COUNTRY REPORT:

India

Between Generations: Belonging in India

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BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE LAB

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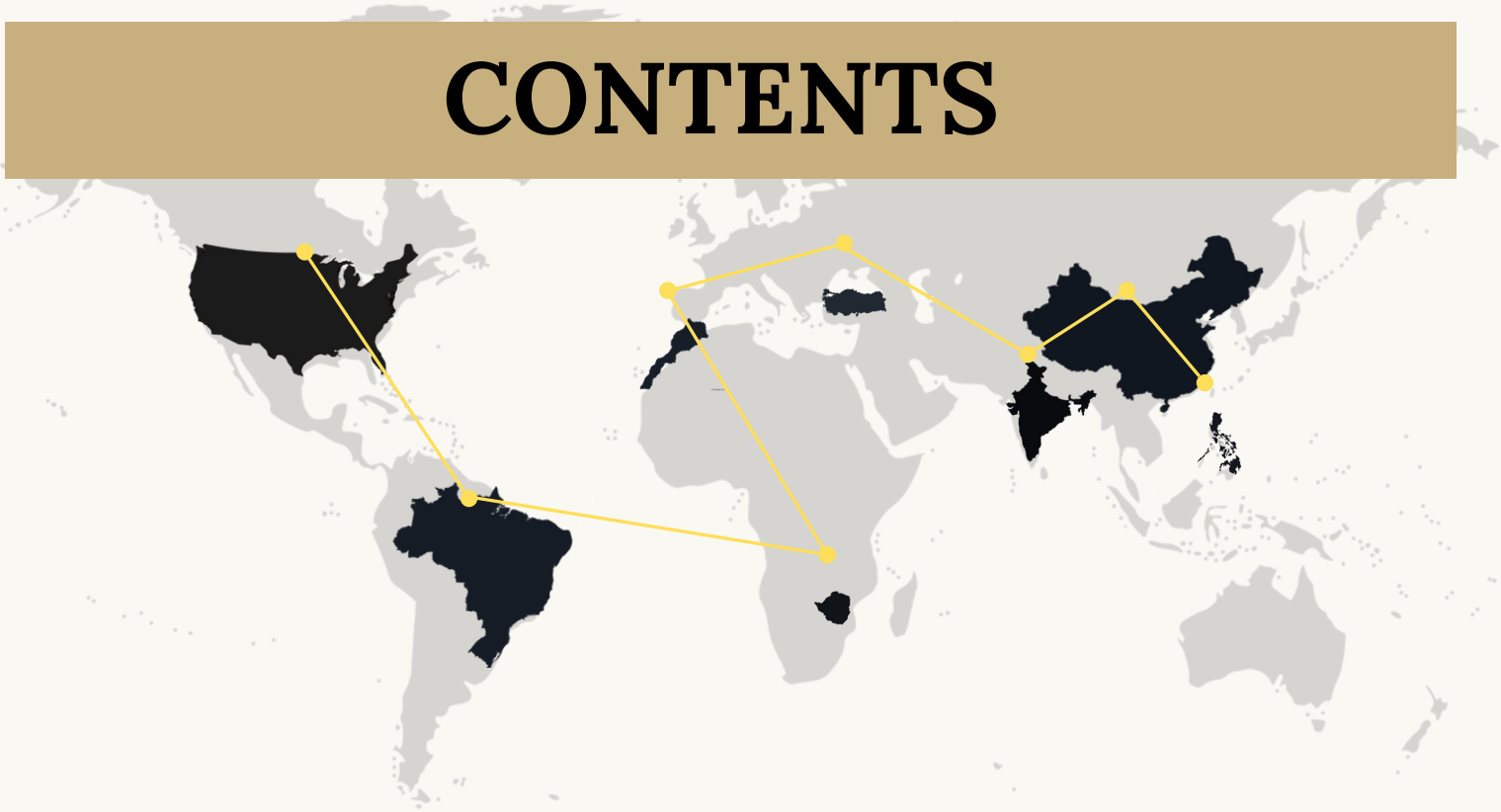

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A Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness

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1. Summary Report

"Even if I want autonomy, independence, I need family and all. Without that, what's the purpose of life?"

- participant from India

Introduction

This report presents findings from a multi-country qualitative study examining how people across diverse cultural settings conceptualize and experience social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The project engages with eight countries: Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.

The goal is to provide actionable insights for monitoring and intervention for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers by highlighting both universal and culture-specific dimensions of social connection, disconnection and loneliness.

In India, social life is shaped by extended family, neighborhood, and community, with traditions of collective responsibility and interdependence. At the same time, rapid urbanization and generational change are shifting how people connect and experience disconnection.

Methodology

The study employed a stratified sampling design and recruited 354 participants aged 18 and older across eight countries. Stratification included age, gender, income, partnership status, loneliness severity, urban/rural residence, and region. Recruitment followed a drift sampling strategy, combining targeted outreach with participant referrals.

Semi-structured interviews (2–3 hours each) explored the individual's social map, functions of their social connections, definition and experiences of social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The interview included a meta-cognitive portion where individuals reflected on how and why they have provided the answers that they have given. Data were then transcribed, translated into English, and de-identified. Country teams conducted inductive coding before iteratively synthesizing results into a shared framework. Thematic coding was supported by qualitative analysis tools (Quirkos, NVivo, Google Sheets).

Analytic Approach

For each interview the whole transcript was first mapped to an analysis summary sheet which summarizes all sections of the interview. Information from these summary sheets were then aggregated together to form the evidence table. Concurrently, each transcript was subjected to a selective line-by-line coding focusing on how individuals experience and conceptualize social connection (including how individuals define social connection, how they characterize good and deficient social connections, and how they define belonging); as well as how they experience and conceptualize disconnection and loneliness (including how the individuals experience and define disconnection, experience and define loneliness, and whether make the a distinction between loneliness and solitude).

For the line-by-line coding, country leads initially inductively coded manuscripts independently of the rest of the team. The codes that were developed then reflected culturally applicable elements. Codes from across all countries were then collated and synthesized, and overlapping or similar codes were integrated.

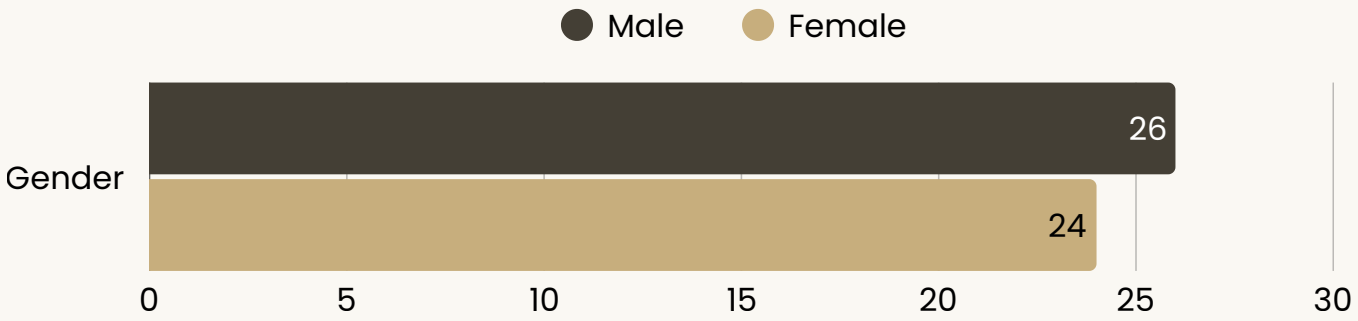
This synthesis provided the coding framework, which the research team then applied to the full set of transcripts.

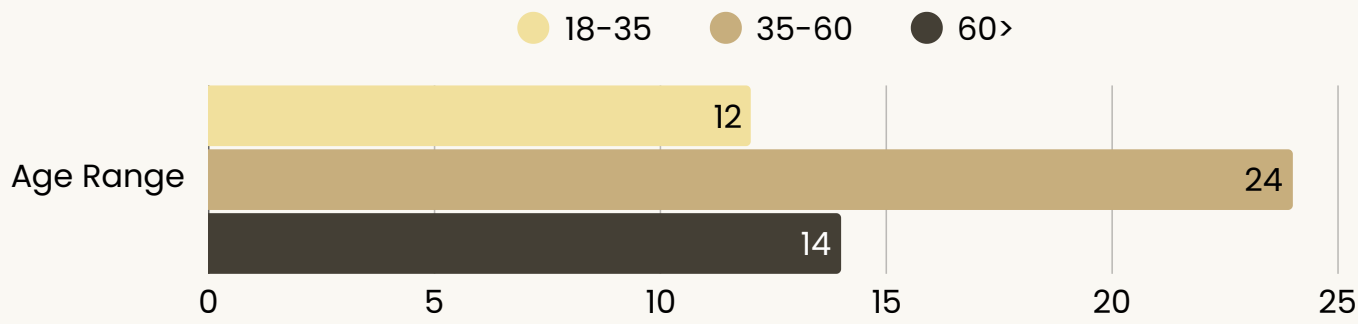
For example, the code [Emotional depth / superficiality] were used for responses that indicate the depth or superficiality of the emotional connection such as when one participant mentioned "People could be extroverted but still lonely if they don't really connect on a deeper level." Codes are not mutually exclusive, and transcript portions can be coded with multiple applicable codes

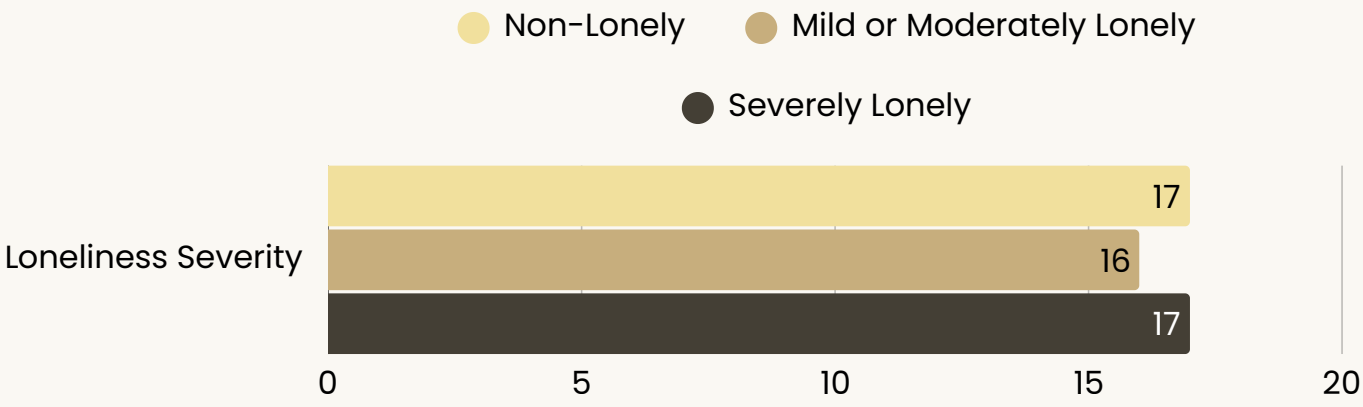
Codes were clustered as to whether they referred to the characterization of the relationship (e.g., "closeness/depth", "duration"), the interaction (e.g., "frequency of interaction", "reciprocity of interaction"), the function of the interaction (e.g., "instrumental support", "emotional support"), the perceived characteristics of the other (e.g., "availability", "trustworthiness"), or one's self state (e.g., "satisfaction", "obligation") . The full list of codes can be found in the project OSF. The team met weekly to refine the codes, clarifying provisional definitions and applicability of the codes to instances in the data.

Sample Demographics Overview

Participant Profile Summary
👤 Total Sample: 50







*Loneliness severity was determined during sampling using a single item from the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D): *"During the past week, have you felt lonely?"* Responses were categorized as: Non-lonely: ≤1 day, Mild/Moderate: 1–4 days, Severe: 5–7 days.

Summary of Select Findings

Key Social Categories

In India, family is the core of social life, shaping emotional connections, identity, and obligations. Parents, siblings, and extended kin provide support, while friends act as "chosen family," filling gaps in times of crisis or joy. Neighbors and colleagues contribute to everyday connection, while gurus and mentors offer moral and spiritual guidance. These layers create a dense web of ties where duty and affection often overlap.

Challenges and Quality of Connection

Even within families, the ties that bind can also weigh heavily. Generational divides, unmet expectations, and physical separation are common sources of strain. Friendships sometimes fracture under financial pressures or broken trust, while workplaces can feel competitive and unsupportive. These challenges reveal how connections, while central, are not always protective or nurturing.

Definitions of Connection and Belonging

For many Indians, belonging is not about constant contact but about the depth and authenticity of relationships. It is marked by standing together in both celebration and hardship, by shared ritual and faith, and by experiences of peace in spiritual spaces. Belonging is often tied to reliability and emotional honesty rather than surface-level interaction.

Cultural Specificity

Social life in India is strongly shaped by festivals, collective rituals, and multigenerational households. Religious and cultural obligations reinforce the idea that relationships extend beyond the individual, encompassing entire networks and communities where interplays of caste, creed, and religion intertwine. Rural communities often emphasize generosity and permanence of ties, while in urban contexts, bonds risk becoming more transactional and fragile.

Disconnection and Loneliness

Loneliness in India often emerges when cultural ideals of connection and duty fail to match personal realities. Women describe feeling unseen after carrying disproportionate caregiving burdens, while men recount social norms that

Summary of Select Findings

discourage emotional vulnerability. Shame and stigma make it difficult to openly acknowledge loneliness, even in close circles. Yet festivals, prayer, and community gatherings offer powerful buffers, reaffirming belonging and continuity despite these tensions.

Implications

Measurement of social connection and disconnection in India must account for the central role of family while also recognizing the pressures and strains that kinship can create. Tools should capture generational divides, caregiving burdens, and gendered expectations, since these often shape whether connection is experienced as support or strain. Faith and spirituality are indispensable dimensions of belonging, making them essential to include in measurement and intervention design. Finally, stigma around loneliness highlights the need for approaches that reduce shame, normalize vulnerability, and strengthen community-level pathways of support.

Summary of Research Questions

This study was guided by a shared analytic framework and research questions* across eight participating countries:

SOCIAL MAPPING

- What are common social categories among the target population?
- What are common challenges/burdens of social connection among the target population?

SOCIAL CONNECTION

- Definition of social connection: how does the target population define social connection?
- Characteristics of a good (and deficient) social connection: what makes for a good social connection for the target population?
- Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of social connection among the target population?
- What else does the target population feel connected to?

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS

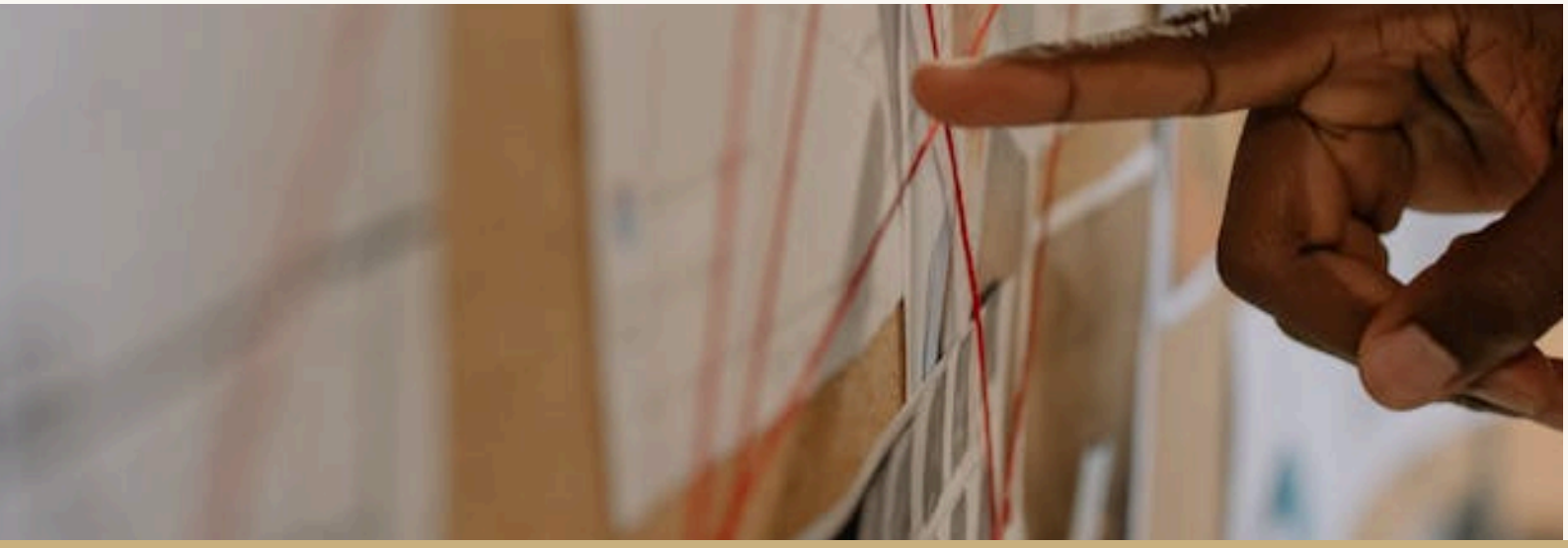
- Experiences of disconnection: What are the experiences of disconnection among the target population?
- Definition of disconnection: How do the target population define disconnection?
- Experiences of loneliness: What are the experiences of loneliness among the target population?
- What is the physiology of loneliness among the target population?
- What are the effects of loneliness among the target population?
- How does the target population cope with loneliness?
- What factors affects loneliness for the target population?
- Definition of loneliness: How do the target population define and explain loneliness?

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS *(continued)*

- How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?
- Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of loneliness among the target population?

META-COGNITION

- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them
- What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of “I feel lonely” from 0-100



Summary of Project Resources

Project OSF

This project's materials are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/p3msu, to ensure transparency, and accessibility.

- **Interview Guide:** A copy of the interview guide containing the questions asked across 8 countries
- **Deidentified Transcripts:** Interview transcripts (anonymized) from all participating countries
- **Ethics:** Documentation of institutional ethics approvals, consent processes, and ethical safeguards
- **Evidence Tables:** Verbatim transcript portions and summarized information per participant across different research questions
- **Codebook:** The codebook contains the codes, provisional code definitions and transcript portion examples across different research questions
- **Country Reports:** Country reports from the analysis of within-country data in Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Turkey, the United States, and Zimbabwe.
- **Main Publication:** Pre-print of the publication that features the cross-country comparisons across the global project.

DOI

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2. Analysis Report

"We celebrate Holi Or Diwali. We are looking for a community here, to live with like we did in our childhood."

- participant from India

Common social categories

Across Indian participants, family emerged as the foundation of social life, forming the primary source of emotional, instrumental, and informational support. Parents, spouses, children, and siblings were mentioned in nearly every interview, often described as people who are "there for every situation" (P2). Family was not only where participants turned for help but also where they anchored their sense of identity and responsibility.

Friends followed closely, often described in familial terms, "they are also like a family" (P2). For younger and middle-aged participants, friends played a central role in mood regulation, leisure, and esteem-building. Friendship, in this context, extended the emotional safety and reliability traditionally associated with kinship.

Neighbors formed another important layer of connection, especially among older or small-town residents, where sharing food or offering help were common gestures of everyday solidarity. As one woman shared, "If you need anything urgent, just tell me" (P18). These exchanges reflected how community ties still thrive in smaller or interdependent settings.

Workplace relationships were significant primarily among urban, salaried participants. Colleagues provided companionship and occasional emotional support, though participants maintained clear boundaries between professional and personal life. "We share some personal things, but there's a boundary," explained P5, while P16 relied on a roommate-colleague for comfort during difficult days. Shared meals and collaboration lent these ties a semi-familial flavor, yet most participants emphasized the importance of maintaining respect and restraint.

Faith-based communities also served as vital social anchors, offering collective calm and spiritual belonging. P20 noted that attending Quran

classes "relieves mental stress," while P31 expressed, "I belong there," describing the sense of peace found in communal worship.

In contrast, online connections were peripheral, acknowledged as convenient but emotionally limited. Social media made people "feel a little light" (P50), but it was rarely seen as a dependable source of support.

Some participants mentioned unique categories of connection that reflected the diversity of Indian participants' relational life. P1 highlighted the guru–disciple relationship, "The relationship between the disciple and the Guru is very different," while P26 described emotional reliance on a romantic partner. Others found comfort in animals: "They say good things; I understand their language" (P30).

Taken together, these accounts show that while family remains at the heart of Indian connection, it is complemented by friendships, neighborhoods, colleagues, and faith communities that mirror family-like trust and reciprocity. This pattern reflects the Indian ethos of extending kinship beyond blood ties, embodying the Sanskrit ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—the belief that "the world is one family."

Common challenges/burdens of social connection

For Indian participants, the closest relationships were also the most demanding. Family ties often carried emotional strain due to clashing values, generational gaps, and communication difficulties. As one participant shared, "My point of view and his family's point of view are different" (P4), while another observed, "The generation gap creates as many issues as possible" (P36). Distance and lack of support deepened these tensions: "Sometimes it would be nice if everyone could be together" (P15).

Friendships were strained mainly by trust violations and perceived exploitation. P15 admitted feeling distant "after lending money to friends and not getting it back," while P50 reflected, "The people whom I personally helped, they always harmed me." Life changes, such as marriage, also reduced contact and closeness.

At the workplace, participants mentioned competition, hierarchy, and ego clashes, describing emotional fatigue but maintaining professional restraint.

A few cited cultural and value differences that complicated cooperation. Beyond these domains, unique burdens included inter-faith relationships, in-law pressure, and the need to hide one's true self to maintain peace (P30).

Overall, Indian participants viewed conflict as a natural part of maintaining relationships. Bonds that offer belonging also demand patience and compromise, reflecting the cultural balance between collective harmony and individual expression.

Definition of social connection

Among Indian participants, social connection was most often described through family, community, and everyday acts of mutual help. The most prominent ideas—captured in thematic codes such as "general connection" and "social structure"—show that connection is viewed as being part of a reliable network rather than as a purely emotional feeling. Participants spoke of belonging both to close relationships and to society at large: "There are many things that connect us to our society" (P4). Others defined connection through familiar, everyday ties: "My friends, my cousins, my family, and all the people with whom I enjoy spending time" (P6).

Descriptions linked to the functions of relationships—especially "general support/being there" and "socialization"—highlighted that connection is

sustained through action. As one participant put it, “One should be useful to each other… we should be able to help others” (P8), while another noted, “When your friend has a problem, you need to be there for them—when they’re happy too” (P2). These expressions illustrate how helping, sharing, and being present embody what it means to feel connected.

Emotional dimensions such as “emotional bond” or “emotional support” were mentioned less frequently and, when they did appear, they were often secondary to ideas of duty and practical help. Some participants admitted uncertainty about the term itself, saying they had “never really thought about it.” Very few participants described connection in terms of “equality,” “shared interests,” or “frequency of interaction,” underscoring that connection was defined less through similarity or contact frequency and more through moral and functional ties.

Overall, the data reveal that Indian participants define social connection through social embeddedness and moral responsibility—a sense of belonging upheld by helping others and fulfilling shared duties. For some, faith communities also provide this experience of connection and calm, reinforcing the collective ethos that relationships are maintained through care in action rather than words.

Characteristics of good and deficient social connections

For Indian participants, the qualities of a good relationship centered on trust, care, empathy, and honesty—supported by a sense of emotional safety and reliable presence. These themes emerged across three interconnected dimensions: the qualities of the people involved, the nature of the relationship, and the functions these ties serve.

Within the Characterization of Actors dimension, participants emphasized moral and emotional reliability. “With love and trust. These two things are not there, you cannot maintain a relationship” (P20), explained one respondent. Many participants also stressed “attention and caring” and “empathy or perspective taking,” showing that being attentive and understanding were core expectations. Honesty completed this cluster, revealing that participants equated good relationships with sincerity and genuine concern.

In the Characterization of Relationship dimension, participants valued emotional safety and non-judgment—the ability to speak freely “without fear of judgment” (P6). A sense of belonging (“It feels good,” P30) and freedom from burden also marked positive ties. When connection became draining or one-sided, participants labeled it a “burden,” indicating that its absence is key to maintaining harmony.

The Relationship Functions dimension underscored mutual support and presence. A common image was “being together in each other’s joys and sorrows” (P32). Participants also mentioned sharing (“Sharing our joys and sorrows with them,” P21) and emotional reassurance (“They tell me not to be sad,” P39). Together, these portray good connections as dependable, responsive, and emotionally available.

In contrast, deficient connections were described as burdensome, selfish, or exploitative. Participants spoke of people who “only talk for their own benefit” (P32), reflecting frustration with relationships lacking reciprocity. Several explicitly described others as selfish or said they “felt used,” capturing this sentiment. At the same time, there were few references to simply “liking” or general “dissatisfaction,” suggesting that casual affinity mattered less than trust and obligation.

Similarly, there were limited references to ties “not related to benefits,”

implying that practical help remains central to how relationships are evaluated.

In conclusion, for the Indian participants, good social connections are defined primarily by the involvement of individuals who demonstrate trust, caring, empathy, and honesty; relationships characterized by emotional safety, absence of burden, and togetherness; and interactions that provide general support, enable disclosure, and offer emotional reassurance. Conversely, deficient connections are marked by burden, selfishness, and exploitation, revealing that relationships lacking reciprocity or shaped by self-interest are experienced as draining and unsatisfying.

Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?

Among Indian participants, belonging was described as a feeling that extends beyond human relationships to include nature, spirituality, and shared purpose. Three overlapping dimensions emerged: connection to place and the sacred, inner states of authenticity and value, and relational warmth and care.

Participants most often spoke of finding belonging in nature and religion. One explained, "I am very attached to nature… I feel alive in the trees and plants" (P37), while another described a deep sense of peace during village prayers: "When I go there, I feel like I belong there" (P31). These accounts reveal that belonging, for many, is grounded in place and spiritual practice as much as in people.

The self-related dimension of belonging centered on feeling part of something larger and being accepted as one's true self. Participants highlighted shared community efforts—"The whole village was involved; we all

worked together to decorate and celebrate" (P33)—and authenticity: "I can say anything and be myself and no one will call me for that" (P38). Feeling valued and appreciated within family settings also reinforced belonging: "They ask for my views and I feel very good with them" (P34).

Belonging was equally rooted in relationships defined by emotional connection and care. Participants described attachment as "It is like one of my own" (P12). One grandmother expressed this tenderness through her adopted granddaughter who "calls me 'Ammi, Ammi,' hugs me, and shows love" (P27). Everyday gestures of concern—"When someone asks, 'Have you eaten? Aren't you tired?' it feels like they care" (P8)—and dependable presence in joy and hardship—"What's the point of being together when there's no togetherness in happiness or sadness?" (P49)—were seen as the essence of belonging.

While most experienced belonging positively, some offered contrasting views. A few described it as absent or fleeting: "I didn't feel like that with anyone" (P10) or "Belonging is not lasting" (P9). Others restricted it to family alone: "I don't feel it anywhere else" (P35), or felt it faded after life changes such as marriage (P4). These cases show that belonging can be disrupted, temporary, or context-bound. Ideas such as "trust," "alignment of goals," and "frequency of interaction" were mentioned less often, suggesting that participants prioritized feeling cared for and accepted over structural or similarity-based aspects.

Overall, Indian participants described belonging as a multidimensional experience that joins environmental connection, spiritual grounding, personal authenticity, and caring relationships. Feeling part of nature, participating in collective rituals, and being accepted and valued within close ties all conveyed belonging's essence.

What are culture-specific aspects of social connection?

For Indian participants, social connection is deeply woven into culture, family obligations, and shared celebrations. Festivals such as Diwali were seen as vital moments of reunion and renewal. "Sisters go to their brothers, they make sweets… this is our big way of going in the country," explained one participant (P3). These collective occasions reinforce bonds that stretch across generations and geography, anchoring emotional life in family and tradition.

Family remains the core structure shaping all other forms of connection. Participants repeatedly described how relationships—whether with friends, colleagues, or neighbors—are grounded like kinship. As P17 put it, "Social relationships in India exist in the background of family relationships." Yet, the cultural ideal of "unity in diversity" also surfaced strongly, emphasizing harmony amid difference. "People of different castes, creeds, and religions live together… they behave with great virtues," noted P1, while another added, "India has diversity, richness in culture, and greater acceptance of different backgrounds" (P43).

At the same time, social rules and public visibility shape how connections are maintained. The idea of "limits" and community scrutiny was frequently mentioned: "There is shame in everything in India, beta… humans should remain within their limits" (P9). As P36 described, "Everyone knows what happens in the neighbour's house." This social transparency both sustains and constrains connection—P22 reflected that constant concern about "what others will think" can heighten loneliness. Participants also highlighted rural–urban contrasts: "People from villages give a lot of value to relationships… compared to that, people from cities don't" (P50).

Cultural expectations define the moral architecture of relationships. Caring

for parents and elders was viewed as a duty—"There are expectations from children that they will take care of you in old age" (P8). Ritual participation carried social pressure: "There's pressure to wear expensive clothes, gold, and silk sarees" (P28). Respect was hierarchical—"The way you respect your parents is different from the way you respect your partner" (P7)—and connection was expected to endure through crisis: "They should be around when we need them most" (P41).

Participants also reflected on instrumental and future-oriented dimensions of connection. P39 noted that "society plays an important part in your growth; if you have good social connections, you can utilize them and grow more professionally." Others described how people often evaluate ties for their longevity: "People here think 20 or 50 years ahead; every relationship is judged by whether it will last that long" (P49).

Overall, Indian participants' social connection is deeply anchored in the rhythms of everyday life—in how people gather, care, and fulfill their responsibilities toward one another. Festivals, rituals, and family occasions provide regular moments to reaffirm bonds, while shared values of respect and reciprocity sustain them in between. Yet these connections also carry expectations: to honor elders, observe traditions, and maintain one's standing within the community. Rural life, with its shared dependence and slower pace, often nurtures this sense of togetherness more naturally than urban settings. At the same time, relationships are also viewed as pathways for growth and stability—offering emotional support, social standing, and practical opportunities in both personal and professional life.

What else does the target population feel connected to?

Indian participants described feeling deeply connected not only to people but also to places, nature, spirituality, animals, and creative expression. These non-human connections often offered comfort, identity, and peace—

grounding individuals in both the visible and unseen worlds around them. Spiritual and faith-based ties emerged strongly. Many spoke of temples, prayers, and divine presence as steady sources of belonging. “I am very happy when I visit temples,” shared P3. P5 described visiting a campus shrine for moments of “sukoon” (peace). For several, faith was less about ritual than about feeling at home in sacred spaces that offered quiet and renewal.

Place and locality were equally powerful anchors of connection. Participants evoked ancestral homes, fields, and hometowns with deep affection. “I feel connected to the place where I was born and raised,” said P17. Others contrasted village warmth with urban distance: “I am very attached to my village, to my soil… people there have a different kind of love; it gives happiness” (P25).

Nature and the environment provided calm and emotional balance. “Mountains, valleys… I feel very connected to things like these” (P17), shared one participant, while P28 found restoration in the sea and stars: “I’m a sea girl… when 100 thoughts are popping, stargazing makes me calm.”

Animals also featured as meaningful companions. P12 reflected, “There is a cow as a mother… there are dogs, there are animals, and one gets attached to them as well.” Others shared simple affection: “I do feel a special affection for goats and cows” (P15).

Art, music, and creativity were further sources of connection and joy. P4 said, “I am interested in art. I love to see that,” while P36 described listening to Indian classical music when in a good mood: “It makes me feel peaceful.”

Several participants expressed unique and personal forms of connection. P30 identified as belonging to humanity itself: “My religion is human… animals have red blood too, so I do not believe in divisions.” Others found belonging

through meaningful activity. P3 recalled farming and cooking with joy: "I have a lot of memories with food and I love it very much." And P46 described feeling "ecstatic" when seeing a full moon—a connection to something vast and enduring.

Overall, Indian participants locate connections in a wide web of life—in faith, land, nature, animals, creativity, and shared humanity.

Experiences of disconnection

For Indian participants, disconnection was described as both an inner feeling and a social experience—shaped by judgment, neglect, and the absence of emotional safety. Three interlinked dimensions emerged: Self States, Characterization of Others, and Interaction Patterns, revealing how loneliness is lived through both thoughts and relationships.

Self States reflected the inner world of disconnection—a sense of withdrawal even when surrounded by people. Some felt disconnected because they feared judgment or misunderstanding. "It's financial," shared P8, who linked shame about money to feeling cut off from others. P26 described pulling back when sensing others were upset with him. Others spoke of emotional distance within proximity: "I just felt disconnected somewhere… I wasn't able to connect with them" (P47). For some, this led to selective silence—"These people are right next to me, yet I can't share things with them" (P5).

In the Characterization of Others dimension, disconnection arose when people felt unseen or unsupported. "You don't need to get involved in this," one participant was told (P22). P49 recalled being deliberately ignored, and P27 described the pain of "not getting any support when I am in a problem." Differing values also triggered distance: "Their thinking is very different… so I feel disconnected" (P4).

Interaction Patterns showed how disconnection plays out in everyday moments—through exclusion, conflict, or sudden endings. P22 recalled feeling invisible "when everyone is chatting together." P20 described a "sorrowful disconnection" after her husband's death, while P3 traced it to "a little argument in the house." Only a few participants spoke in terms such as "desire for more connections," "distraction," or "loneliness as a disorder," suggesting that people saw disconnection less as a mental health label and more as a lived, relational experience.

Patterns differed in intensity and coping. Severely lonely participants described deep, pervasive isolation that colored their entire outlook. "It affects perception of everything—seeing negatives even when positives exist" (P2). P10 shared, "I always feel disconnected from my family members… I always feel the distance." For some, it was linked to loss, mistrust, or feeling unseen even in close relationships. Others, like P14, questioned life's purpose itself.

Moderately lonely individuals described disconnection as situational—arising from betrayal (P5), conflict (P3), or failed expectations (P28, P30). These feelings were often temporary, lasting from days to weeks. Many coped by immersing in work (P31), sleeping (P11), or avoiding conflict (P16).

Non-lonely participants also encountered moments of disconnection—from family conflict (P4) or financial shame (P8)—but described these as mild or short-lived. "I remove that feeling, I don't keep it in my heart" (P13). Others simply "accept and move on" (P44), or said they had never experienced it (P34, P42). These accounts show that resilience and perspective help limit the impact of disconnection even when it occurs.

Interestingly, a few negative cases reversed the pattern. P36 and P38, both categorized as Severely Lonely, said they did not feel disconnected at all: "I

don't feel disconnected from everything," said P36. Their loneliness seemed less about loss or rejection and more about a chronic sense of emptiness. This contrast suggests that loneliness and disconnection, though related, may not be identical experiences.

Overall, disconnection among Indian participants was experienced as an inner struggle tied to social context—a mix of emotional withdrawal, feeling unseen, and the small ruptures of daily life.

How is disconnection understood?

For Indian participants, disconnection was most often described as an inner state of separation—a feeling of being unseen, unheard, or emotionally apart even in the presence of others. Three interrelated dimensions captured these meanings: Self States, Relational Breakdown, and Broader Reflections on Human Limits.

Within Self States, disconnection was defined through loneliness felt from within. A common theme of "isolation or sense of being alone" appeared even in shared spaces. "There were four people in the room, and I felt like I was alone… the other three were like a team," said P37 (severely lonely). P5 (non-lonely) described a similar feeling of "distance" that was "not physical but still feels like distance." Others linked disconnection to being unseen or unacknowledged by those around them. "People pretend not to have seen me," shared P49 (severely lonely), describing the quiet pain of invisibility. Some also saw disconnection as self-withdrawal: "I disconnect from everyone to spend time alone," said P2, expressing retreat as both defense and exhaustion.

Relational Breakdown highlighted the role of unmet expectations and endings. Several participants defined disconnection as the point where

belonging fades. “When the thing about belonging ceases to exist,” explained P44. For others, it was about disappointment or broken trust: “People expect something, and when it’s not fulfilled, they feel cut off” (P34). A few spoke of complete rupture: “It means when our best relationships are cut off… that’s what disconnection means” (P31). These accounts reveal that disconnection is often tied to moral and emotional expectations of reciprocity—when care is not returned or understanding breaks down.

Beyond personal ties, some described disconnection as something difficult to fix, reflecting limits in changing others or circumstances. “If someone thinks the sun rises from the south… I’ll wake him up once, twice, three times, and then he’ll leave,” said P36, suggesting resignation to others’ immovability.

Across levels of loneliness, definitions varied in intensity. Severely lonely participants described disconnection as pervasive and heavy—marked by mistrust, loss, and emotional fatigue. For some, it meant feeling unseen or unsupported even by family: “I always feel disconnected from my family members… I always feel the distance” (P10). Others linked it to the loss of purpose (P14) or broken faith in others (P38, P49). Moderately lonely individuals saw it as situational—triggered by betrayal (P5), loss (P20), or exclusion (P22)—but occasionally framed it as self-protection: “I choose to disconnect from negative influences” (P28). Non-lonely participants described subtler forms of distance: “These people are right next to me, yet I can’t share things with them” (P5), or acknowledged temporary emotional withdrawal to recover energy (P7, P39). Some viewed it as misunderstanding rather than absence: “We drift apart because of small differences” (P45, P46).

Negative cases reminded us that disconnection is not universal. P36, though severely lonely, said simply, “I don’t feel disconnected from people around me.” P42 (non-lonely) echoed the same. Others, like P37, linked disconnection not to emotion but to frustration with human stubbornness—“We can’t change people.”

Overall, Indian participants defined disconnection less as physical separation and more as an emotional or moral distance—a gap between expectation and reality, closeness and understanding. It may arise as isolation, invisibility, or loss of reciprocity, but it is rarely final. Many recognized disconnection as part of the cycle of human relationships—something to endure, reflect upon, or even choose when self-preservation demands it.

Experiences of loneliness

For Indian participants, loneliness was described as a complex emotional and physical experience that varied from quiet solitude to deep distress. Participants' accounts clustered around three themes: inner states and coping, social and environmental triggers, and personal interpretations of loneliness itself.

The most prominent experiences came from inner states. Many participants spoke of managing loneliness through activity and distraction—immersing themselves in work, rest, or hobbies to stay occupied. "I feel lonely very rarely because I am busy with my work," explained one participant (P25), while another added, "I distract myself or pray" (P13). Others intentionally reframed solitude as self-enjoyment: "I enjoy my company a lot… I prefer staying alone" (P35). These accounts show that loneliness was often met with deliberate efforts to regulate emotion rather than succumb to it.

Yet for others, loneliness carried a heavy mental and physical toll. Participants described exhaustion, panic, and bodily pain. "It feels very hard on the body… I feel exhausted and weak," shared P19, while P48 described "panic attacks… like a brick of ice on my chest." Some linked loneliness with weight gain, headaches, or crying spells, reflecting how deeply emotional strain can register in the body. For a few, loneliness was tied to persistent isolation: "From morning until evening, I'm alone… so I naturally experience loneliness" (P18).

Loneliness also took shape through the social environment. A frequent trigger was loss or separation. Participants described loneliness following the death of parents or departure of spouses. “I have been feeling lonely ever since my spouse left,” said P9; “When my mother passed away, we all felt lonely and sad” (P27). Others spoke of friends becoming unavailable or lack of support during crises: “There was no one with whom I could share my feelings,” recalled P5. These stories point to loneliness as both a private emotion and a social vacuum—marked by absence and the awareness of being alone in times of need.

A smaller group struggled to even define what loneliness meant. P47 observed that “disconnection and loneliness almost overlap,” while P33 reflected, “Loneliness can be detachment from yourself.” For some, loneliness was viewed as a kind of illness: “Loneliness is like a depression… it makes a person hollow,” said P41. This overlap between psychological and existential understandings highlights how loneliness in India is not only relational but also spiritual and bodily.

Experiences differed in depth and duration. Severely lonely individuals described loneliness as a constant companion—“I feel lonely every day. No day I feel I am not alone” (P10)—whereas moderately lonely participants experienced briefer, situational episodes, often triggered by stress, rejection, or failure. Non-lonely participants, by contrast, rejected the label altogether. “I have never felt the feeling of loneliness… someone is with me always” (P8), said one, while another insisted, “I don’t feel lonely. I enjoy my company” (P35).

Still, the data revealed contradictions. Some non-lonely participants described intense or chronic symptoms—daily crying, exhaustion, or isolation—suggesting a gap between self-perception and lived experience. Others rated as moderately lonely dismissed loneliness entirely, attributing comfort

to technology or constant contact: “Now is the age of social media and mobile,” said P32. Even among those rated as severely lonely, duration varied widely: some felt profound loneliness for only minutes a day, while one participant found “being alone can feel good—it makes you love yourself more” (P50). These inconsistencies reveal that loneliness is deeply subjective, colored by coping, acceptance, and personal meaning.

Only a very small number of participants hinted at self-harm or feeling disengaged, indicating that, in this sample, loneliness was more about exhaustion, loss, and reflection than about self-destructive impulses.

Overall, Indian participants’ experiences of loneliness reveal a tension between endurance and vulnerability. Many respond by keeping busy, reframing solitude, or seeking strength in faith and habit. Yet beneath this resilience lies a quieter struggle with absence—of people, of support, of shared understanding. Loneliness is felt not only when alone, but when effort, presence, or care fall short. For some, it is a bodily ache; for others, a passing thought. In every form, it reflects the deeply human desire to be seen, accompanied, and remembered.

The physiology of loneliness

Indian participants often described loneliness not only as an emotional experience but as something that could be felt in the body. Across accounts, loneliness was accompanied by changes in sleep, energy, appetite, and physical sensations—reminding that for many, the body carries what the mind cannot express.

Disturbed sleep was one of the most common signs. Participants described restless nights, difficulty falling asleep, or waking suddenly. “I can’t sleep; I keep thinking,” said P12, while P21 recalled “waking up startled” and reacting to faint sounds others couldn’t hear. P6 simply noted “sleep difficulties,” and

P23 confessed, “Sleep is lost.” These experiences revealed how worry and rumination often linger into the night, blurring the line between emotional unease and bodily unrest.

Headaches and heaviness were another frequent expression of loneliness. “Mostly I get a headache… my body doesn’t work,” said P10. P13 linked anxiety directly to physical tension: “My head feels heavy… anxiety starts to build up, tears start falling, and I feel pain in my head and mind.” For some, the sensations were accompanied by panic or pressure, as P48 described: “My heart starts bumping loudly… like somebody’s pasted a brick of ice on my chest.”

Cardiovascular symptoms such as changes in blood pressure and palpitations reinforced how loneliness could affect the heart—literally and metaphorically. P9 shared, “Sometimes my blood pressure increases and I start feeling dizzy,” while P10 experienced the opposite: “My blood pressure becomes low.” P48’s detailed account of a “panic attack… like ice on my chest” illustrates how emotional distress could translate into physical shock.

Many participants also described general fatigue and weakness, using words like “drained,” “tired,” and “heavy.” P19 explained, “It feels very hard on the body. Both mentally and physically, I feel exhausted and weak.” P20 echoed this exhaustion: “I feel tired. Very tired.” For some, loneliness was less a sharp pain than a slow depletion—a weight carried through the day.

Emotional expression through the body was another striking theme. Tears, choking sensations, and throat tightness often accompanied moments of loneliness. “I feel like crying. I feel like I cannot talk to anyone,” said P4. P22 described, “My throat chokes up, then tears come without reason… my mind tightens, and I feel difficulty breathing.” P49 explained that tears became the only release: “When it becomes too much, it is expressed through tears when the person is unable to say anything.” These accounts show how loneliness

often found voice not in words, but through the body's involuntary responses.

Changes in appetite and eating patterns also reflected attempts to cope. Some lost interest in food—"I couldn't eat" (P6)—while others sought comfort in it. P5 jokingly called this mix of emotions "an emotional khichdi," describing how food soothed stress. P29 and P30 admitted to eating more when lonely, whereas P43 noticed gradual weight gain over the years. P28 described "not wanting to eat well," showing how appetite could swing in either direction depending on mood.

Several participants shared unique physiological descriptions that gave vivid shape to their inner turmoil. P6 spoke of a sensation of "drowning," P21 noticed their body becoming "very hot" or coughing when anxious, and P22 described the "mind tightening" and struggling to breathe after crying. P48's imagery of "a brick of ice on my chest" captured the chilling weight of panic. A few described more extreme impulses—P45 said it felt "like I could just grab a knife and do something," and P46 admitted to feeling "like a mad person." Others found small ways to self-soothe: "Smoking makes the feeling better," said P15, offering a glimpse into coping through sensory relief.

Taken together, these accounts show that loneliness in India is experienced as a full-body condition—felt through tiredness, tightness, and restlessness as much as through sadness or emptiness. Participants spoke of a body that mirrors emotion: sleepless when worried, heavy when alone, hungry or numb when comfort is sought elsewhere. The physiology of loneliness reveals not only distress but endurance—the body's attempt to contain what the heart cannot share.

The effects of loneliness

Among Indian participants, loneliness was experienced not only as an emotion but as a state that reshaped the body, mind, and daily life. Its effects appeared in thoughts, sleep, mood, appetite, and motivation—at times quietly, at times with force.

Mental health effects were among the most prominent. Participants described anxiety, overthinking, and emotional fatigue. "My brain goes haywire; I'm not emotionally hygienic," said P28. For some, loneliness deepened into despair or thoughts of self-harm: "It feels like I could just grab a knife and do something," admitted P46. Others denied mental strain altogether, yet still linked body and mind—"When the mind feels weak, the body also suffers" (P19)—suggesting that loneliness was often felt even when unacknowledged.

Changes in appetite and weight reflected contrasting coping patterns. Some gained weight or ate for comfort—"I gained weight from 74 to 84 kilograms" (P43)—while others lost appetite and weight. P5 described her response as "an emotional *khichdi* (mix)," using food to soothe stress. Several, however, reported no change, noting that sadness altered routine more than eating habits.

Sleep disturbances were another recurring effect. Participants reported sleeplessness, restlessness, or over-sleeping as a way to escape difficult emotions. "I don't sleep the whole night," said P9; "Even when I lie down, my mind doesn't sleep" (P16). A few found temporary relief through extra rest, while non-lonely individuals often reported "no effect on sleep" (P7).

The most consistent theme was mood change. Loneliness evoked sadness, irritability, and emptiness. P5 described "an emotional *khichdi*—anger, crying,

everything together." Others noticed fluctuations: "Low at night, normal by morning" (P26). Some found crying cathartic: "After crying for some time, many things get cleared out" (P20). A few, like P49, presented cheerfulness —"laughing and singing"—possibly masking distress beneath humor.

In everyday life, motivation and activity often declined. P10 shared, "My interest in living has vanished." Another said, "My daily routine was disrupted… I just stayed locked in my room" (P22). Others reported no effect, suggesting that routine could serve as protection against emotional drift.

Loneliness also influenced relationships. Some turned anger inward—"It triggers self-blaming and self-harming" (P35)—while others turned it outward. "When I'm in a bad mood, I can't talk nicely… I react immediately," said P14. Yet several made conscious efforts to protect others: "I don't let my feelings hurt anyone" (P7).

Participants also noted physical consequences: dizziness, headaches, raised blood pressure, or a general heaviness of the body. P9 mentioned "increased BP and dizziness," while others described racing thoughts or loss of energy. A few even noted paradoxical effects—P20 said sadness sometimes gave her "extra strength to finish work."

Across levels of loneliness, the duration and intensity of these effects differed. Severely lonely participants described persistent symptoms; moderately lonely ones, shorter episodes tied to stress or loss; non-lonely individuals often denied loneliness but still showed traces of strain.

Overall, the effects of loneliness among Indian participants reveal a cycle of emotional strain, physical fatigue, and social withdrawal—countered by moments of resilience, humor, and self-regulation.

Coping with loneliness

Indian participants described a wide spectrum of ways to cope with loneliness—from seeking company and faith to keeping themselves occupied through work and daily routines. Across accounts, coping reflected the balance between endurance, spirituality, and practical effort.

Family was the most common source of comfort. Many spoke of sharing concerns or spending time with relatives. "I now talk to my husband about the concerns," said P4. Others played with children, called siblings, or stayed close to family gatherings. Yet some avoided such conversations: "I don't inform my family about such things," admitted P17. Those who felt less lonely tended to describe warmer family exchanges, while the severely lonely often kept emotions to themselves.

Friends and community offered emotional release and companionship. Participants mentioned talking to close friends or partners—"I talk to two close friends," shared P10—or meeting up after brief solitude. However, several said these ties had weakened: "I used to connect with friends, but not now," said P37. Connection with friends thus acted as both relief and reminder of what was missing.

Few turned to professional help. "I don't think it's that big of an issue that I need to go to someone," said P5. A handful took medication for anxiety or sleep, while one participant mentioned trying therapy but "didn't find the right fit." Most coped within familiar circles rather than formal support systems.

Technology and media were widely used for distraction. Phones, YouTube, and television filled the silence and provided company. "When you're alone, the phone is the only thing you have," said P14. "Mobile is the best tool," added

P50. Movies and music were common companions, though a few rejected screens altogether: “No, I don’t use a mobile phone,” said P13.

Religion and spirituality were central to many coping practices. Participants prayed, read holy texts, or visited temples and mosques. “When I feel lonely, I read the Quran and ask Allah for help,” said P13. P3 shared, “When you go to God, you feel a little calm.” Meditation and chanting also offered peace. Spirituality often bridged solitude with meaning and reassurance.

Activities and hobbies helped participants fill time and regain rhythm—walking, cooking, cleaning, or reading. “I watch movies or go for a walk,” said P24, while P18 described “eating out or attending music shows.” Work similarly provided structure and distraction. “When I go to work, I try to keep such thoughts away,” said P13. Staying busy became both a shield and a form of self-care.

Substance use was rare. One participant said, “If I smoke, it gets better” (P15), while another saw quitting drugs as essential for recovery. Others noted that alcohol worsened loneliness rather than easing it.

Some participants described personal rituals—humming, poetry, or self-talk. P9 spoke tenderly of “talking to my deceased husband” as a way to stay connected. P13 found calm through “reciting poetry or speaking to Allah.” These small acts reflected creativity and faith as sources of inner companionship.

Coping patterns differed across loneliness levels. Severely lonely individuals relied more on prayer, distraction, and activity; moderately lonely participants combined these with family or friends; and non-lonely individuals maintained consistent routines and openness, often preventing deeper isolation.

Overall, coping with loneliness in India reflects strength in connection, faith, and daily life. People turn to family, prayer, work, and small personal habits to steady themselves.

Factors affecting loneliness

Among Indian participants, loneliness was described as arising from a mix of loss, misunderstanding, isolation, internal struggles, and life pressures. Each factor reflected the complex ways personal and social worlds intertwine.
Loss and separation were among the most powerful causes. Participants who had lost spouses or close family members often described deep, lasting loneliness. “The only absence I truly feel is that of my husband,” said P13. P9 also linked her loneliness to “the loss of my spouse.” The absence of parents or friends carried a similar emptiness, showing how grief and separation leave spaces that are hard to fill.

Many also pointed to difficulties in communication and feeling misunderstood. “Conversations don’t work out,” said P2, while P5 and P45 both mentioned “feeling misunderstood.” P32 described a disconnect when “your thoughts do not meet anyone’s.” Such experiences were mentioned by participants across loneliness levels, revealing that even those surrounded by people may feel unseen or unheard. For many, loneliness stemmed less from being alone than from not being understood.

Social isolation and lack of contact with others also featured strongly. Participants described living far from family, being single, or having few social interactions. “Separation from society, friends, and family,” said P1, while P17, an expatriate, shared, “We have only very limited people around us.” P26 associated loneliness with attending events “without a life partner when others come as couples.” Such accounts reflected how physical distance and life transitions—migration, remote work, or singlehood—can quietly erode social connection.

Several participants reflected on personal and internal factors that made them more vulnerable. P28 observed, “Because you don’t love yourself, that feeling comes automatically from inside.” Others linked loneliness to failure, self-doubt, or comparison: “When someone feels lonely, it usually means they’ve made a lot of mistakes in life” (P50). For some, loneliness arose less from circumstances than from how they saw themselves—their confidence, expectations, or past regrets.

External stressors such as illness, financial pressure, and unmet family expectations also contributed. “Physical pain and illnesses make you feel lonely,” said P12. P22 explained that loneliness grows “when life turns out contrary to expectations.” Even boredom or routine could intensify the feeling: “Restrictions on activities once enjoyed” (P4) left some feeling trapped and disconnected.

Across loneliness levels, these factors varied in intensity rather than kind. Severely lonely individuals often spoke of irreversible losses or sustained disconnection; moderately lonely participants mentioned temporary setbacks or misunderstandings; non-lonely individuals faced similar conditions but seemed buffered by stronger relationships, faith, or self-acceptance.

Overall, loneliness in India emerges from both outer circumstances and inner perceptions. Loss, distance, and miscommunication may create emptiness, but how people interpret and respond to these experiences shapes their depth. For many, loneliness is not just about who is missing, but how one continues—to love, to connect, and to find meaning amid change.

Definition of Loneliness

Among Indian participants, loneliness was described primarily as an inner state of isolation—a feeling of being alone even when surrounded by others. The most common expressions centered on "being alone" and "having no one to talk to." As one participant explained, "Nobody's there with you. You're all alone" (P2). Another reflected, "Loneliness is when we feel isolated even with people around us" (P22). These accounts highlight that loneliness is not simply physical solitude but the absence of emotional presence and attention.

Participants often emphasized the lack of connection or sharing, describing it as being unable to express one's feelings openly. "You can't tell anything to your spouse, nor to your son or neighbor… this is loneliness" (P9). Others associated it with emptiness or boredom: "Not really having anything to do… whatever had kept me busy and going" (P48). Together, these accounts portray loneliness as a quiet disconnection from both others and purpose.

Patterns differed by intensity. Severely lonely individuals described deep helplessness—"No one is with us" (P23)—and an inability to communicate their distress. Some spoke of being emotionally cut off even within family. A few, like P50, offered an unusual perspective: "It's a positive feeling for me. Whenever I'm alone, I listen to songs; I feel like dancing." For moderately lonely participants, loneliness was situational—linked to failure, illness, or transition: "After school, they move in different directions… at such times we feel isolated" (P20). Those who felt little or no loneliness defined it more abstractly—"Loneliness is just a feeling" (P25)—and some differentiated it from peaceful solitude.

Comparing loneliness and disconnection revealed subtle but important distinctions. Loneliness was viewed as an internal absence—a passive state of

emptiness or unshared emotion—while disconnection involved active rupture or withdrawal. One participant noted feeling ignored despite visibility—"People are aware of me coming and going… but they pretend not to see me" (P49)—while another described unmet expectations: "People always expect something from others which is not fulfilled" (P34). In this sense, loneliness reflects inner lack, whereas disconnection reflects a break in relational flow.

Agency also differed: loneliness "happens" to a person ("Nobody is there with you", P2), but disconnection can be chosen—sometimes for self-protection ("I disconnect from everyone to spend time alone", P28). Moreover, loneliness often appears without prior ties, while disconnection presupposes that something valued once existed and has changed ("When the thing about belonging ceases to exist", P44).

Across experiences, loneliness clustered around self-states of isolation, lack of connection, and boredom, while disconnection spanned both internal feelings and social processes. Psychological or diagnostic language such as "depression," "anger," or "tiredness" was rarely used by participants when defining loneliness, suggesting that it is more often understood as a relational and existential feeling than as a medical condition.

Overall, Indian participants defined loneliness as a deeply felt inner emptiness shaped by silence and invisibility rather than physical absence. It differs from disconnection in agency and scope: loneliness speaks to the felt absence of understanding and emotional resonance, whereas disconnection marks the active erosion or withdrawal from once-meaningful ties. Both concepts illuminate how people navigate closeness and separation—but for most Indian participants, loneliness remains a quiet, inward experience of being unseen even in the company of others.

The difference between loneliness and solitude

For Indian participants, loneliness and solitude were often seen as emotionally distinct states—one heavy with sadness, the other peaceful and chosen. The most common way people drew this line was through emotional tone. As one participant explained, "There's a clear distinction—loneliness is negative, solitude is positive" (P5). Another added, "To me, loneliness means you feel sad… when you're alone, you can still be happy" (P6). In this sense, solitude was not the absence of others but the presence of calm.

Participants also described solitude as a matter of choice and control, contrasting it with the unwanted nature of loneliness. "Solitude is chosen. By choice," said P5 simply. Several participants found that being alone by choice allowed them to reflect and reconnect inwardly. "When I'm alone, I'm more connected to myself," shared P18, while P23 described, "When I'm alone, I always have my thoughts with me." Solitude, in this view, offered space for clarity rather than emptiness.

Patterns across loneliness levels showed that this distinction was widely recognized, though not universal. Non-lonely participants appreciated solitude as peaceful or productive. Moderately lonely individuals could also separate the two, like P43, who felt comfortable "being alone in my place." Even some severely lonely participants made this distinction—"I was alone, but I didn't feel lonely" (P36)—while others blurred the boundary. For a few, especially those with long-standing emotional struggles (P11, P26) or deeply enmeshed family lives (P25, P34), being alone was almost inseparable from loneliness. P13 described how solitude could easily tip into loneliness "unless I'm busy or doing something."

Participants rarely framed solitude in terms of social support, helplessness, or religion; instead, they tended to describe it as a personal emotional state. This

suggests that solitude was understood less as a spiritual or social experience and more as an inner, self-directed one.

Overall, Indian participants distinguished loneliness from solitude through three interlinked themes: emotional quality (sadness vs. satisfaction), intentionality (unwanted vs. chosen), and self-reflection (emptiness vs. insight). Yet this boundary remains culturally and personally fluid.

How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?

Among Indian participants, loneliness was seen less as a disorder and more as a shared part of being human. Many described it as a universal condition —"Every person has their own loneliness" (P2)—and something that varies only in degree: "All humans are alone… its intensity is higher or lower in each person" (P16). As one participant put it, "Lonely is not a disease; it's just a phase of life. Today I can be lonely and tomorrow someone else will be lonely" (P39). This framing reveals empathy: loneliness is understood as a natural, if painful, rhythm of life.

Behaviorally, lonely people were often described as withdrawn or silent. Participants said they "sit apart from friends and family" (P1), "don't open up to anyone" (P20), and are "always quiet" (P49). Non-lonely participants tended to interpret this withdrawal critically, calling such individuals "arrogant" (P42) or difficult to engage with (P4). In contrast, mildly lonely participants recognized more subtlety, noting that loneliness "may not be obvious" (P6) and that some appear "physically present but emotionally absent" (P43). Severely lonely participants, however, looked inward: one said lonely people often "pretend that they are very happy" (P37), masking their inner pain.

Emotionally, perceptions varied with personal experience. Non-lonely participants offered simpler labels—"not happy," "fear of judgement," or "don't

like external things" (P27, P42). Those who had felt loneliness themselves described it more complexly: "They get annoyed easily," said P28; "They might get angry quickly," added P22. Others noted that expressions of loneliness are sometimes mocked—"People laugh at those expressing loneliness" (P47)—revealing stigma around emotional vulnerability. Severely lonely individuals described deeper turmoil, speaking of "nothing in life, he feels nothing" (P10), or distress so profound it could make someone "act like a mad person" (P30). One explained the paradox of wanting connection but being unable to seek it—"You're reluctant to socialize but it's very difficult to ask for help" (P17).

Across all groups, the death of a spouse emerged as a shared image of loneliness. Participants spoke compassionately of "women whose husbands have died" (P22) and "men in complete disorder after their wife's passing" (P15). Beyond bereavement, causes varied: non-lonely participants mentioned living away from family (P24); mildly lonely participants added financial instability (P15) and communication barriers (P20); severely lonely individuals pointed to mistrust (P36), existential emptiness (P10), and not having space to share feelings (P39).

Not everyone fits these patterns. P18 noted that some personalities simply "don't feel a loss or loneliness… whether isolated or not, they are happy." Others expressed more fatalistic beliefs—"When God forsakes you" or "when your wife leaves" (P11)—underscoring that ideas about loneliness also draw from spirituality and fate.

Overall, Indian participants viewed loneliness with a mix of empathy and judgment. It was seen as both ordinary and revealing: a state that can evoke compassion or discomfort depending on one's distance from it. While some saw lonely people as closed off, others recognized quiet suffering beneath the silence.

Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?

For many Indian participants, loneliness is a quiet emotion—felt deeply, but rarely spoken of. The strongest barriers to talking about it were social stigma and fear of judgment. "Society takes it in a bad way," said one participant (P7), while another admitted, "People judge others who are lonely" (P2). For some, this fear turned inward into guilt or shame—"I feel guilty from inside. I think they will make fun of me" (P10). Loneliness, though common, carried the weight of being seen as weakness.

Cultural norms reinforced this silence. "There is shame in everything in India" (P9), one participant said plainly. Others spoke of the pressure to maintain appearances: "Others don't need to know what's lacking in our lives" (P20). Gender expectations also shaped what could be shared. For women, boundaries were more rigid: "Socially this is wrong even when nothing is there" (P49), explained one, while another noted, "Only women can come closer… only women can use that power" (P3). Such rules created invisible lines around emotional expression.

Trust and gossip were also major concerns. "With close ones, they don't understand… there's no trust," said P14. Others feared exposure: "People talk too much; they start gossiping behind your back" (P13). Even those who had tried to open up described past "betrayals when sharing personal problems" (P45).

Many also spoke about the difficulty of putting feelings into words. "There are many things inside, but I can't express them… they just don't come to my lips" (P46), said one. Another reflected that language itself can be a barrier: "There's a lack of words for these emotions in our culture" (P47). For some, silence wasn't a choice—it was the only available language.

Practical pessimism added another layer. Some doubted the usefulness of sharing. “Even if we tell others, they can’t help us, can they?” (P18). Others stopped talking because responses felt empty: “People just say, ‘You’ll be all right’” (P48). One expressed disillusionment—“No one provides a solution; everyone proceeds selfishly” (P23).

The desire not to burden others also kept people quiet. “We just reassure them, ‘Beta, it’s just some discomfort. Why tell them everything?’” (P13), said one parent, while another felt their own pain was small compared to others’. Such restraint reflects empathy, but also isolation.

Not everyone, however, avoided the topic. Some individuals, like P30, said they had “no problem discussing it.” These exceptions suggest that openness depends not just on how lonely one feels, but on trust, personality, and support.

Overall, Indian participants portrayed loneliness as an emotion constrained by culture, fear, and duty. Speaking about it risks judgment, gossip, or appearing weak.

Culture-specific aspects of loneliness

For Indian participants, loneliness is deeply intertwined with culture, family, and social expectations. Many described it as shaped not only by personal emotion but by how society sees you. The idea of “what people will say” emerged again and again as a quiet but powerful force. “People are judging,” said one participant (P2); another added, “There is shame in everything in India” (P9). In this cultural climate, loneliness is not just about being alone—it is about being seen as alone.

Family expectations formed another core theme. In a society built around lifelong interdependence, unmet expectations can lead to painful isolation.

"The culture here is that since he was born, he should be my son… when that expectation is not fulfilled, loneliness comes" (P18). Several contrasted this with the independence of Western families: "In foreign countries, families aren't as involved; everyone lives according to their own circumstances" (P45, P46). In India, family is both the deepest source of belonging and the sharpest reminder of absence when ties weaken.

Gender norms also shaped how loneliness is experienced. Women often carried invisible emotional burdens. "There are so many women in our country. They will feel lonely… only women can bear the suffering" (P3). Another observed, "They spend their whole lives raising families, but no one turns to them" (P4). For men, expectations worked differently but equally strongly: "Don't be too emotional, don't share too much" (P5). Silence becomes a measure of strength for men, but a quiet suffering for women.

Participants also pointed to structural causes—particularly the lack of government or institutional support. "There's no loneliness in European countries because the government provides support… but in India, it's not applicable" (P18). Others connected the absence of public care to emotional isolation: "The government, all other things, make life very difficult—so more people move toward loneliness" (P23).

At the same time, community life and cultural festivals were described as protective buffers. "We celebrate Holi or Diwali… we look for community here, like we did in childhood" (P43). "In India, everyone stays connected with each other" (P12), said one, while another contrasted it with the West: "It's not like the loneliness of foreigners… their relations are not like ours" (P25). These traditions offered social warmth even amid personal struggle.

Not all participants agreed that loneliness in India is unique. Some rejected the cultural distinction outright. "No, I don't think anything in particular" (P17),

said one; “It can be anyone—foreigner or Indian” (P26), added another. A few echoed that “there is nothing special about loneliness in India” (P27, P34).

Overall, participants described loneliness as shaped by social judgment, family expectations, gendered norms, and weak public support, yet softened by community ties and festivals.

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness

When asked to describe their last experience of loneliness, Indian participants responded in very different ways—some by revisiting concrete memories, others by reflecting on ongoing feelings that seemed to have no clear beginning or end.

Many began by remembering specific moments. P17 spoke of “remembering the situations that happened at that time,” such as when he was “working alone.” P6 recalled a painful academic failure, while P41 revisited the moment “my best friend left,” still wishing for an explanation. Others, like P28, described reliving “the ugly feelings” associated with earlier disappointments. These responses show that loneliness was often remembered through emotionally charged scenes from daily life.

For some, however, loneliness felt constant rather than event-based. P21 reflected, “Since I experience it all the time, all those moments went through my mind.” P9 traced her loneliness to a life-changing loss—“ever since my spouse left.” P49 offered a more existential version: “The whole life has gone by,” suggesting that loneliness had become woven into her life story.

Loss was another powerful anchor for memory. P23 recalled his “mother’s death” and a later break with his brother, noting that these memories “often come through” whenever he thinks of loneliness. P7 associated the same feeling with his mother’s passing, and P41, too, remembered that period as a

time of deep isolation. These participants connected loneliness with bereavement and irreversible change.

Others approached the question reflectively, linking loneliness to causes or life circumstances. P26 framed it around marital status—"If I had got married, then I wouldn't have had to say this." P40 related her recent loneliness to job struggles and the isolating nature of remote work. P43 described reflecting on "multiple dimensions of loss—career, people, places, environment, weather." P48 compared her social life to her sister's, realizing her sense of lack came from "not having friends to share activities with."

For many, the recall was not just cognitive but emotional. P15 said the question itself "brought up sad memories," particularly of her grandchildren leaving. P22 reported both "mental images and emotional responses," while P30 noted that "old memories are revived." P28's "ugly feelings" and P16's "all the situations where I experienced isolation went through my mind" highlight how memory and feeling are intertwined. P47 struggled to articulate a single instance, suggesting the act of remembering itself could be confusing or painful.

Finally, several participants did not recall loneliness at all, emphasizing satisfaction or chosen solitude instead. P35, P33, P31, P32, and P42 all said they had not felt lonely recently, some distinguishing solitude from loneliness entirely. Their recall process involved reaffirming their self-image as not lonely and drawing comfort from existing connections.

Overall, participants' ways of answering the question revealed diverse cognitive and emotional pathways. Some looked for moments of rupture, others felt it as a constant hum in the background, while a few denied its presence altogether.

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them

When asked "What is loneliness?", Indian participants responded in deeply personal ways, often grounding their definitions in direct experience rather than abstract reasoning.

For many, defining loneliness meant describing how it feels. P17 said simply, "What I thought was how I feel loneliness," using emotion itself as the definition. P5 similarly avoided formal explanation, instead listing "personal characteristics of loneliness," such as feeling misunderstood after "doing or saying something wrong." Their process was rooted in lived emotion—in what loneliness feels like rather than what it means. P5 added that connection is something rarely noted consciously—"You don't really note it down like, 'Oh, today I felt connected,'" suggesting that its absence, loneliness, is recognized only when it hurts.

Others approached the question through abstract reflection—and struggled with words. P39 shared, "I was just thinking about the answer only. Like what loneliness could be actually and how to put it in words," highlighting the effort of naming something so intangible. P36 echoed this: "It's a very specific thing… just a feeling… It's a little difficult for me to describe it." Some even circled back to tautology—"Loneliness is loneliness" (P11)—reflecting both recognition and inexpressibility.

Language and culture also shaped participants' ability to define it. P47 noted that in Malayalam, there is "rarely used terminology for loneliness," underscoring how emotional vocabulary influences self-understanding. When words are missing, the feeling remains personal, unnamed, yet unmistakably real.

Overall, the process of defining loneliness ranged from direct introspection

(P17, P5), to conceptual struggle (P39, P36), to inarticulate recognition (P11), often constrained by linguistic and cultural limits (P47).

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them

When defining what makes a good social connection, participants drew heavily from their own lives and relationships rather than theory or abstraction.

Most began by revisiting lived experiences. P25 said, "I thought about my past experiences and answered," linking his definition directly to personal history. P27 similarly described "thinking about the things that I have gone through in my life." For many, good relationships were remembered through stories of support and communication. P4 said, "Then I thought about relationships and communication," while P29 recalled, "I was thinking who are those people who help me during my difficult times… this is what makes a good relationship."

Some defined good connection through contrast—recalling negative experiences. P22 reflected on "interactions with people who didn't have good natures," suggesting that bad relationships clarify what good ones should be.

A few turned inward. P17 reflected on his own social ability: "I thought about how much of such ability I have… how much ability I have," showing that self-assessment of one's social competence influenced how "good" connection was understood.

Not all participants engaged in deep introspection. P49 said simply, "No, it did not happen. There is society, then there should be everything in it," implying that connection is taken for granted—a natural part of social life rather than something consciously analyzed.

Overall, participants' responses reveal that defining good social connection is

an experiential act: revisiting relationships, contrasting past hurts with care received, or quietly measuring one's own capacity to relate.

What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of "I feel lonely" from 0-100

When rating the statement "I feel lonely," participants described varied thought processes—some immediate, some reflective—revealing how they translated emotion into numbers.

For those with high ratings, loneliness felt constant. P10, who rated it 100%, said, "I always feel lonely… I feel lonely every day." P11 gave a similar account. P14, who rated it 80%, explained, "I feel lonely most of the time, even when surrounded by people… even when you have everything—family, relatives, people around—you still feel that loneliness inside." P16's high rating also reflected this ongoing emotional state. These participants equated rating with the frequency and intensity of a persistent feeling.

Those with low or zero ratings used the same logic in reverse. P12, who marked 0%, said, "If I stay with him, then why should I feel lonely?" referring to her husband's presence. P8 said plainly, "I never feel alone." P35 responded, "Not at all… I don't feel lonely even for a moment," while P37, once lonely, explained, "I am alone but I am not lonely." Their reasoning drew on current relationships or a shift in perception—from loneliness to content solitude.

Participants with moderate scores thought in situational terms. P29, who rated it 50%, associated loneliness with evenings spent away from his wife. P26, at 30%, spoke of "nighttime loneliness" linked to being unmarried. P40 noted feeling lonely "on some days," typically for brief periods. These participants seemed to calculate an average of episodic experiences across time.

A few questioned the limits of the scale itself. P47 "found it difficult to mark precisely," struggling to quantify emotion. P23 preferred conversation over

scoring, suggesting surveys miss nuance. Their reflections show awareness of the gap between feeling and measurement—that numbers cannot always capture life's emotional complexity.

In summary, participants' responses ranged from straightforward self-assessment (high or low ratings) to reflective calibration of frequency or context, and finally to metacognitive questioning of the scale's adequacy.

Notes

- P1: IN_MML_high_35-60_Partnered_Male_Siddhi_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P2: IN_SL_high_18-35_Single_Female_Siddhi_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P3: IN_SL_low_60+_Partnered_Female_Siddhi_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P4: IN_SL_high_18-35_Single_Female_Samina_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P5: IN_NL_high_18-35_Partnered_Female_Prakhar_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P6: IN_MML_high_18-35_Single_Male_Sarabjeet_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P7: IN_NL_low_35-60_Single_Male_Neti_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P8: IN_NL_any_60+_Any_Any_Prakhar_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P9: IN_SL_any_60+_Any_Any_Sarabjeet_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P10: IN_SL_low_60+_Any_Male_Siddhi_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P11: IN_SL_low_35-60_Partnered_Female_Sarabjeet_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P12: IN_NL_high_60+_Any_Female_Neti_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P13: IN_SL_low_35-60_Single_Female_Saumya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P14: IN_SL_high_18-35_Single_Female_Samina_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P15: IN_MML_low_60+_Any_Male_Sarabjeet_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P16: IN_MML_high_35-60_Single_Female_Siddhi_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P17: IN_SL_high_35-60_Partnered_Male_Aditya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P18: IN_MML_low_35-60_Single_Female_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P19: IN_NL_high_35-60_Single_Female_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P20: IN_MML_high_35-60_Partnered_Female_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P21: IN_NL_low_35-60_Single_Female_Neti_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P22: IN_MML_low_35-60_Partnered_Female_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P23: IN_SL_low_35-60_Partnered_Male_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P24: IN_NL_high_35-60_Partnered_Male_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P25: IN_NL_high_35-60_Partnered_Female_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked

Notes

- P26: IN_SL_high_35-60_Single_Male_Saumya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P27: IN_NL_low_35-60_Any_Female_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P28: IN_MML_low_35-60_Partnered_Male_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P29: IN_SL_high_35-60_Partnered_Female_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P30: IN_SL_high_60+_Any_Male_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P31: IN_MML_high_60+_Any_Male_Siddhi_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P32: IN_MML_low_35-60_Single_Male_Sarabjeet_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P33: IN_NL_high_60+_Any_Male_Aditya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P34: IN_NL_low_35-60_Partnered_Male_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P35: IN_NL_low_60+_Any_Female_Sarabjeet_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P36: IN_SL_high_18-35_Any_Male_Sarabjeet_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P37: IN_SL_low_18-35_Any_Female_Saumya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P38: IN_SL_low_18-35_Any_Male_Siddhi_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P39: IN_SL_high_60+_Any_Female_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P40: IN_MML_low_18-35_Any_Female_Alka_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P41: IN_MML_high_60+_Any_Male_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P42: IN_NL_high_18-35_Any_Male_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P43: IN_MML_high_35-60_Single_Male_Aditya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P44: IN_NL_high_35-60_Single_Male_Samina_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P45: IN_NL_low_35-60_Partnered_Female_Mubashir_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P46: IN_MML_high_18-35_Any_Female_Aditya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P47: IN_MML_high_60+_Any_Female_Aditya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P48: IN_MML_high_60+_Any_Female_Saumya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P49: IN_SL_any_60+_Any_Any_Saumya_1checked_deidentified_2checked
- P50: IN_SL_high_60+_Any_Female_Saumya_1checked_deidentified_2checked

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