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LIBERAL AUTONOMY AND THE STRUCTURAL PRODUCTION OF LONELINESS IN POST-LIBERALISATION INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Loneliness is increasingly recognised as a major social concern but is largely treated as an individual psychological condition. This paper argues that post-1991 liberalisation in India institutionalised liberal autonomy as a governing rationality, restructuring the relationship between the state, market, and individual. In liberal political thought, autonomy occupies a central moral position, privileging individual choice, self-authorship, and freedom from external interference. When embedded through LPG reforms, this logic reorganised family life, urban space, labour, migration, and digital interaction, transforming the social conditions through which companionship, recognition, and belonging were sustained. Using a qualitative structural-analytical approach and a heuristic reading of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, the paper conceptualises loneliness as a structurally produced outcome of post-liberalisation autonomy rather than a purely personal experience.

KEYWORDS: *Loneliness; Liberal Autonomy; LPG Reforms; Post-liberalisation India; Social Structures; Political Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness has emerged as a visible and growing social concern in contemporary societies. In recent years, platforms such as Astrotalk – which offers round-the-clock paid conversations with astrologers – and the Chinese viral app "Are You Dead?[1]" - designed to check in on users who may be socially isolated - have gained widespread popularity **(Reuters, 2026; Tripathy, 2025)**. While differing in form, both platforms respond to a common condition: a demand for constant availability, reassurance, and recognition in the absence of stable social companionship. Reflecting this growing concern, the World Health Organisation estimates that nearly one in six people globally experience loneliness, framing it as a pressing social and public health issue **(Social Isolation and Loneliness, 2026)**.

Despite this growing visibility, dominant scholarly approaches continue to conceptualise loneliness primarily as a subjective psychological experience. Loneliness is commonly defined as the distress arising from a perceived mismatch between desired and actual social relationships **(Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010)**. While such frameworks have been instrumental in identifying health outcomes and individual vulnerabilities, they often locate the problem at the level of personal perception, emotional regulation, or social skills. As a result, the broader social, economic, and institutional transformations that reshape everyday conditions of social connection remain insufficiently examined.

Liberal autonomy is treated in this study not merely as a normative ideal but as a governing rationality that shapes social, economic and institutional arrangements. It privileges individual choice, self-authorship, and freedom from external interference as central moral values. When institutionalised, liberal autonomy reorganises obligations, expectations, and forms of social coordination. This study approaches autonomy as a structural principle with consequences for everyday social life.

In the Indian context, this liberal autonomy was pushed through with the economic reforms of 1991. The liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation reforms, introduced in response to a balance-of-payments crisis, restructured the relationship between the state, market, and individual by dismantling state controls and expanding market mechanisms **(Ahluwalia, 2002; Rodrik & Subramanian, 2004)**. Beyond economic restructuring, these reforms reorganised everyday social life by transforming family arrangements, patterns of migration, labour relations, urban spaces, and modes of social interaction. These transformations altered the institutional settings through which companionship, recognition, and belonging were traditionally sustained.

This research proposes to examine loneliness in post-liberalisation India as a structurally conditioned outcome of these transformations. Rather than treating loneliness solely as an individual psychological state, the study conceptualises it as an effect of changes in social, economic and institutional structures that organise everyday interaction, obligation, and availability. It focuses on how shifts in family organisation, urban public space, labour arrangements, migration, and digital infrastructures

[1] *It is named "Sileme" in Chinese.*

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reshape the conditions under which social embeddedness is produced and maintained. By adopting a structural-analytical approach, the research aims to move beyond psychologised accounts of loneliness and contribute to a sociologically grounded political understanding of loneliness as a systemic feature of contemporary Indian society.

METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a **qualitative structural-analytical approach** to examine loneliness as a socially and institutionally conditioned outcome of liberal autonomy in post-liberalisation India. Rather than measuring loneliness as a psychological state, the study conceptualises it as an effect of transformations in social structures that organise everyday interaction, obligation, and availability.

The **unit of analysis** is institutional and social structures - such as family organisation, urban public space, labour arrangements, migration, and digital infrastructures - through which liberal autonomy is operationalised. The analysis combines political theory on autonomy with secondary sociological and demographic literature to trace how these structures reconfigure conditions of social embeddedness.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale is used **heuristically**, with its items analytically regrouped to identify core dimensions of social disconnection. The paper does not claim direct causal determination; instead, it advances a **structural conditioning argument**, showing how multiple institutional changes collectively shape exposure to loneliness.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a growing concern throughout the world, with some health experts even terming it a silent epidemic that needs immediate intervention. As per WHO data, 16% of people worldwide, i.e. one in six, are experiencing loneliness **(Social Isolation and Loneliness, 2026)**. It denotes a personally perceived sense of social isolation. **Hawkley and Cacioppo (2010)** define loneliness as "a distressing feeling that accompanies the perception that one's social needs are not being met by the quantity or especially the quality of one's social relationships" **(p. 218)**.

The UCLA Loneliness Scale is the most frequently employed loneliness instrument reported in the literature that assesses an individual's subjective feelings of loneliness. It was originally prepared by psychologists Daniel Russell, Letitia Anne Peplau, and M.L. Ferguson in 1978, with multiple revisions later. This research draws on the items of Version 3 of the UCLA Loneliness Scale to examine how liberal autonomy and the social structures it generates shape experiences of loneliness. For the paper, the 20 items of the UCLA scale are clubbed into 5 broad categories. The UCLA loneliness scale is not used here as a psychometric instrument, but rather heuristically.

A. Breakdown of Social Attunement

It denotes not feeling "in tune" with others, or there is a loss of everyday synchrony, leading to erosion of shared lifeworlds. People coexist spatially but not culturally.

- 1. How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?
- 6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?
- 8. How often do you feel that those around you do not share your interests and ideas?
- 11. How often do you feel left out?
- 17, How often do you feel shy?
- 18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?

B. Erosion of Companionship Infrastructure

It means loss of routinised togetherness. There is an absence of dependable social availability.

- 2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- 4. How often do you feel alone?
- 7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?
- 14. How often do you feel isolated from others?

C. Collapse of Relational Depth

It denotes that social ties do remain but become shallow and instrumental.

- 12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?
- 13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you well?

D. Disintegration of Friendship Ecologies

It means friendship becomes effortful and contingent, not automatic.

- 5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?
- 9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?
- 10. How often do you feel close to people?
- 15. How often do you feel you can find companionship when you want it?

E. Failure of Recognition Structures

It denotes institutional inability to sustain recognition and emotional availability.

- 3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?
- 16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?
- 19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?
- 20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?

Liberal Autonomy as a Political Rationality

Liberalism has travelled a long intellectual distance - from Hobbes's concern with order, through Locke's rights-bearing

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individual, to Nozick's minimal state and Rawls's egalitarian justice. It continually redefined the meaning of freedom, authority, and obligation in modern political life. Today, liberal political thought is fundamentally organised around the value of autonomy **(Mason, 1990).** Autonomy is understood as the individual's capacity to choose and pursue personal ends free from external interference. Isaiah Berlin's notion of negative liberty defines freedom as the absence of coercion, thereby locating autonomy in a protected private sphere of individual choice **(Berlin, 1969)**. This understanding of freedom is institutionalised in political liberalism, where individuals are treated as morally autonomous agents rather than as bearers of inherited social roles.

John Rawls grounds this vision in the idea of citizens as "free and equal" persons who possess the capacity to form, revise and pursue their own conceptions of the good **(Rawls, 1993)**. Social cooperation, in this framework, is justified not by shared moral ends but by principles that secure equal rights and liberties. Ronald Dworkin further extends this logic through his defence of ethical individualism, according to which each person bears ultimate responsibility for shaping the course of his or her life **(Dworkin, 1988)**. Together, these formulations place autonomy as the defining moral status of the individual in liberal political thought.

By the late twentieth century, autonomy had also become a cultural ideal. Charles Taylor describes the rise of an "ethics of authenticity," in which being true to oneself is elevated as a dominant moral obligation **(Taylor, 1991)**. Liberal autonomy thus moves beyond a legal or moral principle and becomes a governing rationality that establishes choice over obligation and self-authorship over inherited social ties. Today, individuals are "obliged to be free" **(Rose, 1999)**.

The emergence of liberalism in response to monarchial authority, feudal hierarchy and religious orthodoxy explains its strong emphasis on individual liberty and the creation of an autonomous individual. In India, Minoo Masani, one of the founders of the Swantantra Party, was a torchbearer of ultra-radical liberalism. He even championed the individual's right to die and founded the Society for the Right to Die with Dignity **(Centre for Law and Policy Research Trust, n.d.)**.

The logic of liberal autonomy flows from the idea of curbing the state or any sort of power over individuals. This shift had two important consequences: it limited the coercive power of the state, but simultaneously freed market forces that came to exercise new forms of constraint over individuals, and it weakened social ties, contributing to social isolation. **Marcuse (1964)** calls it one-dimensional man, where individuals think they are free, but they are under the clutches of market forces, which have deeply embedded the idea of production, consumption and mass culture in their minds.

Individual autonomy is institutionally secured through an expanding framework of rights. Almost all liberal societies focus excessively on three rights: the right to life, liberty, and property. In India, the right to life & liberty is a fundamental right under Part III of the Constitution, and the property right is a constitutional right under Article 300A of the Constitution. This autonomy emanating from political liberalism produced certain structures that made the 'self' a sovereign project and reorganised social bonds.

Post-Liberalisation India: Institutionalisation of Autonomy

In 1991, India faced a balance of payment crisis majorly due to fiscal profligacy. In response to that, a series of economic reforms were introduced that were collectively called Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation, or popularly known as LPG reforms. With that, the "trade barriers were slashed; foreign investment was welcomed; the license raj was dismantled; and privatisation began" **(Rodrik & Subramanian, 2004).** Liberal autonomy in this sense manifested in two spheres: market-driven capitalist autonomy, and choices induced individual autonomy. This restructured the relationship between the state, market, and citizens **(Ahluwalia, 2002)**. However, in India, the rights-based individual autonomy, though ensured by the constitution under the fundamental rights, is largely enhanced by the judiciary, especially under Articles 19 and 21 of the constitution. Through the instrument of judicial activism, it has enlarged the scope of the operation of fundamental rights by liberally interpreting Article 12 of the Constitution, which defines 'State' **(Manikyam, n.d.)**.

The argument advanced here is not that any single post-liberalisation transformation directly produces loneliness. Rather, the claim is that liberal autonomy, once institutionalised through market expansion, legal rights, mobility, and choice, reorganises multiple social structures simultaneously. These transformations – across family life, urban space, migration, work, and digital infrastructures – operate cumulatively and have impacts on almost all the categories of clubbed items of the UCLA loneliness scale. Therefore, the impacts of these structures cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation and hence, studied cumulatively and collectively.

Post liberalisation, the social structures produced by it have impacted the structures or places of social attunement, companionship infrastructure, relational depth, friendship ecologies and recognition structure. Among them, some important ones are - family structures, local public spaces, workplaces, and educational institutions.

According to **Ganguly-Scrase (2003),** households and families in India are being continuously transformed by the processes of economic liberalisation, structural changes and changes in social spheres. Similarly, **Sinha (2025)** argues that the forces of liberalisation and globalisation altered the structural dynamics of Indian society by inducing urbanisation and migration that accelerated the disintegration of the joint family and gave rise to

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nuclear families. As per Kantar data, the nuclear family formed 50% of Indian households in 2022, up from 37% in 2008 **(Gupta & Mohanty, 2025)**. By 2022, nuclear households accounted for almost 69 per cent of families in southern India, up from 50 per cent in 2008. In the northern and eastern regions, it was 38 per cent and 45 per cent, respectively, while the western region reported a share of about 49 per cent **(Ambwani, 2023)**.

The transition from joint to nuclear families in post-liberalisation India is not merely a demographic or economic change. It reflects the institutionalisation of liberal autonomy, wherein co-residence, caregiving, and intergenerational obligation increasingly become matters of individual choice rather than normatively enforced duties. This happened due to increased opportunities in the private sector.

These transition conditions the UCLA items related to companionship and isolation, as reduced household size limits routinised emotional and physical availability in everyday life. Further, the impact of modern liberal lifestyle, such as Double income no kids (DINK), on loneliness is yet to be explored.

These household changes occur alongside post-liberalisation urban growth and changing living arrangements. As per the census 2011, 31% people live in urban areas. This number is consistently growing, with the Economic Survey 2023-24 expecting that by 2030, more than 40 per cent of India's population will live in urban areas **(Press Information Bureau, 2024)**. Rapid urbanisation was one of the structural outcomes of liberalisation in India **(Sinha, 2025)**. Liberalisation promoted private businesses that were mainly established in the urban areas. This rapid urban growth increased the number of million-plus cities from 23 in 1991 to 35 in 2001 **(Chadchan & Shankar, 2012)**. By 2030, this number will rise to 68 **(McKinsey, 2010)**.

Rapid urbanisation reshapes living arrangements and everyday social interaction in ways that can increase exposure to social isolation. These changes are especially visible in the growth of one-person households and the weakening of stable co-residential social arrangements**.** OPH, though, is low in percentage but large in absolute numbers and is growing **(Dommaraju, 2015)**. It marks a thinning of everyday co-residential social interaction, which increases the risk of social disconnection, which in turn increases exposure to loneliness. Urban living arrangements in post-liberalisation India increasingly prioritise privacy[2], mobility, and independence – key values of liberal autonomy. One-person households thus reflect an institutional preference for self-sufficiency, making everyday social interaction optional rather than structurally sustained. While **Dommaraju (2015)** adopts the census definition of one-person households, it excludes institutional and shared living arrangements, potentially underestimating the scale of solitary or weakly embedded living in India.

Urbanisation in India has been significantly shaped by internal migration flows. NSS data showcase a steady increase in the internal migration in the post-reform era from 24.8% in 1993 to 28.5% in 2007/2008 **(Mahapatro, 2012)**. Whereas migration statistics upto early 1990s show a stagnancy[3]. In India, intra-state migration is far more than inter-state migration **(Bhagat & Keshri, 2020)**. In the 2011 census, this reached around 37.64%; however, subsequent high-frequency evidence suggests that both the volume-11.78% and rate of migration have declined since then **(Debroy & Misra, 2024).** The current migration rate hovers around 28.88% in 2023. For a country as populous as India, the absolute number is still high. Post-liberalisation migration is enabled and legitimised by liberal autonomy's emphasis on individual mobility, aspiration, and exit from inherited social contexts.

Migration often dislocates individuals from familiar social and cultural settings, disrupting established networks of belonging. Cultural embeddedness and family-based arrangements function as primary sources of stability and social belonging for individuals. Migration threatens these security and attachment bonds and jeopardises family links **(Narchal, 2012)**. **Ahamad et al. (2025)** in their cross-sectional study found a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms among migrants than non-migrants, with rural to rural migrant, inter-state migrant, older adults[4] migrant, and migrants with 25 + years of stay having elevated odds of depression. However, loneliness is analytically distinct from depression. Still, there is a close relationship between both, with loneliness, among others, being a unique risk factor that contributes to the development of major depressive disorders[5] **(Van Winkel et al., 2017)**. Therefore, acculturation stress, induced by migration, such as language barriers, weak social ties, discrimination and unfair treatment by others, is one of the risk factors that make it difficult for the migrant to have a sense of belonging.

Migration disrupts not only shared cultural attunement but also the continuity of interpersonal ties, thereby conditioning responses to UCLA items, suggesting reduced relational depth and difficulty sustaining companionship.

Alongside migration, transformations in local public spaces independently reshape the conditions of everyday social interaction. These spaces, such as streets, parks, neighbourhood shops, and markets that traditionally enabled repeated low-effort encounters and through which familiarity and informal social ties were sustained, are also shrinking or becoming restricted.

[2] *Through the K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India (2017) case, right to privacy has been declared a fundamental right by the Supreme Court.*
[3] *It is based on census data.*
[4] *Persons above the age of 45 years were considered as older adults in the present study.*
[5] *MDD is measured as a DSM-IV clinical diagnosis (SCID-I), distinct from loneliness.*

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"A public open space in the neighborhood is an available opportunity for neighbors to have communication as a friendly chat in a fenced garden or even public meetings in local parks which can be common gathering places and social-cultural interactions as results" **(Farzad Soltanian, 2015)**. Hence, "public spaces play an integral role in generating a collective feeling in the neighborhood, as they act as places where social interactions can freely occur" **(Gaur, 2022).** However, autonomy-rooted neo-liberal gated developments restrict shared public spaces and everyday social encounters, and loneliness is structurally enabled by urban design and governance **(Gaur, 2022).** The decline of shared public spaces reflects a liberal-autonomous logic that prioritises privacy, security, and controlled access over collective interaction.

Beyond changes in the physical design of neighbourhoods, everyday interaction is also reshaped by platform-mediated forms of convenience that reduce the need for routine face-to-face contact. Quick commerce platforms such as Blinkit, Zepto and Instamart, etc., reduce the need for routine interactions with local shops, further weakening everyday neighbourhood social contact. Due to this, people live near each other without developing shared social rhythms. This phenomenon, however, is more common in urban spaces than in rural ones. Quick commerce in India is estimated to grow at a CAGR of 27.9% between FY2022 and FY2027 **(Pratik and Arora, 2022)**. Putting the future at risk.

Taken together, this thinning of everyday neighbourhood encounters further conditions UCLA items related to friendship and group belonging, as casual and repeated interactions that previously sustained informal friendship networks become less frequent.

In parallel with these changes in physical neighbourhood life, social interaction increasingly shifts to digitally mediated environments. Digital platforms operationalise liberal autonomy by enabling convenience, choice, and disengagement with minimal social obligation. Social media and loneliness are deeply linked, with some research establishing social media as a cause for intensifying loneliness **(Kraut et al., 1998)**. However, the relationship between social media and loneliness calls for a nuanced approach **(Pittman & Reich, 2016; Smith et al., 2021)**. At most, social media, as a curated, asynchronous, and comparison-oriented space, is a mediating and amplifying structure that may shape the conditions under which loneliness is experienced. This is even though the digital space provides far more interconnectedness with the world than physical space does. **(Kraut et al., 1998),** call it the "internet paradox". Digital connectivity thus enables high levels of interaction while often failing to provide stable forms of social attunement and belonging. Extended reliance on online classes has increased students' daily screen exposure, with implications for both mental and physical well-being **(Sharma & Sharma, 2021)**.

Post-liberalisation, informalisation has increased, not only through expansion of the informal sector but also via informalisation within the formal sector **(Kerswell & Pratap, 2018)**. The informal sector is marked by employment without written contracts, job security, paid leave, or social security benefits. In the informal sector, the absence of stable collegial environments and institutionalised social spaces fragments everyday workplace interaction. Although not distinctly loneliness, mental health disorders in the informal workers are well-documented in various research **(Ludermir & Lewis, 2003; Santana et al., 1997; Chowdhury et al., 2023)**.

However, liberalisation expanded autonomy not only for employers in matters of hiring and dismissal but also for employees in their ability to exit employment. Increased opportunities enhanced employees' choice-based autonomy. In traditional workplaces, in the case of dissatisfaction within the organisation, the employee either used to voice their concerns or stay loyal. In current times, **Hirschman (1970)** explains that when members experience a decline in satisfaction in the organisation, they tend to choose exit rather than exercising voice or remaining loyal.

Emerging forms of flexible and short-term employment further reinforce this exit-oriented orientation. Recent trends such as the gigification of the Indian economy, work-from-home arrangements, and freelancing have further reduced the presence of stable, long-term workplaces that traditionally enabled everyday socialisation. **Sennett (1998)** argues that this modern form of flexible capitalism values flexibility, mobility, risk-taking and constant reinvention more than long-term commitment. Flexible and insecure work arrangements condition UCLA items related to recognition and social availability, as the absence of stable collegial environments reduces the likelihood of dependable interpersonal support.

Taken together, these transformations do not operate as isolated causal mechanisms but as interlinked institutional expressions of liberal autonomy. Family reorganisation, urban design, migration, work arrangements, and digital mediation collectively reconfigure everyday availability, obligation, and recognition. It is through this cumulative restructuring – rather than any singular change – that post-liberalisation autonomy conditions contemporary experiences of loneliness.

CONCLUSION

This paper conceptualises loneliness in post-liberalisation India as a structurally conditioned outcome of the institutionalisation of liberal autonomy rather than as an individual psychological state. As autonomy becomes a governing rationality privileging choice, mobility, and exit, the social structures that sustain shared rhythms, companionship, and recognition are reconfigured. Drawing on a heuristic use of the UCLA Loneliness Scale, the analysis shows how transformations in family life, urban space, labour, migration, and digital infrastructures collectively increase exposure to loneliness. Rather than asserting direct causality, the paper demonstrates how contemporary social arrangements shift responsibility for social connection onto autonomous individuals.

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Addressing loneliness, therefore, requires attention to the institutional organisation of autonomy and social life, not merely individual-level interventions.

While this paper demonstrates how post-liberalisation reforms institutionalised liberal autonomy and reconfigured social structures in ways that condition loneliness, the specific pathways through which autonomy is embedded across different institutional domains warrant further investigation. Future research could deepen this analysis by tracing how reform-induced autonomy is unevenly operationalised within family, labour, urban, and digital settings.

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Appendix A: UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3)

The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) was developed by Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson (1978) and revised by Russell (1996). The scale is reproduced here for academic reference. In this study, it is used heuristically rather than as a psychometric instrument. Copyright remains with the original authors. Source: Fetzer Institute (n.d.).

Scale:

INSTRUCTIONS: Indicate how often each of the statements below is descriptive of you.

Statement	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
*1. How often do you feel that you are "in tune" with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
2. How often do you feel that you lack companionship?	1	2	3	4
3. How often do you feel that there is no one you can turn to?	1	2	3	4
4 How often do you feel alone?	1	2	3	4
*5. How often do you feel part of a group of friends?	1	2	3	4
*6. How often do you feel that you have a lot in common with the people around you?	1	2	3	4
7. How often do you feel that you are no longer close to anyone?	1	2	3	4
8. How often do you feel that your interests and ideas are not shared by those around you?	1	2	3	4
*9. How often do you feel outgoing and friendly?	1	2	3	4
*10. How often do you feel close to people?	1	2	3	4
11. How often do you feel left out?	1	2	3	4
12. How often do you feel that your relationships with others are not meaningful?	1	2	3	4
13. How often do you feel that no one really knows you we11?	1	2	3	4
14. How often do you feel isolated from others?	1	2	3	4
*15. How often do you fee1 you can find companionship when you want it?	1	2	3	4
*16. How often do you feel that there are people who really understand you?	1	2	3	4
17, How often do you feel shy?	1	2	3	4
18. How often do you feel that people are around you but not with you?	1	2	3	4
*19. How often do you feel that there are people you can talk to?	1	2	3	4
*20. How often do you feel that there are people you can turn to?	1	2	3	4