the eighties, most of which were carried out on causes and determinants. He also found that theory was a relatively underdeveloped area of divorce related research and that these studies had taken place outside major theoretical currents of contemporary sociology. Apart from his main recommendation of doing further research within a theoretical perspective he recommended that there should be more research on family process, a broader understanding of why people get married, why they stay married and how marriage and divorce affect men and women differently.

It is evident from the above that although in the eighties divorce related researches in both Indian and Western societies had a similarity, that they lacked a theoretical grounding, there were two notable differences. First is that during the 1980s the rate of divorce in India would have been very low whereas according to White (1990) the high levels of divorces had become a standard part of the American family experience. Another difference is that the Western society had already researched the causes and determinants of divorce and separation and were then moving beyond to understand and research other related factors, whereas the Indian studies still needed to understand in-depth the causes and consequences of divorce and separation. A low rate of divorce in India may be the reason for this.

In the recent times Amato (2010) reviewed continuing trends and new developments in the divorce related researches. He states that divorce continues to be a major topic of scholarly interest in the United States. According to him, a search using the ISI web of science bibliographic database in August 2009 revealed a total of 11,980 articles published in social science journals since (and including) 2000 that listed divorce as a key topic. Amato, believes that a high divorce rate is definitely the reason behind this. His review found that research on divorce during the past decade has focused on a range of topics including the predictors of divorce, associations between divorce and the well-being of children and former spouses and interventions for divorcing couples. He found that in the past decade studies have become more sophisticated methodologically and new conceptual perspectives, such as, focus on the number of family transitions rather than divorce as a single event have become prominent. His review suggests several new directions for research. Some of which are: need for more research on separation, relationship between education and divorce, children born to unmarried or cohabiting parents, variability in post-divorce adjustment, why do sudden and unanticipated events like affair, illness and unemployment cause a marriage to unravel quickly, children's relationship with their stepparents, evaluation of divorce intervention and divorce policies and divorce of same sex couples. These research directions suggest that the Indian society is yet to witness many social situations already prevalent in the Western context.

An annotated bibliography on 'Marriage in globalizing contexts: Exploring change and continuity in South Asia' by Chaudhry, Majumdar, Kaur, and Palriwala (n.d.) reveals that researches on divorce and separation in India in the recent times are almost invisible. Apart from this, Indian studies on divorce still focus mainly on causes and consequences of divorce, especially economic consequences. Furthermore, one notable similarity between all the studies conducted in

India and other parts of the world is that very few studies on divorce and separation are qualitative in nature.

### **The Theoretical Framework of the Study**

Amato (2000) views divorce and separation not as a discrete event but as a process that begins while the couple lives together and ends long after the legal divorce is concluded. Considering the context of India, it may not even end in situations where the couple is sometimes indefinitely separated without a legal divorce. Divorce or separation will thus be considered as a process of experiences in the study.

Coelho (1991) suggested a need for a multi-dimensional frame of reference for studies on marital disharmony. Additionally Desai (1991) stated that no comprehensive theory exists in India in the area of marital problems. This is because very few studies have been conducted in this area and those which have been conducted have been fragmented into different disciplines. Thus, six theoretical perspectives have been considered appropriate, given the dearth of qualitative researches (in the area of women's experiences of divorce and separation) and considering the limitation of a single frame of reference. Below is a description of each theoretical perspective.

**The symbolic interaction theory.** This theory calls for paying attention to how events are interpreted by social actors. It states that a culture is composed of commonly shared signs and symbols from which actors construct the meanings found in culture. To understand social behavior, the researcher must understand the meanings actors assign to the situation and action (White & Klein, 2002).

According to Mead (1934, cited in White & Klein, 2002) some ideas which are of importance to symbolic interactionism are:

- Self is a symbolic representation of that which did an act (I) that which was acted on (me). In other words, humans represent themselves both as subject and object.
- Mind is an importation of the socialization process (from which humans acquire the symbols, beliefs, and attitudes of their culture) into the conduct of the individual so as to meet the problems that arise.
- One of the most basic concepts in symbolic interactionism is a 'role' which means 'place of an actor'. One important dimension of roles is 'role strain'. Role strain occurs when the actor does not have sufficient resources to enact a role or roles or when there are multiple

resources. The overload of expectations may be so great as to create role overload or expectations.

- Lastly, what the individual defines as real will have real consequences. An individual's definition of the situation depends upon how the individual defines the problem and what actions and solutions will be undertaken.

**The social exchange theory.** This theory states that individuals come together in groups so as to maximize their rewards. The membership in social groups may also necessitate compromise and even costs to the individual member. If the cost of the group membership exceed the rewards then membership in the group is no longer a rational choice. This theory is also termed as utilitarianism (White & Klein, 2002).

A reward can be anything that is perceived as beneficial to an actor's interest or it can be materials or relationships that bring pleasures, satisfactions, and gratifications. A cost can be the inverse of a reward (White & Klein, 2002).

White and Klein (2002) also believe that individuals are motivated by self-interest and they are rational beings. Further, individuals seek materials and relationships they regard as beneficial for themselves and they have the analytic ability to calculate the ratio of costs to rewards. Therefore, to understand any actor's choice as rational, we need to know what the person considers rewarding and costly, and in addition we have to know the relative weights for each of the rewards and costs.

**The feminist theory.** According to Gordon (1979 cited in White and Klein, 2002) feminist theory is an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it. One of the core assumptions of this theory is that women's experiences are central and real, and provide the foundation for knowledge which are claimed in the feminist theory. The theory further advocates that there is more than one way of looking at any given problem, issue or knowledge claim. Women from different cultures, places and times may have vastly different experiences which are accorded the same status and respect. Additionally, the feminist theory is closely linked to the feminist movement and is judged by whether it frees women from major sources of oppression and inequality in their lives (White & Klein, 2002).

Some ideas and concepts of feminist theory (White & Klein, 2002) which are of relevance to the study are as follows:

- Family is defined by the prevailing identity that suggests that a certain division of labor or type of co-residence is normal or natural. Further, in the family certain work is 'women's

work' or in disputes like custody of children, women are given the custody because of some inherent maternal ability.

- What is illegal or non-normative in terms of public behavior could be tolerated in private. Thus the exploitation of women and children continues in a less regulated environment where men could escape the public sanction for beating, violence and even rape because it is in the private sphere of the family.
- Other key concepts are 'inequality' and 'oppression'. These terms are of importance because according to feminist theory it is not important to simply understand the gender differences. The differences that matter are those that subordinate women to men and such inequality is not natural or inevitable but the result of social forces that 'push down' or subjugate women.

**Stress and coping: The Indian experience.** Pestonjee (1999) suggests that individuals cannot remain in a continuous state of tension. Even if a deliberate and conscious strategy is not adopted to deal with stress, some strategy is adopted; knowingly or unknowingly to take care of self. He goes on to say that coping can have an effect on a person's psychology, physiology and his/her social relationships.

According to Pareek (1983, cited in Pestonjee, 1999) psychologists have identified two major ways in which people cope with stress. In the first, which is a passive approach, a person may decide to suffer or deny the experience of stress. In the second or active approach a person may decide to face the realities of experienced stress and clarify the problem through negotiations with other members.

Additionally, Moos and Billings (1982, cited in Pestonjee, 1999) discuss that although there are many ways to classify the coping responses most approaches distinguish between the three broad domain below.

- ***Appraisal-focused coping.*** In order to cope with stress an individual attempts to define the meaning of the stressful situation. Strategies used for coping in this approach are logical analysis and cognitive redefinition.
- ***Problem-focused coping.*** In this approach an individual in stress tries to modify or eliminate the source of stress or problem. Alternatively the individual may also change the self to develop a more satisfying situation.



- ***Emotion focused coping.*** An individual who is experiencing stress will try to maintain an effective equilibrium by managing the emotions which are around the stressors.

**Adaptation and the set point model of happiness.** In their classic theory on adaptation, Brickman and Campbell (1971, cited in Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, and Diener, 2003) argued that people are confined to a hedonic treadmill, that is, they are bound to experience stable levels of well-being because, over time, they adapt to even the most extreme positive and negative life circumstances.

Hedonic treadmill is a process which describes that people experience emotional reactions to life events similar to sensory adaptation. Just as people's noses quickly adapt to many scents and smells thereafter disappearing from awareness. One's emotional system adjusts to one's current life circumstances and all reactions are relative to one's prior experience (Brickman & Campbell, 1971 cited in Diener, Lucas, & Scollon, 2006).

While reexamining the adaptation theory and the set point model of happiness with respect to marital transitions Lucas et al. (2003) found that adaptation to events does occur and people do return to a positive baseline even after major life events and this is much influenced by their own personality. They additionally found that an event such as marriage or divorce does not have the same implications for all individuals and what determines people's reactions to important life events is not just their personality but also the total circumstance of their life.

Further, Diener et al. (2006) on revising the adaptation theory of well-being of Brickman and Campbell stated that:

- Most people are happy most of the time. If people adapt and return to a baseline (after a significant life event), it is a positive rather than a neutral one.
- Personality factors may predispose individuals to experience different levels of well-being.
- Individuals may have not one, but multiple set points. Well-being may have various components and these may change in various ways over the course of the life span, but changes in one domain do not fully correspond to changes in other domains.
- Happiness can change, that is, important life events can permanently alter individual's happiness set points.

- There are individual differences in the rate and extent of adaptation that occurs even to the same event.

**Concept of self of Indian women.** To understand the complexity of Indian conceptions of selfhood, it is necessary to turn to an analysis of Indian philosophy and religion. While the Indian philosophy ultimately unites an inner self to transcendental spiritual reality, Indian social and moral philosophy binds selves to social relations. Indian philosophy postulates four social values. In order of importance they are *moksha* (spiritual emancipation), *dharma* (righteous action), *artha* (wealth), and *kama* (pleasure) (Mascolo, Misra, & Rapisardi, 2004). Mascolo et al. (2004) further add that within Indian philosophy and culture, a person is born into a system of duties and relationships defined by the hierarchical nature of Indian society. They include duties defined by one's position in one's (1) extended family, (2) class or caste and (3) state. One's primary duties are towards the extended family. The extended family is hierarchically, structured by kinship position and gender. When a woman marries, she leaves her family to become a part of her husband's (*gotra*) extended family.

Parikh and Garg (1989) have argued that regardless of their socio-economic class and cultural background the situation remains unaltered for most women in India. They further add that since women are the source of family continuity, they have to encounter the male identity. This encounter is legitimized and sanctified in the institution of marriage. Additionally they state that social custom dictates that marriage for a woman means uprooting and re-rooting. It means an entry and acceptance into the space of others. This critical shift in the life of a woman has been romanticized, and its reality of anguish, anxiety, and apprehension has been covered up. In discussing the confrontation of women with their macro and micro identities they share that it is in the course of this encounter that women have to contend with certain inevitabilities of their life and find the freedom, dignity and grace to be persons as well as women.

Within the social hierarchy the bride normally occupies a low rank. Obedience and compliance with the wishes of the mother-in-law are expected as a matter of course. The woman also believes that getting along with her husband's family and earning the good opinion of his family members, including the traditionally reviled and feared mother-in-law, are important obligations—even when these entail a measure of self-sacrifice and denial (Kakar & Kakar, 2007).

Roland (1988, cited in Mascolo, Misra, and Rapisardi, 2004) found that Indians organize interdependence to a greater degree than Americans. He coins the term “we-self” for Indians and “I-self” for Americans. This is more so in the case of women given the patriarchal context.

Mascolo et al. (2004) describe a model “encompassing self” wherein a sense of self is subsumed by the other or otherwise embedded in a relationship that extends beyond the self alone. This sense of self according to them arises in relationships where one person is obligated to, is responsible for, or views himself or herself as the caretaker of the other. They further go on to say that representations of this sort are likely to be well represented in hierarchical relationships which are salient in India.

The perspectives in the above theoretical frameworks have guided the study in its conceptualization, methodology, and data analysis and interpretation.