

THE SHIFT AND THE STRETCH

How Modern Milestones are Reshaping Consumption in India

September 2026





A decade or two ago, turning thirty often meant being married, having children, and settling into a stable family life. Today, in India's Urban cities, many thirty-somethings are still exploring careers, relationships, and personal ambitions.

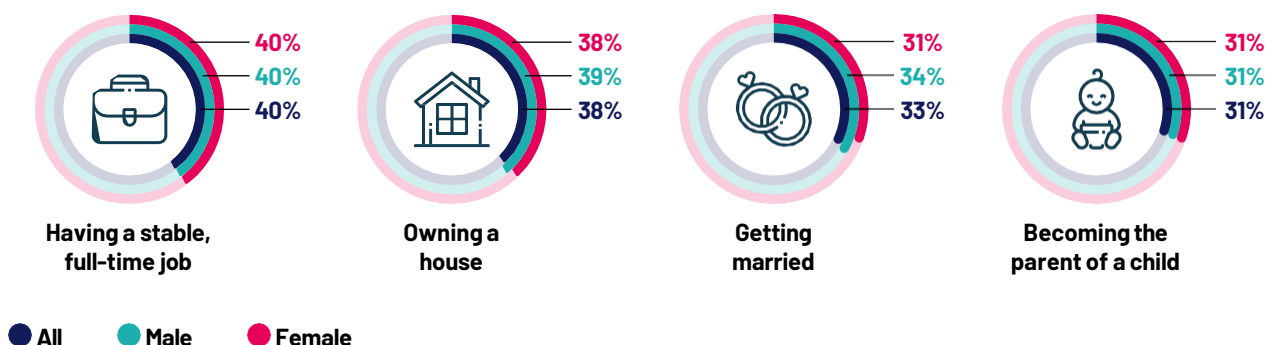
The timeline of adulthood is being rewritten – marriage, parenthood, and other traditional milestones are no longer arriving in a fixed sequence or at a predetermined age. The milestones have not disappeared, but they have shifted, reflecting a change in how urban Indians define success, stability, and fulfilment.

Data across studies show that only ~50% of Urban Indians aged 18- 35 yrs are married, and only 35-40% have had a child yet.

The Ipsos Life Aspirations Report 2026 shows that having a stable, full time job is more important than getting married or having kids. This is true among both males and females. In fact, females show an even lower importance to getting married, than males. (Refer Fig.1)

While men and women rank a range of life events in the same order of importance, men are significantly more likely than women to say that getting married is an important sign of a successful life.

Fig.1 Important Life Milestones



Q.Which, if any, of the following would you say are important signs of living a successful life these days?

Source: Ipsos Life Aspirations 2026 - India data (Sample Size: 2165)

As education expands, careers demand longer commitments, and personal aspirations evolve, young Indians are choosing to delay major life decisions, creating new time-periods for how adulthood unfolds for them. Career building often takes precedence over family formation – for both men and women. Urbanisation is also changing lives in terms of access to education and jobs outside the family unit, giving greater freedom of making the choice regarding starting a family.

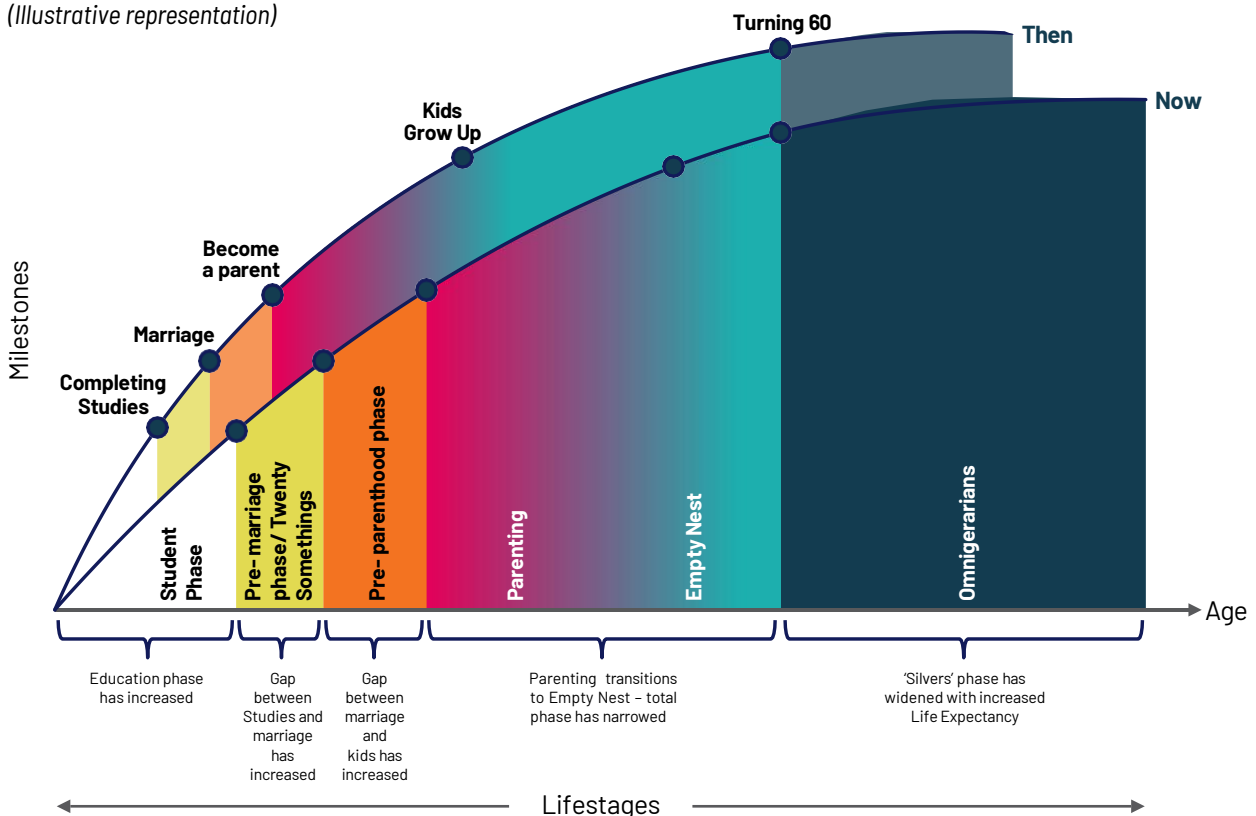
This is reflected by the significant increase in the mean age at marriage. In 1961, the **mean age at marriage** for women was around 16.8

years, while it climbed to about 22.2 years by 2010. Successive rounds of the National Family Health Survey have shown that the mean age at first marriage increases even further, for both men and women. Indian youth are also postponing parenthood, with the **age at first birth** increasing steadily, driven primarily by increasingly more time being spent on education and careers.

Marriage in India has always been one of life's most important milestones. But when they marry (or whether they choose to marry at all) has undergone a change.

Fig.2 Lifestages are Stretching and Shifting

(Illustrative representation)



Note: Visual for illustrative purposes only, to represent how each milestone is moving later on the age axis and the gap between milestones is widening.

Empty Nest = Kids have grown up, and may move out for study / job / marriage

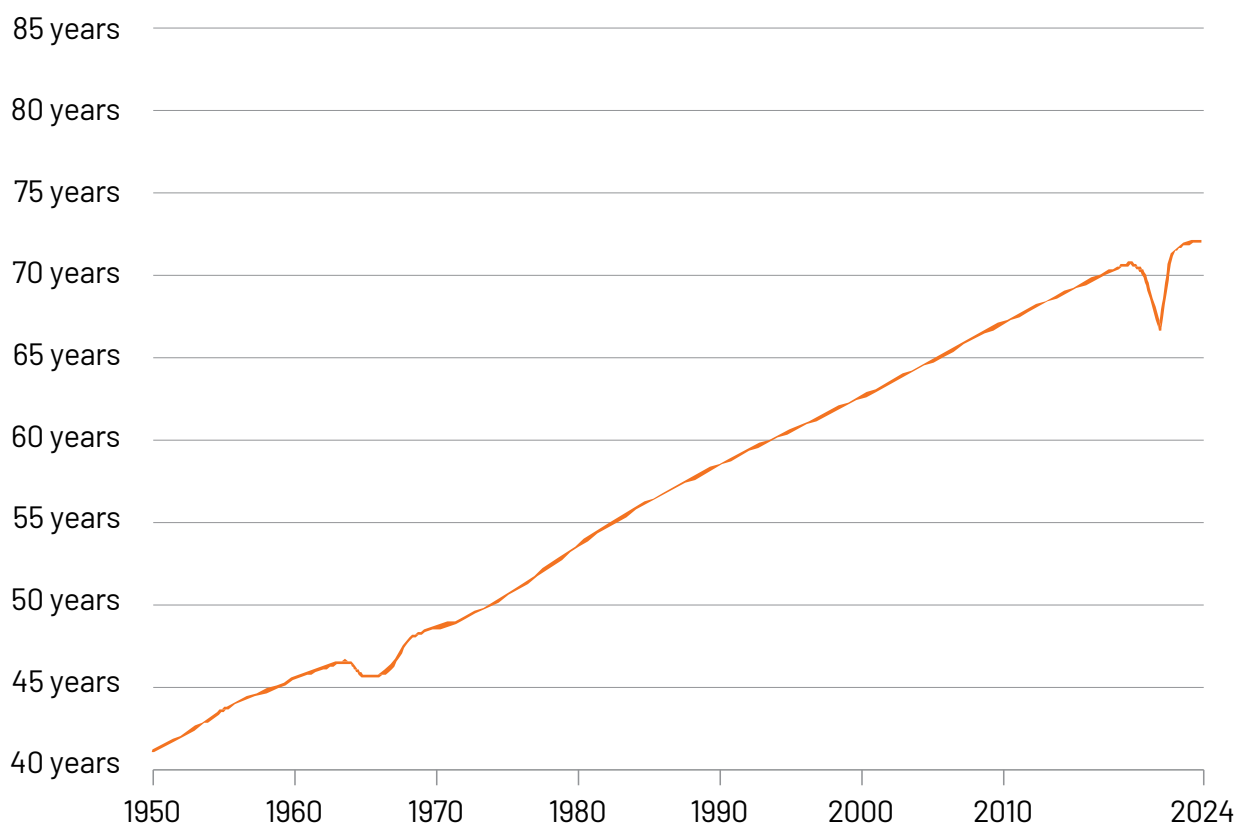
Sillers = 60 yrs + this milestone is based on age criteria, but has expanded with increasing life expectancy

The Other End - Omnigenarians

At the other end of the population pyramid, people are living longer, and the post-retirement life stage is extending. By 2050, the United Nations predicts a doubling of the number of people aged 60 or over to 346 million people in India – about 20% of the total population.

We can collectively refer to this cohort of sexagenarians, septuagenarians, octogenarians, nonagenarians, and centenarians as the 'omnigenarians'. India's life expectancy now stands at 72.7 years, with people living an extra 31 years today vs in 1950.

Fig.3 Life Expectancy at Birth - India



Source: World Population Prospects, United Nations Population Division

As we mentioned in [“Dear Brands, Are you silver Savvy?”](#) older adults want to live a life of dignity and self-respect, making their own choices. Also they are not one homogenous group. They represent a large group who do

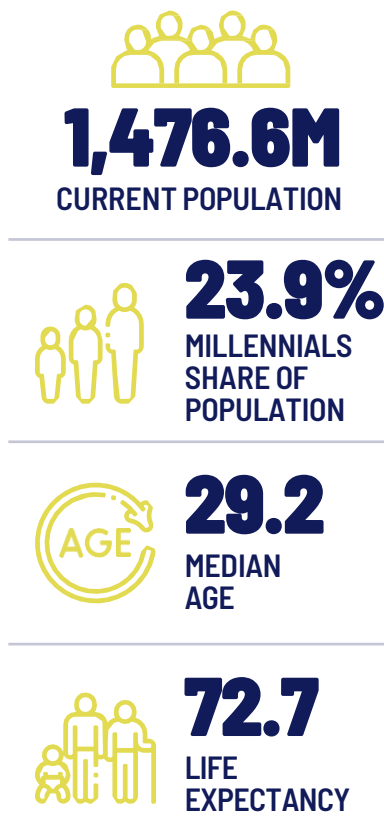
not all think – or behave – the same. This group will have significant differences based on whether they are active vs sedentary, digital savvy vs non-adopters, financially strained vs secure.

The “Sandwiched” Life- Stage

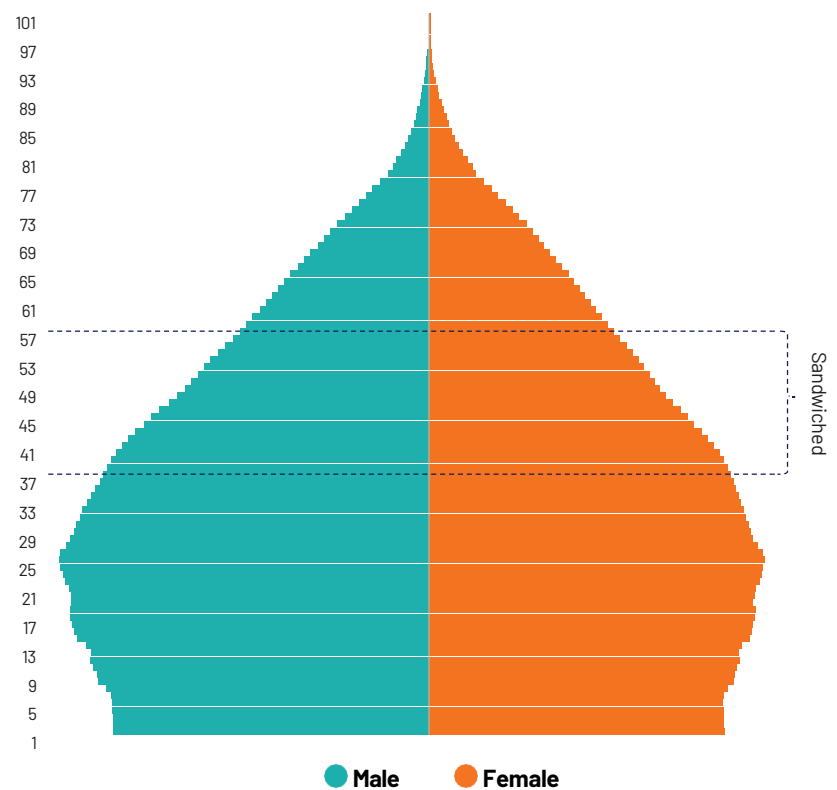
In between both of these groups are middle-aged people sandwiched between caring for young, teenage, or adult children on the one side, and ageing parents on the other. One factor increasing the squeeze is the delay in having children. As people have children

later in life, their children are still young (and more dependent) exactly when their own parents reach an age at which they begin to require more care. This double-ended squeeze carries with it both emotional and financial consequences.

Fig.4 India: Key Stats



2026 population pyramid



Source: Ipsos Generations Report 2026





Understanding the impact of the shifting patterns

Changing life stages offer new opportunities for brands to connect with their consumers, as well as new challenges. Shifting patterns in marriage and parenthood are not merely demographic shifts - they fundamentally change how consumers earn, spend, socialize, travel, consume media, and build identities. Brands would do well to monitor these changes and adopt this in their innovation pipelines and brand messaging.

1. **New Urban Social Structures Emerge:**

A later marriage may mean that a 32-year-old today may behave like a 25-year-old consumer from a generation ago. Solo - living, and solo- experiences (including travel etc.) are on the rise, driven by more young adults spending longer periods living independently.

Separately, women embracing marriage and motherhood at a later stage, and choosing to have lesser children, is also changing urban family structures.

And this impacts how we market - for example, think of SKUs. These need to be built for smaller/ solo families as compared to larger ones for this lifestage.

2. **Consumers remain in the self-spending stage for longer:**

People are spending a larger share of their income on themselves before taking on marital and parental responsibilities. This extends the life stage where discretionary spending is directed towards personal development, wellness, appearance, travel, and experiences rather than child-centric or large-family needs.

This has an impact on multiple categories relevant to this lifestage, and the communication/ messaging needs to evolve accordingly.

3. Delayed Entry into “Family Basket”

Categories: Categories like baby care, family cars, and kid-focused education see later adoption in life. This also means higher spending power on more “premium” products, and willingness to spend more (linked to better incomes). And the need for Family packs/ bigger SKUs emerge a bit later.

4. Rise of “Chosen Family” & Social

Consumption: Friend groups, co-living, and pet parenting substitute for traditional family roles, driving spend on social dining, gifting, shared experiences, pet care etc.

5. Increase in Fertility Healthcare:

When women delay having children, fertility care becomes important, and healthcare access for delayed pregnancy and related services are required.

6. Seniors as a Spending Generation:

India will be among the Top 10 Silver Economy markets by 2030. This generation, ignored

by brands and marketing, are spending on travel, entertainment, auto, electronics, etc. Brands need to cater to their specific needs – simplified technology, packaging that is easier to read and to open, and by meeting their very specific health, diet, and housing needs.

7. Need for Convenience for the “Sandwiched Generation”:

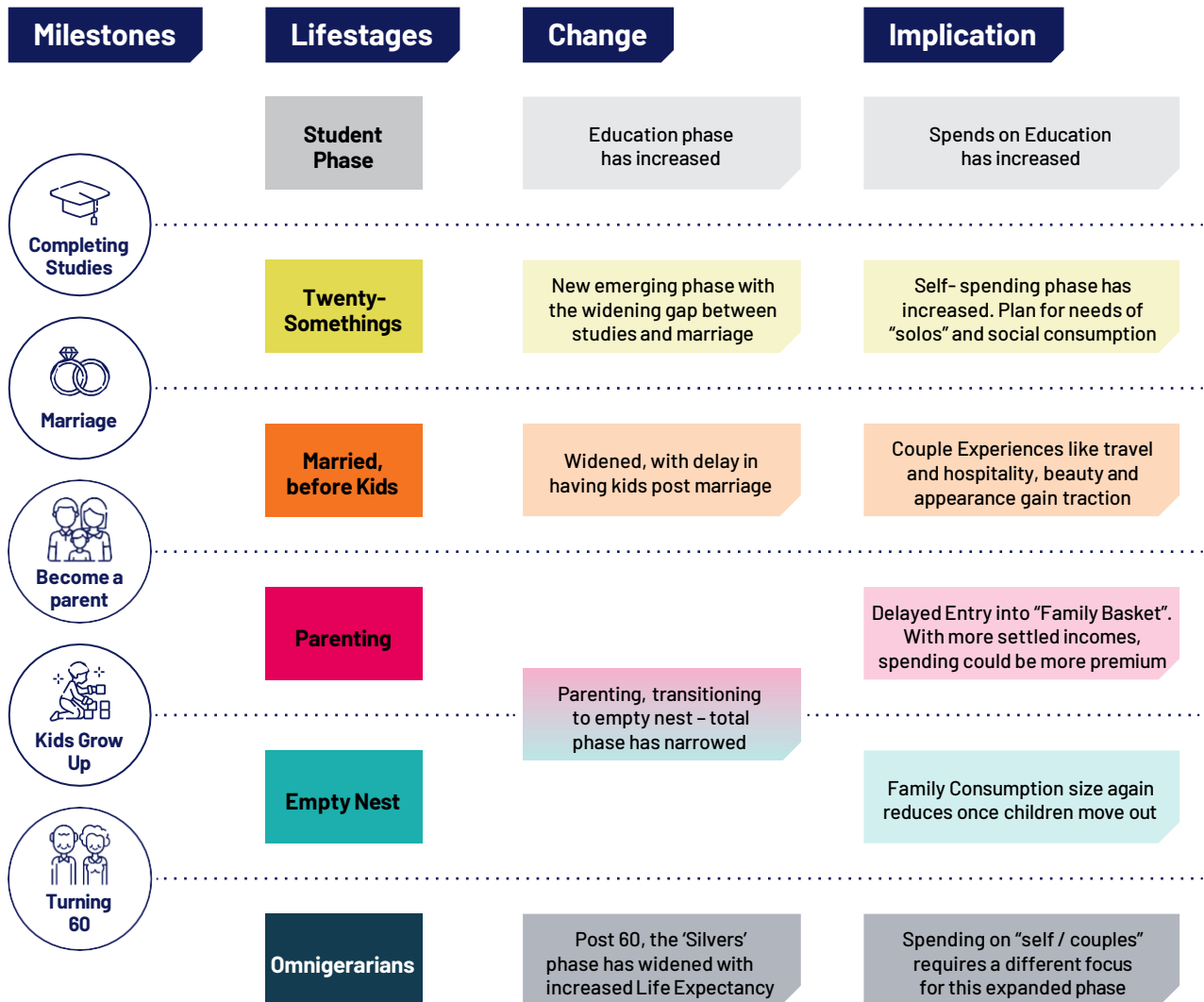
Reducing friction and increasing convenience will make caring for two groups of people in their lives easier. As time, energy and emotional bandwidth become increasingly stretched, solutions that simplify daily tasks, reduce decision-making effort and seamlessly adapt to changing needs can play a critical role in easing the burden. Flexible, adaptable products and services will help to reduce emotional stress.



In Summary

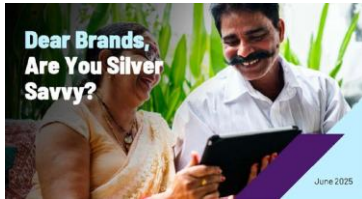
The winners will be brands that design for flexibility rather than fixed family structures, and build products, experiences, and communication that adapt to changing realities.

In an era of delayed milestones and diverse households, relevance will come not from targeting demographics, but from understanding how people's lives are being redefined.



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Further Reading:



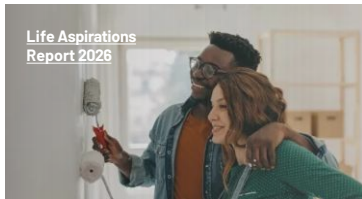
[Dear Brands, Are You Silver Savvy? | Ipsos](#)



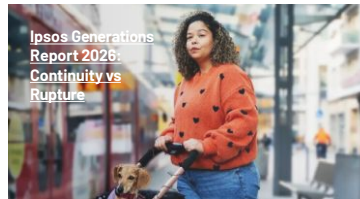
[Generations: Finding Common Ground in a Changing World | Ipsos](#)



[Modern Milestones: Why it's critical to think in life stages | Ipsos](#)



[Life Aspirations Report 2026](#)



[Ipsos Generations Report 2026: Continuity vs Rupture | Ipsos](#)



[Ipsos Generations Report 2025](#)



[Ipsos Generations Report 2024](#)



[Generational Marketing: Breaking free from stereotypes](#)



[Golden Years, Golden Opportunities](#)



[We need to talk about generations – A topic of conversation](#)

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