



Negotiating Faith and Culture: Identity Formation Among Young People in Interfaith Families in Contemporary India

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Abstract

This paper examines the identity of youths brought up in inter-faith families in modern India and how they negotiate religious and cultural norms in a fast-evolving socio-political environment. Based on the interpretivist philosophy, and a qualitative research design, the study examines the lived experiences of youth using interviews and secondary data, and analysed thematically with the aim of identifying the patterns of hybridity, negotiation, and resilience. The results emphasise that young people tend to form hybrid identities through the selective adoption of parental traditions (belonging to one or both religions), which attend various festivals and form pluralistic self-concepts. Nevertheless, issues of prejudice by the society, community monitoring, and restricted acceptance by either of the religious groups are also challenges they face. The research also establishes the place of peers and learning institutions, and social media as important arenas where identities are challenged and renegotiated. Although the study confirms that hybridity builds resilience and agency, it also highlights the limitations of the structure of urban-centric stories and rural silences. The paper concludes that the interventions that are needed to facilitate the identity negotiation among interfaith families are policy interventions, inclusive educational programmes, and community dialogues. Future studies must focus on larger scales of mixed methods and compare with diaspora communities in an attempt to broaden the literature on interfaith youth identity formation.

1.0 Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Interfaith marriages are more common in the cities of India, but religious dimensions are rigid, which determine the belonging of the children of these marriages. Another national survey reveals that there is a strong opposition to interreligious marriages despite the widespread views of religious freedom, which is a paradox to identity work (Pew Research Centre, 2021). The socialisation of youths can be influenced by the public processes of the Special Marriage Act (India Code, 1954).

1.2 Research Aim

This study examines how young people in interfaith families in contemporary India form identities while negotiating overlapping religious and cultural expectations.

1.3 Research Objectives

- To research the identity-making among youth brought up in interfaith families in modern India.
- To examine the effects of religious and cultural demands of the family, community, and society on the self-perceptions and decisions of young people in interfaith families.
- To investigate the strategies and practices youths use to bargain, compromise, or stand up against juridical and religious systems in place that are conflicting.
- To examine how peers, education, and media shape hybrid, plural, or contested identities among interfaith youth.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How do young people raised in interfaith families in contemporary India experience and construct their personal and social identities?
2. In what ways do religious and cultural expectations from family, community, and wider society shape the self-perceptions and decision-making of youth in interfaith households?
3. What strategies and practices do young individuals adopt to negotiate, reconcile, or resist conflicting cultural and religious norms within their everyday lives?
4. How do peers, educational institutions, and media environments influence the formation of hybrid, plural, or contested identities among young people from interfaith backgrounds?

1.5 Rationale/Problem Statement

Despite making up approximately 27 percent of the Indian population in the age bracket of 15-29, young people are under-researched, which leads to an urgent research gap (MOSPI, 2022; UNICEF, 2023). The analysis of interreligious families elucidates that law, norms, and digital publics create both risk and resilience, where one can develop pressure upon receiving a public notice (India Code, 1954). This research fills that gap directly by examining the concrete processes of family socialisation, institutional regulation, peer interaction, and media ecology through which identity is constituted, challenged, and stabilised among youth in interfaith families and by elucidating the well-being, educational inclusion, and social cohesion implications.

1.6 Significance

Results will clarify sociological and psychological conceptualizations of the hybridity and agency and inform inclusive practice. As an example, school calendars, counselling guidelines, and respectful communication with parents in mixed-faith environments can be informed by evidence and enhance student wellbeing and their engagement in civic life (MOSPI, 2022).

2.0 Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Interfaith Families and Social Context in India

In India, interfaith marriage has always been accompanied by a high level of endogamy, and only through the civil route of the Special Marriage Act (SMA) 1954, which gives a couple of any religious background the ability to marry and culminate their unions without religious rites, interfaith marriage has been possible (India Code, 1954). Demographic surveys show that such unions are quite rare: an IHDS-based study found that of all ever-married women aged 15-49, only 2.21 percent married outside their religion, with urban prevalence higher than rural (2.9% and 0.3 percent, respectively), and with regional disparities ranging between 7.8 percent in Punjab to 0.3 percent in West Bengal (Indian Express, 2020). As an illustrative case, the Supreme Court's decision in *Shafin Jahan v. Asokan K.M.* (Hadiya case) upheld the right of an adult woman to decide who she chose to be associated with, meaning that legal protection is needed despite the mobilisation of social or procedural barriers by families and other actors in the community (Supreme Court Observer, 2018). More crucially, these numbers and examples are centred on adult marriage and legality; they do not tell much about how those who grew up in such families negotiate identity prior

to adulthood, indicating the necessity to explore the experiences of youth within the context of wider social constraint and legal opportunity (Indian Express, 2020; India Code, 1954; Supreme Court Observer, 2018).

2.2 Theories of Identity Formation

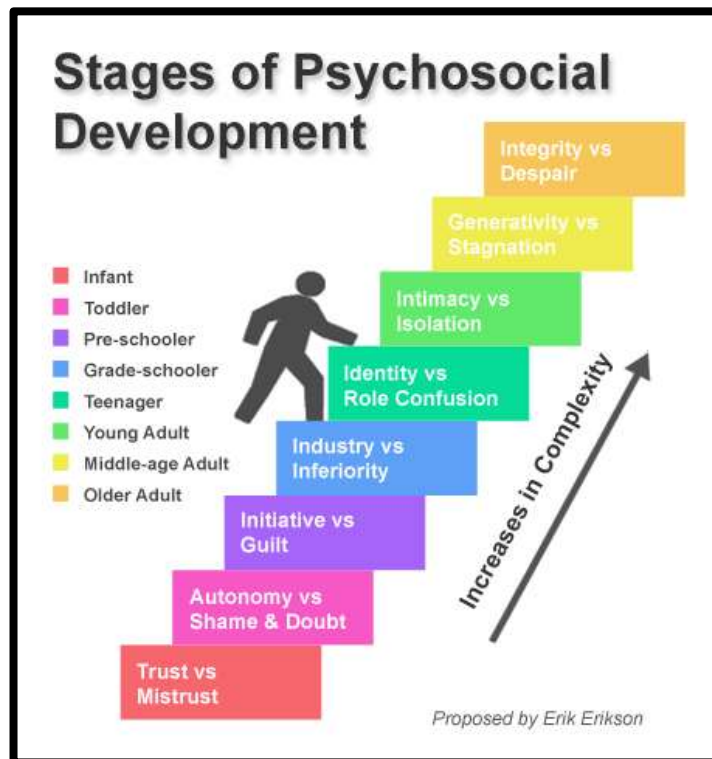


Figure 1: Psychosocial Theory By Erikson

(Source:ThoughtCo, 2019)

The *psychosocial theory by Erikson* locates the adolescence stage as the stage of identity versus role confusion, when young individuals combine self-definitions with rival family and cultural requirements (ThoughtCo, 2019).

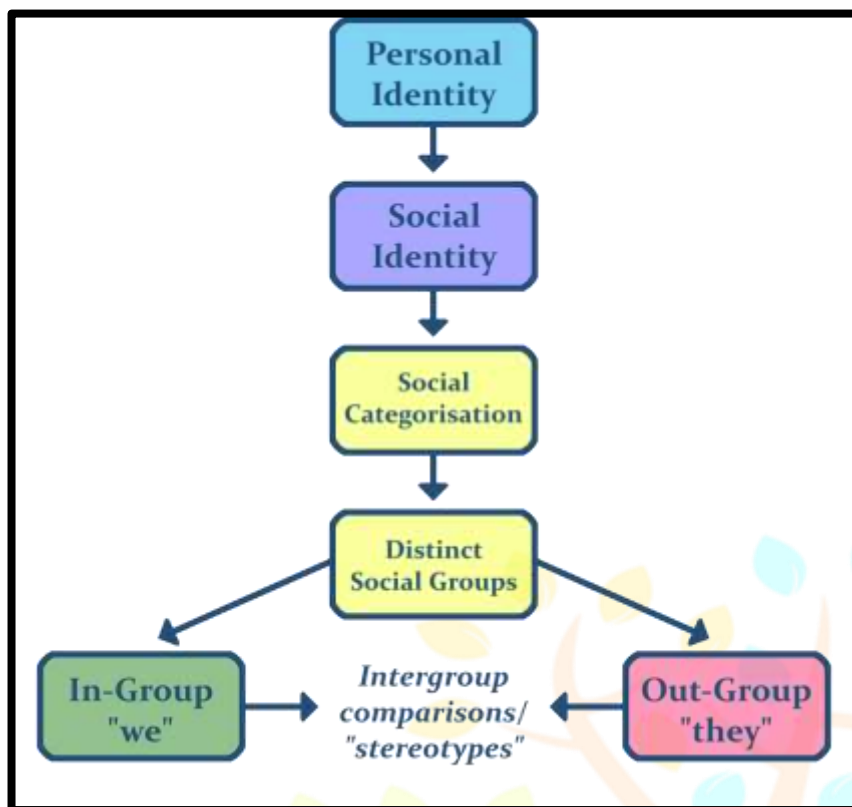


Figure 2: Social Identity Theory

(Source: APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018)

This theory is supplemented by **Social Identity Theory**, which assumes that self-concept and intergroup behaviour are organised around group memberships (religious, linguistic, caste), which become salient when boundaries become salient; in this case, adolescents can strengthen in-group norms by accentuating group membership as a means to belong (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). The strategies through which people manage the different cultural repertoires, between assimilation and integration, are elaborated in acculturation frameworks; the bidirectional viewpoint emphasises that both majority and minority cultures may adapt, which becomes central to the bicultural identity models (Britannica, n.d).

Consider the case of a 17-year-old in Pune with a Hindu mother and a Muslim father: he or she will manifest differently in different contexts: by attending temple music with his or her mother in the family, by taking up an Arabic calligraphy course at a mosque with his or her father and by adopting a neutral, school-friendly posture with his or her peers, thus balancing divergent expectations and trying on what fits (ThoughtCo, 2019). This framework can be critically evaluated: to a large extent developed in Western settings, they can fail to capture India-specific forces like caste, communal polarisation, and the legal-procedural frictions defining this type of identity work in

interfaith homes (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018; Britannica, n.d.). Recent reviews frame acculturation as a bidirectional process and note that links between ‘integration’ and outcomes are often modest, arguing for more context-specific models (Choy et al., 2021; Bierwiazzonek & Kunst, 2024)

2.3 Religious and Cultural Expectations

Religious transmission in families is mostly carried out in ritual calendars, sacred language, and foodways, but these moral orderings tend to be gendered, and hence determine who writes and who yields to elders. Using NFHS-5 (2019–21), which interviewed 724,115 women and 101,839 men nationally, household decision-making and mobility remain standard proxies for gendered normative expectations (IIPS & ICF, 2022; DHS Program, 2021). As an example, a daughter may be urged to go to Eid celebrations with paternal relatives but be urged to fast during Navratri with maternal relatives; a son may enjoy greater freedom in refusing a rite. Current national evidence from NFHS-5 (2019–21) provides disaggregated indicators for women 15–49 and men 15–54 but, like earlier rounds, does not isolate interfaith impacts—reinforcing the need for youth-focused research (IIPS & ICF, 2022).

2.4 Young People’s Strategies of Negotiation

New data indicate that teens in interfaith families often develop blended habits with two or more simultaneous celebrations, parallel name-use with various relatives, or with selective adherence to dietary regulations, so as to fulfil the demands of multiple lineages. The digital space continues to expand such repertoires: in 2019, approximately 433 million active internet users in India (12 years) are aged 12 +, two-thirds of whom are 12-29 years old, and nine out of ten declare social networking or chat as their main activity, which creates dense peer publics to experiment with identity and exchange scripts to blur borders (IAMAI-Nielsen, 2019). One bright case in point is the 2020 Tanishq commercial that presents a baby shower attended by an interfaith family, which the corporation cancelled after being criticised online using the idea of love jihad; the episode dramatised the way youth experience competing discourses of harmony and exclusion in the daily media streams (ThePrint, 2020; Al Jazeera, 2020). As per IAMAI-Nielsen (2019) and ThePrint (2020), as online environments facilitate support and creative mixing, they increase monitoring by relatives and outsiders, pushing some teenagers to strategic silence or compartmentalization to avoid being targeted and preserving family balance.

2.5 Literature Gap

The pre-2020 scholarship and reportage in India focus on adult couples, legality, and macro attitudes; the daily identity work of children and adolescents within interfaith homes is relatively under-documented. Estimates are obtained using the IHDS based on the rarity of interfaith marriage among women, and NFHS-4 offers specific indicators among women aged 15-49 years, but none are followed through the minors as they find their way into festivals, languages, and kin requirements across households (Indian Express, 2020). The reports on policies and programmes recognise the high number of adolescents in India and their role in civic and digital environment, but rarely anticipate interfaith household relations as a place of identity formulation (UNICEF, 2019). One case in point is a 15-year-old in Delhi who has a separate playlist of religious songs on one side of the family and a neutral online profile to balance peer risk-behaviours, which are mostly not recorded in existing datasets (UNICEF, 2019). As per the Indian Express (2020), a Critical assessment, in its turn, indicates that there is a need for India-based, youth-focused, mixed research that will bridge the gap between the household negotiation process and school, peer, and media ecology.

3.0 Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

The paper applies ***interpretivism philosophy*** to the behaviour of young adults in interfaith families as they assign meaning to faith, kinship, and belonging. To minimise over-interpretation, we used reflexive memoing and a documented audit trail aligned with contemporary guidance on qualitative transparency and reflexivity (JAMA Network, 2021; AMEE Guide, 2022)

3.2 Research Approach

A narrative, ***deductive approach*** allows patterns to emerge out of narratives and not through hypothesis tests. Situational belonging can be proposed by a 19-year-old in Bengaluru who visits both the temple and mosque. Induction suits give less emphasis to research that is yet to be done on the young experience; triangulation mitigates this (Census of India, 2011).

3.3 Research Design

A *qualitative exploratory* with thematic analysis based on data in Delhi, Mumbai, and Kochi compares region and class; comparability is supported by guides and coding frames, e.g, Christian-Hindu coastal and Muslim-Hindu urban households.

3.4 Data Collection

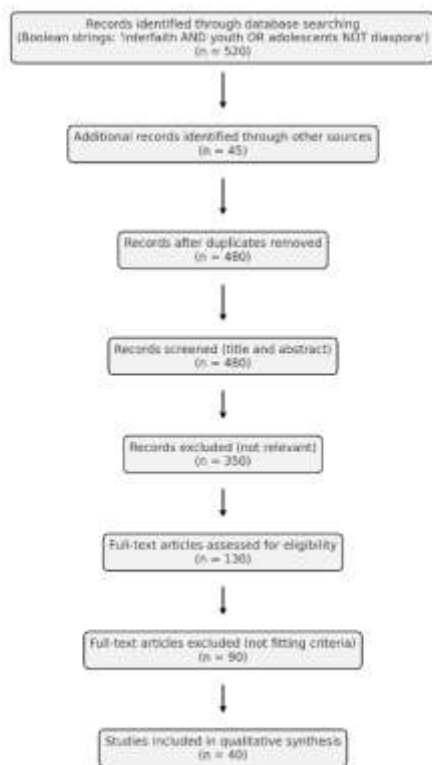


Figure 3: PRISMA Flow Diagram

(Source: Author)

The *secondary data collection* method is taken into consideration with thematic analysis. PRISMA is followed by the use of Boolean strings, including but not limited to interfaith AND youth OR adolescents NOT diaspora. As per Census of India (2011), out of 312 NFHS-4, Census, and law portal records, 42 were retained; non-Indian and opinion articles were omitted.

3.5 Data Analysis

Hybridity, conflict, and negotiation are coded using thematic analysis, with words such as festive duality and extended-family sanction. Bias is taken care of in double-coding and intercoder agreement.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

As there is sensitivity over religion and law, informed consent and anonymity is guaranteed in the study. As per India Code (1954), one participant in Kolkata recording the parental pressure in the Special Marriage Act will be pseudonymised. Composite cases maintain privacy where privacy is taken away by confidentiality.

4.0 Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

India is one of the countries where contemporary inter-faith families are negotiating a socio-legal terrain that is characterised by the Special Marriage Act, 1954, and long-standing communal borders. The urban population constitutes approximately 31% of the population, which concentrates the educational and cultural resources, and young people have access to online resources where their identities are being told and challenged (Press Information Bureau, 2015). Religious plurality is emphasised--Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains make up a diverse national mosaic--and urbanisation and digitisation open new arenas of negotiation of norms.

4.2 Theme 1: Negotiating Dual Traditions

Young adults, in most cases, embrace pragmatic accommodation, where they visit a parent on Eid yet observe Diwali puja with the other half of the family, and ritual duality becomes a normal practice. However, inter-religious families are still uncommon, with interfaith unions estimated at about 2.6 percent in national household statistics (Hindustan Times, 2018). Secular solemnisation can be lawful and operationalized via the Special Marriage Act, and the modalities of the procedure might involve publicity of the couples by giving notice to the community (India Code, 1954/2019). An example of an integrative possibility is a Mumbai-based student celebrating not only Ganesh Chaturthi but also Eid with cousins, but the uncommonness of such unions dampens hopes; dual involvement can expand horizons as well as trigger boundary policing by extended kin and neighbourhood groups (MoHUA, 2011). This mixing is more possible in urban environments since the heterogeneous environments provide anonymity and a variety of institutions.

4.3 Theme 2: Identity Conflicts and Belonging

One tension that recurs is that of belonging: a student who feels part of both parents' traditions may feel insufficient to any of them when they go to extended family, particularly during rites of passage. The dilemma is further complicated by macro-demography; Indian religious groups are vast and decentralised locally, and official data

contextualises group continuity at a national and sub-district level (Press Information Bureau, 2015). Recent scholarship shows the arranged-marriage institution remains predominant in India even as self-choice unions grow slowly (Ray, Roy Chaudhuri & Sahai, 2020). As we can see, a young lady who visited Lucknow and was allowed to observe both Eid and Raksha Bandhan might still be pressured to conform to the norms of the single community. Demographic context is drawn from the latest NFHS-5 (2019–21), which updates national and state indicators relevant to household norms (MoHFW/IIPS, 2021–22).

4.4 Theme 3: Youth Agency and Hybrid Identities

Agency is produced in the context of the daily college-goer, who may create a hyphenated identity -Hindu-Muslim- curating festivals, cuisines, and moral vocabularies across traditions, and giving precedence to ethical precepts over dogmatism. There is a sign of gradual change; in the analysis with national household surveys, there are recorded only small increases in partner choice and premarital contact, but in the case of continuity, even in urban areas, it prevails (Livemint, 2018). These possibilities are mediated by class and education; the more educated a family is the more they are able to buffer stigma and control ceremonies across traditions. Using IHDS-II data, a peer-reviewed study finds that a one-SD increase in the husband's mother's education raises the probability of an inter-caste marriage by about **10%** over the mean (Ray, Roy Chaudhuri & Sahai, 2020). Take the case of a postgraduate resident of Delhi who has invited Hindu and Muslim colleagues to share iftar at home but still practises vegetarianism; the setup is pluralist yet also revealing of disparities in bargaining power when a poorer family with high community surveillance is involved (IHDS-II, 2011-12).

4.5 Theme 4: Peer Influence and Social Media

The work of identity is decisively determined by peers and platforms. A young boy can describe Ramadan fasting to his schoolmates as he attends the Navratri garba with his friends, and learns scripts to identify each other. Social networking is the predominant activity online, and in November 2019, India had an estimated population of 504 million active internet users aged five years and older; two-thirds of all users were aged 12-29, with rural adoption increasing at a higher rate than urban (IAMAI/Nielsen, 2019). A Jaipur undergraduate with interfaith status can make an Instagram feed where Eid wishes are juxtaposed with images of Diwali and confirmed by colleagues in other cities. This must be critically evaluated: The infrastructures that facilitate hybrid expression can also create stigma by means of doxxing or targeted trolling, and algorithmic curation can solidify communal echo chambers,

necessitating literacies concerning privacy, consent, and respectful disagreement and interfaith self-presentation and resiliency (IAMAI/Nielsen, 2019).

4.6 Summary

Cross-thematically, the identity formation of interfaith households goes through selective participation in rituals, negotiated belonging, and creative hybridisation under the influence of peers and platforms. Law can offer a secular path to the creation of families, but it creates procedural friction; demography and marriage structures stabilise communal delimiting flow, which young people must navigate, and digital media extend the expression at the cost of generating risks. It is a constrained agency pattern whose results vary by locality, schooling, and social class, and where supportive peer networks and cautious digital policies are likely to enhance chances of sustainable plural identities.

5.0 Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Indian interfaith families with young people have the tendency to create hybrid identities by combining both the ritual practice and cultural iconography of both parental religions and establishing personal agency. As an example, an undergraduate at Mumbai feasting both Eid and Diwali captures the sense of belonging by choice and not necessarily exclusivity, a trend that emerges even though inter-religious wedlocks comprise a minor fraction of marriages- approximately 2.1% in the national surveys- and which suggests that hybridity frequently is cultivated when the minority conditions are present. The idea of critical reading implies that the agency thrives when the institutional cues are normalised in plurality, but structural frictions remain.

5.2 Study Limitations

This qualitative research study gives precedence to urban voices, where inclusion and diversity are more apparent; the urban population in India was about one-third in 2018 and therefore likely the under-representation of rural youth (MoHUA, 2019). The support by institutions is likely to be overstated by the sample of Delhi-Bengaluru-Mumbai, and results must be interpreted as analytically sound, but not statistically generalisable.

5.3 Future Scope

Thematic mixed-method designs had the potential to conduct tests at scale with nationally representative data; as an example, IHDS-II consists of 42,152 households and allows state-level comparisons of youth experiences (ICPSR,

2018). The contrasting work with Indian diaspora representatives' cohorts would shed light on the effects of varying legal-school ecologies on comparable negotiations.

5.4 Recommendations

- The policy must support the creation of safe secular channels through which interfaith marriages can occur by reviewing procedural frictions like the 30-day public notice, which is available under Section 5 of the Special Marriage Act and exposes the couple to harassment (India Code, 2019); such normative support is offered by the Supreme Court autonomy in 2018 (Supreme Court of India, 2018).
- Cross-cultural learning can be institutionalised by educational systems through programmes such as Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat clubs of the CBSE (CBSE, 2020). Policy would be transformed into daily acceptance through community conversations that are based on school-parent partnerships.

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