



The Historical Evolution of Shame in Indian Society (1850–2025): A Comparative Study of Widowhood, Divorce, Mental Illness, Sexuality, and Unemployment

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Abstract

Shame has long anchored the regulation of social life in India, operating not merely as an individual emotion but as a cultural mechanism through which communities police acceptable conduct and reinforce moral boundaries. Historically intertwined with honour (izzat), caste hierarchy, family reputation, and ritual purity, the targets and enforcement of shame have evolved alongside colonial governance, national reform, constitutional democracy, post-liberalisation economic shifts, and digital hyper-visibility. This paper examines the historical evolution of shame in Indian society across three pivotal epochs: late colonial India (c. 1850s), the early decades of the Republic (c. 1950s), and contemporary India (2025). Focusing on five thematic domains—widowhood, divorce, mental illness, sexuality, and unemployment—the study demonstrates how shame transitioned from enforcing inherited statuses and ritual purity to disciplining achieved identities, economic productivity, and digital performance. Drawing on perspectives from social history, gender studies, and emotional sociology, this paper demonstrates that modernization has merely shifted shame into new organizational structures and digital networks, rather than eradicating it.

Keywords: shame, social history, stigma, Indian society, widowhood, social change

1. Introduction

While traditional histories record wars, statecraft, and legislative milestones, societies are equally governed by emotional regimes that dictate how individuals evaluate themselves under the collective gaze. Among these, shame occupies a unique position. Unlike guilt, which centers on an internal moral conscience, shame is fundamentally public and relational—it thrives on the awareness or anticipation of external judgment. What a society marks as disgraceful offers an acute diagnostic of its underlying power relations, moral boundaries, and social hierarchies (Goffman, 1963; Nussbaum, 2004).

In the Indian subcontinent, shame has historically operated through deeply embedded concepts such as *lajja* (modesty), *izzat* (honour), *maryada* (propriety), and ritual purity. These notions governed family dynamics, caste interactions, marital alliances, and gendered roles across regions. Public reputation was managed as collective household property rather than personal capital; individual actions directly compromised the standing of the entire lineage. This collective liability explains why oppressive practices—including harsh restrictions on widows, caste

endogamy, child marriage, and the enforced silence surrounding mental distress—persisted over generations despite causing immense personal suffering (Chakravarti, 1993; Dirks, 2001).

The nineteenth century reshaped this social geography. British colonial rule introduced administrative classifications alongside vigorous indigenous debates on social reform. Figures such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, and later B. R. Ambedkar scrutinized entrenched assumptions about caste, gender, and human dignity. Measures like the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 signified efforts to align law with social justice. However, legal statutes rarely yielded instant cultural acceptance. Practices defended as symbols of lineage honour gradually became sites of intense contestation, giving rise to new forms of respectability under colonial modernity (Forbes, 1996; Oldenburg, 2002).

Post-Independence India instituted a radical legal framework based on equality, individual rights, and state-led modernization. Legislative acts in the 1950s altered Hindu personal law, expanding women's rights regarding marriage and inheritance. Yet social norms adapted sluggishly. Divorce remained heavily stigmatized, widow remarriage encountered localized resistance, mental distress stayed buried within households, and discussions of sexuality remained constrained by norms of domestic propriety. This enduring friction between constitutional guarantees and social practice underscores that legal modernization does not automatically dissolve cultural prejudice (Uberoi, 2006; Menon, 2012).

In contemporary India (2025), economic liberalisation, urban expansion, and digital hyper-connectivity have redefined social evaluation once again. Public reputation is no longer monitored solely by village elders or extended kinship networks; it is calculated on digital platforms, educational credentials, employment trajectories, and public performance. Simultaneously, movements advocating gender equity, disability rights, mental health awareness, and LGBTQ+ inclusion have aggressively challenged historical stigmas. This paper argues that shame has not vanished from Indian society. Instead, it has migrated from policing inherited statuses (caste, ritual purity, family honour) to disciplining achieved identities (employment, productivity, personal autonomy, and digital reputation). Examining widowhood, divorce, mental illness, sexuality, and unemployment across 1850s, 1950s, and 2025 reveals how shame continues to function as an adaptable instrument of social control.

2. Literature Review

The scholarly analysis of shame spans sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and social history. Erving Goffman's (1963) foundational work on stigma established that discrediting attributes are not intrinsic to individuals but are socially constructed through interactions that separate the 'normal' from the 'deviant'. Building on this, Thomas J. Scheff (2003) positioned shame as a primary mechanism of social control, arguing that communities enforce conformity through the subtle threat of emotional disconnection and public humiliation.

Historians of South Asia have examined shame primarily through the lenses of caste and patriarchal discipline. Uma Chakravarti (1993) demonstrated how 'Brahmanical patriarchy' weaponized female purity and widowhood restrictions to maintain caste hierarchies and preserve property lines. Veena Talwar Oldenburg (2002) similarly highlighted how economic interests and colonial land revenue policies exacerbated the marginalization of widows, proving that cultural stigma was deeply tied to material structures. Furthermore, Nicholas Dirks (2001) and Bernard Cohn (1996) showed how colonial censuses and legal codifications solidified caste and custom into rigid administrative categories, reconfiguring indigenous notions of honour and disgrace.

In gender and sexuality studies, Geraldine Forbes (1996) traced how colonial-era reforms redefined female respectability, creating new normative expectations for modern women. Ruth Vanita (2002) and Ashley Tellis (2012) documented the historical fluidity of precolonial sexual cultures and argued that colonial legislation, notably Section 377, codified Victorian homophobia into Indian law, creating enduring legal and social stigmas. In public health, Vikram Patel (2008) highlighted how mental health stigma delays clinical care, as families fear compromising matrimonial prospects and social standing.

Despite these rich thematic studies, existing scholarship rarely tracks how shame itself evolved as an overarching social institution across colonial, post-Independence, and contemporary periods. This paper bridges these distinct historiographical strands within a single comparative framework.

3. Historiographical Context

Reconstructing the history of shame in India requires navigating several historiographical traditions. Colonial administrators often deployed a civilizational discourse, contrasting European modernity with Indian social customs like child marriage, sati, and enforced widowhood. These accounts framed Indian customs as static and inherently barbaric to justify imperial governance (Cohn, 1996). Nationalist historians countered by asserting the historical vitality of Indian culture, treating reform as an internal movement for national regeneration, though they prioritized anti-colonial politics over the emotional structures of domestic life (Chandra et al., 1989).

The mid-twentieth-century shift toward social history, followed by Subaltern Studies (Guha, 1982), brought everyday domination and non-state mechanisms of control into focus. Feminist historians (Chakravarti, 1993; Sarkar, 2001) further demonstrated that female modesty and family honour were systematically engineered to preserve caste purity and male dominance. More recently, the 'history of emotions' (Reddy, 2001; Rosenwein, 2006; Frevert, 2011) has established that emotional regimes are historically contingent. When applied to the Indian context, this framework illustrates how changing notions of honour and humiliation are closely tied to structural shifts in legal systems, state authority, and economic dynamics.

4. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative historical methodology (Skocpol & Somers, 1980) across three analytical benchmarks: the 1850s (late colonial consolidation and social reform debates), the 1950s (post-Independence state-building and legislative reform), and 2025 (contemporary digital, market-driven society). It analyzes five key thematic domains: widowhood, divorce, mental illness, sexuality, and unemployment. Primary statutory laws, judicial rulings, policy frameworks, and secondary social history literature are synthesized using thematic comparative analysis to identify structural continuities and shifts.

The theoretical framework integrates four perspectives: Erving Goffman's (1963) theory of social stigma, Thomas Scheff's (2003) sociology of emotional regulation, Michel Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power and self-surveillance, and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) account of symbolic violence and cultural capital. Together, these frameworks explain how shame operates not as a static cultural trait, but as a dynamic, self-enforcing technology of social order that adapts to changing political and economic conditions.

5. Scope and Limitations

India's vast regional, linguistic, and caste diversity means that experiences of shame are non-uniform. This paper focuses on dominant structural trends and public discourses across urban and agrarian India, acknowledging that localized caste and regional dynamics create variations. Secondary themes such as disability, ageism, and infertility, while significant, remain outside the immediate scope of this five-part comparative model.

6. Shame as a Historical Category

Analyzing shame historically requires distinguishing it from related moral constructs such as guilt and honour. While guilt relies on internal moral accountability ('I did something wrong'), shame depends on public exposure and perceived social failure ('What will others think of me?'). Honour represents the external capital that shame threatens to diminish.

Table 1. Distinguishing Shame, Guilt, and Honour

Concept	Primary Basis	Central Question	Social Dimension
Shame	Public judgement & social expectations	What will people think of me?	Strongly collective & relational
Guilt	Personal conscience & moral responsibility	Have I done something wrong?	Primarily individual & internal
Honour	Social recognition, reputation & prestige	How am I regarded by society?	Collective, relational & fragile

Historically, shame in India operated as a primary tool of disciplinary power. Individuals policed their own behavior to avoid public ostracism or family disgrace. As societal values evolved from agrarian caste hierarchies toward market capitalism, the triggers of shame shifted accordingly.

7. The Changing Geography of Shame (1850s–2025)

7.1 Widowhood: From Ritual Impurity to Economic Agency

In the 1850s, upper-caste Hindu widowhood was framed as a state of perpetual ritual contamination and social death. Widows were subjected to ascetic impositions—shaved heads, drab attire, dietary restrictions, and exclusion from auspicious events. These practices served economic and caste functions: suppressing the widow's sexual agency and disinherit her preserved family property and caste purity (Chakravarti, 1993). The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 provided legal permission for remarriage, but social hostility remained intense; remarried widows faced severe community boycotts and loss of property (Oldenburg, 2002).

By the 1950s, the Hindu Succession Act (1956) granted widows explicit property rights, and the constitutional mandate of gender equality reduced state-sanctioned discrimination. However, cultural stigma endured in domestic settings. Widows were frequently excluded from auspicious family rituals and faced covert social pressure to remain chaste and unobtrusive (Uberoi, 2006).

In 2025, widow remarriage is widely accepted in urban and semi-urban settings, supported by female literacy, economic independence, and civil society advocacy. Stigma has largely shifted away from ritual impurity toward concerns over financial vulnerability and social isolation, particularly among elderly widows (Chen, 2000). Modern evaluation focuses on economic self-reliance rather than ritual compliance.

Table 2. Historical Transformation of Shame Associated with Widowhood

Dimension	c. 1850s	c. 1950s	2025
Social Perception	Ritual impurity; threat to lineage honour	Sympathy mixed with traditional caution	Recognition of rights & individual dignity
Remarriage	Violently opposed; socially penalized	Legally recognized; socially resisted	Widely accepted; localized regional resistance
Ceremonial Role	Strictly excluded from auspicious events	Partial participation depending on family	Generally included; residual ritual bias
Primary Basis of Shame	Caste purity, property rights, female chastity	Family reputation and community standing	Economic insecurity and social isolation

Enforcing Authority	Caste councils, patriarchy, religious elites	Kinship networks and village elders	Market conditions and social/family support
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7.2 Divorce: From Family Dishonour to Negotiated Autonomy

In the 1850s, Hindu marriage was treated as an indissoluble sacrament (sanskara). Legal divorce did not exist in formal Hindu law, and marital separation brought total social ostracism, particularly for women. A woman who left her husband, even due to severe violence, brought irreversible dishonour upon her natal family (Derrett, 1968; Chakravarti, 1993).

The enactment of the Hindu Marriage Act in 1955 introduced statutory grounds for divorce, such as cruelty, desertion, and adultery (Agnes, 2011). Nevertheless, mid-century social norms treated divorce as a disgraceful family failure. Divorced women faced intense moral scrutiny, financial precarity, and suspicion, while men experienced milder social disapproval (Uberoi, 2006).

By 2025, higher female labor force participation, urban nuclear households, and family court reforms have normalized divorce as a legal remedy for unviable marriages. Stigma has substantially declined, though gendered double standards linger. Modern shame surrounding divorce increasingly stems from online public exposure, custody disputes, and social media judgment rather than the act of separation itself (Menon, 2012).

Table 3. Historical Transformation of Shame Associated with Divorce

Dimension	c. 1850s	c. 1950s	2025
Legal Status	Non-existent in upper-caste Hindu law	Statutory right under Hindu Marriage Act (1955)	Well-established legal recourse & mediation
Social Perception	Catastrophic family dishonour & moral breach	Legally sanctioned; socially discouraged	Accepted as necessity; lingering gender bias
Female Experience	Total social ostracism & loss of shelter	Severe stigma and financial dependency	Economic autonomy; modern social judgment
Male Experience	Minor social reputational impact	Moderate criticism; easier reintegration	Minimal social stigma; focus on legal assets
Primary Mechanism	Religious doctrine & caste sanctions	Family pressure & social gossip	Digital footprints, court trials & peer networks

7.3 Mental Illness: From Concealed Curse to Public Health Paradigm

In the mid-nineteenth century, psychological distress was largely understood through supernatural frameworks—spirit possession, divine wrath, or karmic retribution (Ernst, 1991). Colonial 'lunatic asylums' operated primarily as custodial containment facilities for public order (Mills, 2000). Families hid mentally ill relatives to protect household lineage, marital prospects, and social standing.

In the 1950s, psychiatric science expanded in India through specialized institutes like NIMHANS, yet clinical resources remained scarce. Mental health conditions were widely viewed as personal defects or social liabilities. Families routinely concealed psychiatric diagnoses during marriage negotiations, fearing permanent damage to family reputation (Kakar, 1982).

By 2025, the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 has codified the right to mental health access, and public awareness campaigns have destigmatized conditions like depression and anxiety. However, treatment gaps persist due to workplace discrimination and fears of being labeled unproductive (Patel et al., 2016; NMHS, 2016). Modern shame centers on functional capacity, career performance, and digital self-presentation.

Table 4. Historical Transformation of Shame Associated with Mental Illness

Dimension	c. 1850s	c. 1950s	2025
Dominant Paradigm	Supernatural, demonic, or karmic causes	Emerging medical model vs traditional beliefs	Scientific, bio-psychosocial & rights-based
Institutional Care	Custodial colonial asylums for order	Overburdened psychiatric hospitals	Community care, therapy, & integrated health
Family Strategy	Complete secrecy & confinement	Selective concealment from suitors	Open dialogue mixed with career anxiety
Primary Basis of Shame	Karmic curse & divine abandonment	Hereditary defect & marriage liability	Workplace incompetence & social dysfunction
Key Authorities	Religious healers & colonial wardens	Medical psychiatrists & family elders	Therapists, HR policies, & online spaces

7.4 Sexuality: From Moral Silence to Rights and Visibility

In the 1850s, colonial governance and Victorian morality codified strict sexual regulation in India. The passage of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1860 criminalized non-heteronormative sexualities, labeling them 'unnatural offenses' (Narain, 2004). Female sexuality

was heavily policed to safeguard caste purity and lineage, rendering unapproved sexual desire shameful (Chakravarti, 1993).

During the 1950s, sexuality remained bound to marital reproduction and domestic modesty. Despite constitutional rights, non-conforming sexual orientation and premarital relationships remained deeply taboo, kept hidden to avoid public humiliation and family rejection (Forbes, 1996; Menon, 2012).

By 2025, landmark rulings—such as *NALSA v. Union of India* (2014) and *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* (2018)—have decriminalized same-sex relations and affirmed transgender rights. While queer visibility and sexual agency have expanded significantly, cyberbullying, online harassment ('slut-shaming'), and localized honor violence demonstrate that moral surveillance has adapted to digital and public domains.

Table 5. Historical Transformation of Shame Associated with Sexuality

Dimension	c. 1850s	c. 1950s	2025
Normative Order	Victorian propriety & caste endogamy	Domestic marital modesty & reproductive focus	Constitutional equality, consent & autonomy
Legal Regimes	Section 377 (1860) criminalization	Section 377 retained; silence in public policy	Section 377 struck down; NALSA judgment
Public Discourse	Strict prohibition & moral censure	Taboo; confined strictly to private home	Open advocacy, digital media & pop culture
Primary Basis of Shame	Violation of ritual purity & colonial law	Family dishonour & societal deviance	Cyber harassment, non-conformity & leaks
Regulating Institutions	Colonial penal code & caste elders	Family hierarchy & educational norms	Judiciaries, online networks & peer groups

7.5 Unemployment: From Structural Misfortune to Individualized Failure

In the 1850s, the agrarian and caste-based economic structure meant that 'unemployment' as a modern concept did not exist. Economic hardship caused by famines or colonial revenue demands was viewed as a collective structural calamity rather than an individual moral flaw (Bayly, 1983). Failure to support dependents brought loss of prestige, but social standing was tied to caste duty rather than job competition.

By the 1950s, post-Independence industrialization and expanding public sector employment created a new figure: the educated unemployed youth. Failure to secure government employment after university education created family disappointment, as stable state jobs were key markers of social mobility and masculine adult responsibility (Guha, 2007).

In 2025, high-pressure job markets, competitive exams, gig work, and private sector volatility have made unemployment a deeply personal source of shame (Standing, 2011). Joblessness is often internalized as personal incompetence rather than systemic economic failure. Social media platforms like LinkedIn amplify pressure, transforming career trajectory into a hyper-visible performance.

Table 6. Historical Transformation of Shame Associated with Unemployment

Dimension	c. 1850s	c. 1950s	2025
Economic Context	Agrarian, customary & caste occupations	State-planned economy & public sector focus	Market economy, tech, gig work & corporate
Social View of Joblessness	Collective misfortune or environmental fate	Failure of state planning & youth stagnation	Individual moral & intellectual failure
Masculine Identity	Fulfilling inherited caste/family duties	Securing permanent public sector employment	High earning capacity, career growth & status
Primary Basis of Shame	Inability to feed dependents during crisis	Disappointing family educational investment	Peer comparison, digital failure & dependence
Enforcing Arena	Village community & immediate household	Extended family & local social circles	Professional platforms, social media & peers

8. Comparative Discussion

Synthesizing these five thematic domains confirms that shame in India has undergone a functional relocation rather than an extinction. Across nearly two centuries, the primary basis of social judgment migrated from inherited status (caste, lineage, ritual purity) to achieved performance (education, employability, income, personal autonomy, and digital reputation).

Gender dynamics cut across all five areas. Historically, women bore an asymmetrical burden of shame, as their bodies, sexualities, and marital statuses were tied directly to lineage honour (Chakravarti, 1993). While legal reforms have expanded female autonomy, modern shame operates through new channels—such as cyber harassment, career expectations, and persistent

domestic double standards. Conversely, men increasingly face intensified pressure surrounding financial success and employability, where joblessness is weaponized as a failure of adult masculinity.

Furthermore, enforcement mechanisms have transformed. The local authority of caste councils, village elders, and joint family patriarchs has been augmented by modern institutions—workplace human resource departments, family courts, medical systems, and above all, digital social platforms. The perpetual visibility of online life creates new forms of public exposure, proving that technological advancement creates novel arenas for social surveillance.

Table 7. Comparative Evolution of Shame in Indian Society

Dimension	c. 1850s	c. 1950s	2025
Dominant Values	Ritual purity, caste hierarchy, lineage honour	Constitutional rights vs traditional norms	Autonomy, productivity, digital reputation
Key Institutions	Family, caste councils, religious authorities	Family, courts, educational institutions	Workplaces, courts, media, social networks
Primary Targets	Widowhood, caste breach, female sexuality	Divorce, mental illness, unemployment	Unemployment, mental health, online image
Nature of Control	Customary, collective & localized	Mixed legal & community pressure	Legal rights & pervasive digital surveillance
Identity Basis	Inherited social status (caste/kin)	Transitional (citizenship vs tradition)	Achieved status (career/performance)

9. Conclusion and Future Horizons

This comparative study traces the historical evolution of shame in Indian society across 175 years. Examining widowhood, divorce, mental illness, sexuality, and unemployment demonstrate that shame is an adaptable technology of social regulation. In the 1850s, shame policed ritual purity and patriarchal order. In the 1950s, it regulated the boundaries between legal reform and social tradition. In 2025, it disciplines economic productivity, digital visibility, and individual performance.

The evolution of shame highlights those legal statutes, while crucial, are insufficient to transform emotional cultures on their own. Institutional reforms must be accompanied by broader cultural shifts in public discourse. Future historical research should explore how shame intersects with



regional variations, caste mobility, disability, environmental displacement, and emerging digital technologies such as artificial intelligence and online surveillance. Understanding the history of shame enriches our knowledge of South Asian social history and illuminates the emotional mechanisms that govern human societies.

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