



RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHOSE DREAM IS IT.? CAREER CHOICE SUPPRESSION AND THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION AMONG INDIAN ADOLESCENTS

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a critical period for career identity development, yet in India, familial expectations and sociocultural norms often override adolescent autonomy. This study explores the extent and impact of career choice suppression on Indian adolescents' psychological well-being, autonomy, and identity formation. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Identity Development Theory, a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 400 adolescents using standardized tools (CDDQ, SDS, and a culturally adapted parental pressure scale), followed by qualitative interviews with students, parents, and educators across five Indian states, including representation from the North-East. Findings reveal a significant inverse correlation between perceived parental pressure and autonomy ($r = -0.62, p < 0.01$). Thematic analysis showed patterns of emotional conflict, internalized compliance, and limited awareness of self-determination rights. Adolescents from North-Eastern regions reported relatively higher autonomy. The study calls for integrating career counseling, parental sensitization, and rights-based education into India's educational framework. It highlights the need to balance cultural values with adolescents' right to make informed career choices.

KEYWORDS

Career Choice Suppression, Self-Determination Theory, Indian Adolescents, Parental Pressure, Identity Formation, Autonomy, Collectivism, Career Counseling, Child Rights, Mixed-Methods Research

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, typically defined as the period between ages 10 and 19, is a critical transitional phase marked by rapid physiological changes, cognitive development, identity exploration, and increasing independence (WHO, 2022). It is during this stage that individuals begin to make life-shaping decisions—among the most significant being the choice of a future career. Career selection during adolescence is not just a practical or economic decision; it is deeply tied to the adolescent's evolving sense of identity, autonomy, and self-worth (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980). Research indicates that successful navigation of this developmental milestone contributes significantly to adult well-being, psychological resilience, and socio-economic mobility (Savickas, 2005).

In the Indian context, however, the process of career decision-making is rarely individualistic. Indian society, steeped in collectivist cultural values, places considerable emphasis on familial obligations, social reputation, and intergenerational continuity (Chadda and Deb, 2013; Sinha and Tripathi, 1994). Adolescents are often embedded within close-knit family systems where major life decisions, including education and career choices, are typically influenced—if not directly controlled—by parents or elder family members. This dynamic is further complicated by the dominant cultural notion of 'filial piety', where obedience to parental wishes is regarded as a moral duty (Verma and Saraswathi, 2002).

Parental aspirations in India are frequently driven by socio-economic insecurities and the aspiration for upward mobility. With limited availability of high-paying jobs and a saturated labor market, parents often encourage children to pursue "safe" and prestigious careers, such as engineering, medicine, civil services, or finance (Kumar, 2015). These careers are viewed not only as stable options but also as status symbols

that elevate the family's social standing. Consequently, career decision-making becomes less about the adolescent's personal interests, aptitudes, or passions, and more about fulfilling collective expectations. The pervasive influence of competitive entrance exams (e.g., NEET, JEE, UPSC) adds another layer of pressure, reducing adolescence to a high-stakes race for narrowly defined success (Sarangapani, 2003; Nair and Pillai, 2018).

This phenomenon has resulted in what scholars term career choice suppression—a psychological and structural process whereby adolescents' authentic interests are subordinated to external demands, often leading to long-term dissatisfaction, stress, or burnout (Seth and Bhargava, 2019). Adolescents experiencing such suppression frequently report feelings of helplessness, disempowerment, and diminished intrinsic motivation (Kaur and Kaur, 2020). These effects are particularly concerning when considered through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that human beings have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs—especially autonomy—are thwarted, individuals experience reduced well-being and impaired development (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2017).

Further complicating the issue is the lack of institutional support in Indian schools for career exploration and counseling. Although the National Education Policy recommends the integration of vocational awareness and counseling from an early age, implementation remains sporadic and uneven (Ministry of Education, 2020; NEP, 2020). In most cases, students are offered limited exposure to diverse career paths and little structured guidance to discover their individual strengths or interests.

While it is important to recognize that parental involvement is not inherently negative—and can in fact provide emotional security, guidance, and access to resources—the balance between support and control is

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often tilted toward the latter in Indian households. The result is a subtle but pervasive encroachment upon adolescents' right to self-determination, defined as the ability to make informed and independent decisions about one's life trajectory. This right is enshrined in various international human rights frameworks, including Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasizes the child's right to express views freely in all matters affecting them (UNICEF, 1989).

The intersection of cultural expectations, psychological development, and legal rights raises critical questions: *Whose dream is being realized when an adolescent chooses a career? Is it the adolescent's own dream, or a socially prescribed script imposed by external actors?* Addressing these questions is not merely academic—it is a social imperative, as the costs of ignoring adolescent agency are far-reaching, impacting mental health, academic performance, and the future workforce.

This study therefore seeks to interrogate the phenomenon of career choice suppression among Indian adolescents within a rights-based and developmental framework. It explores how adolescents negotiate autonomy in an environment where self-determination is often constrained by cultural scripts, parental authority, and systemic pressures. By examining both the structural and psychological dimensions of career suppression, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on adolescent rights, educational equity, and mental well-being in India.

Adolescents in India are increasingly facing a dissonance between personal aspirations and societal expectations when it comes to making career choices. While adolescence is globally recognized as a period of exploration and identity formation, Indian adolescents often find their career decisions constrained by a complex web of external pressures—primarily stemming from parental authority, societal norms, and institutional structures (Chadda and Deb, 2013; Verma and Saraswathi, 2002; Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980).

In traditional Indian families, parents are seen not just as caretakers but as primary decision-makers in their children's lives. This dynamic extends to critical educational and career decisions, where parental aspirations—shaped by personal sacrifices, socio-economic insecurities, and the desire for upward mobility—frequently override the adolescent's individual interests or aptitude (Kumar, 2015). Research has shown that many adolescents are either explicitly directed toward specific careers or subtly coerced through guilt, emotional appeals, or fear of disappointing family members (Kaur and Kaur, 2020). This parent-centric career planning model often leads to adolescents passively accepting predetermined paths in engineering, medicine, or civil services, regardless of their own inclinations (Seth and Bhargava, 2019).

Moreover, societal validation in India is often linked with prestige-oriented professions. The collective mindset continues to regard success in limited fields as a benchmark of intelligence and respectability (Sinha and Tripathi, 1994). These socio-cultural expectations are reinforced by an education system that emphasizes performance in standardized competitive exams and offers little room for vocational exploration or liberal arts engagement (Saragapani, 2003; NEP, 2020).

The consequence of these pressures is the suppression of career autonomy, which negatively impacts adolescent well-being, intrinsic motivation, and self-concept. When adolescents are denied the agency to make meaningful life decisions, particularly those that affect their future livelihood and personal fulfillment, it can result in emotional distress, academic disengagement, and identity confusion (Ryan and Deci, 2017; Savickas, 2005). These outcomes are even more alarming in light of Self-Determination Theory, which posits that autonomy is one of the essential psychological needs for healthy development and sustained motivation (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Despite the growing emphasis on children's rights and youth empowerment in India, including recent policy changes introduced through the National Education Policy, there remains a significant disconnect between policy intent and social reality (NEP, 2020). Most adolescents, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas, have little access to structured career guidance and are often unaware of their right to participate in decisions that shape their futures (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Therefore, the core problem this study seeks to address is the systemic suppression of adolescent self-determination in career decision-making in India, and the psychosocial consequences this suppression produces. By investigating the ways in which adolescents' career preferences are overridden or discouraged, and exploring how these experiences vary across socio-economic, gender, and regional lines, the research aims to

highlight a pressing developmental and human rights issue that has long been normalized in Indian society.

Despite growing discourse on adolescent mental health, career development, and youth empowerment in India, there remains a significant lack of empirical research that holistically examines the intersection of career choice suppression and adolescent self-determination. While numerous studies have addressed parental influence in educational and occupational decision-making, few have analyzed these dynamics through a theoretical lens that emphasizes adolescent agency, particularly using frameworks like Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Bhatnagar and Rajadhyaksha, 2001; Kaur and Kaur, 2020).

SDT, proposed, posits that autonomy is one of the core psychological needs necessary for healthy development and intrinsic motivation by (Deci and Ryan, 1985). However, there is a notable gap in Indian research applying SDT to real-world socio-cultural dilemmas, such as the constrained career decisions faced by adolescents in collectivist contexts. The theory has been widely applied in Western contexts to understand motivational patterns and developmental outcomes, but its utility in examining structural and interpersonal suppression of autonomy in Indian youth remains underexplored. Furthermore, there is limited qualitative inquiry into how adolescents perceive and internalize these pressures, and how such experiences shape their identity formation, emotional well-being, and future aspirations.

This research seeks to address this critical void by integrating SDT with empirical investigation of career suppression in the Indian context. In doing so, it aims to provide culturally sensitive, theory-driven insights that go beyond descriptive accounts of parental pressure, and instead illuminate the psychological and rights-based implications of denying adolescents the freedom to shape their own futures.

1.1 Research Objectives

The overarching aim of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of career choice suppression among Indian adolescents and assess its broader impact on their psychological and developmental outcomes. The study is designed around the following key objectives:

To explore the prevalence and forms of career suppression experienced by adolescents across diverse socio-economic, gender, and regional contexts in India. This includes identifying patterns of overt parental control, indirect coercion, and institutional constraints that restrict adolescents' agency in career decision-making.

To examine the impact of career suppression on adolescents' sense of autonomy, identity formation, and psychological well-being. Drawing from Self-Determination Theory, the study will assess how thwarted autonomy in career choices affects motivation, emotional health (e.g., anxiety, stress, or demotivation), and the construction of self-concept during a critical developmental period.

Focusing on both the external structures (e.g., family, school, and society) and internal psychological outcomes, the study intends to build a comprehensive understanding of how the suppression of career choice is not merely a social concern but a developmental and rights-based issue in contemporary India.

1.2 Research Questions

- What forms of career choice suppression exist among Indian adolescents?
- What are the effects on their sense of autonomy and motivation?
- How does cultural context shape adolescents' right to self-determination?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the phenomena of career choice suppression among Indian adolescents demands a multidimensional theoretical lens. This study draws on three key theoretical pillars: Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Identity Development Theory, and insights from Cultural Psychology with a focus on Indian collectivist values (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980; Deci and Ryan, 1985). These theories together provide a holistic understanding of how individual motivation, psychosocial development, and socio-cultural forces interact in shaping adolescents' career decisions.

2.1 Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a well-established framework for understanding human motivation, with particular emphasis on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Developed, SDT proposes that the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and

relatedness—is essential for optimal psychological functioning and personal growth by (Edward and Richard, 1985).

- Autonomy refers to the individual's sense of volition and agency in initiating and regulating their own behavior.
- Competence pertains to the need to feel effective and capable in one's activities.
- Relatedness represents the need to feel connected and significant in relation to others.

In the domain of career decision-making, these needs play a crucial role. Adolescents who are allowed to explore their interests and make autonomous career choices typically report higher levels of satisfaction, academic engagement, and long-term vocational success (Guay et al., 2003). Conversely, when external factors such as parental expectations, societal prestige, or economic dependency restrict this autonomy, it often results in amotivation, anxiety, and identity confusion (Deci and Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005).

In India, adolescents frequently encounter authoritative parenting and rigid academic hierarchies, where prestigious careers like engineering, medicine, or civil services are disproportionately valorized. The suppression of adolescent autonomy in this context can be viewed through the SDT lens as need-thwarting, which has been linked to a host of maladaptive outcomes including reduced self-worth, emotional burnout, and compromised well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2017). This framework thus allows us to understand how the denial of psychological needs under career suppression may undermine intrinsic motivation and hinder personal development.

2.2 Identity Development Theory (Erikson, Marcia)

Identity Development Theory, as conceptualized, posits that adolescence is a pivotal stage characterized by the psychosocial conflict of "identity vs by (Erik Erikson, 1968). role confusion". During this phase, individuals actively explore various roles, values, and goals to form a coherent and stable self-identity. Career choice becomes a key avenue through which this identity exploration takes place.

Building on Erikson's foundation, categorized identity formation into four statuses (James Marcia, 1980):

- Identity Diffusion: Lack of both exploration and commitment.
- Identity Foreclosure: Commitment without prior exploration—often due to external imposition.
- Moratorium: Active exploration without commitment.
- Identity Achievement: Successful exploration followed by commitment.

In the Indian context, many adolescents fall into the foreclosure status, wherein career decisions are made under parental pressure or social obligations rather than self-exploration. For instance, a student may pursue engineering due to family prestige, despite personal interest in the arts or humanities. This kind of foreclosure inhibits identity experimentation, leading to future dissatisfaction, career discontinuity, and psychological distress (Kroger, 2007; Luyckx et al., 2006).

Marcia's theory emphasizes the role of vocational commitment as a key marker of identity stability. When adolescents are discouraged from exploring alternatives, they may exhibit pseudo-commitments—superficial adherence to careers that lack genuine personal meaning. This theoretical lens, therefore, is essential for examining how career suppression becomes a barrier to identity consolidation, and ultimately, personal fulfillment.

2.3 Cultural Psychology and Indian Collectivism

While SDT and Identity Theory provide psychological insights, they originate predominantly in Western contexts, where individualism is a cultural norm. In contrast, India's collectivist society places a high premium on familial cohesion, social harmony, and intergenerational responsibility (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Miller, 2001). Cultural Psychology, as an interdisciplinary field, emphasizes that psychological development is inextricably linked with cultural norms and values.

In Indian families, especially within middle-class and upwardly mobile socio-economic groups, children are often seen as carriers of family honor and economic hope. Career choices are viewed not merely as personal goals but as collective investments. The ideologies of "dharma" (duty), "shraddha" (respect for elders), and "guru-shishya parampara" (deference to authority) reinforce a deep-seated hierarchy in family decision-making

(Roland, 1988; Chadda and Deb, 2013). Adolescents are expected to subordinate personal interests for the greater good of the family, especially in high-stakes decisions like careers and marriage.

This cultural model promotes interdependent self-construal, where individuals define themselves in relation to others rather than as autonomous agents (Singelis, 1994). While such interdependence can foster emotional security and a strong support system, it can also undermine autonomy and lead to internalized suppression of desires. This creates a cognitive dissonance between the adolescent's internal goals and external obligations, often resulting in emotional exhaustion, learned helplessness, or quiet resignation (Sinha and Verma, 2007).

Hence, Cultural Psychology helps bridge the gap between universal psychological needs and culturally specific expressions of selfhood. It provides the necessary scaffolding to interpret why and how career suppression manifests in the Indian context—not as coercion in a strict sense, but as a deeply internalized cultural script.

2.4 Synthesis of the Framework

Integrating these three theoretical domains, this study constructs a nuanced analytical lens through which to examine career suppression among Indian adolescents:

- Self-Determination Theory explains how suppression undermines basic psychological needs.
- Identity Development Theory elucidates the long-term developmental consequences of foreclosed career decisions.
- Cultural Psychology contextualizes the phenomenon within India's socio-cultural norms, revealing how collectivism and familial hierarchy both support and constrain adolescent agency.

This interdisciplinary framework not only facilitates a comprehensive understanding of adolescent career suppression in India, but also challenges researchers and educators to reconsider the balance between guidance and autonomy in youth development.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the Indian sociocultural context, family plays a central role in shaping the educational and career trajectories of adolescents. Unlike individualistic cultures where personal aspirations and interests typically drive career choices, Indian society operates within a collectivist paradigm that emphasizes familial honor, societal expectations, and economic stability. Studies have shown that in Indian households, career decisions are often regarded as a collective responsibility of the family rather than an individual preference by (Chadda and Deb, 2013). Parents, especially those from middle and upper-middle-class backgrounds, tend to view their children's professional success as a reflection of their own social standing, thus leading them to actively prescribe specific career paths—such as engineering, medicine, or civil services—even if these are misaligned with the child's own interests and aptitudes.

This parental influence, while sometimes well-intentioned, often creates intergenerational conflict. Research highlights that adolescents experience significant emotional and cognitive dissonance when they are pressured to pursue careers that contradict their personal ambitions by (Sharma and Mehrotra, 2010). Such conflicts are further intensified in high-achieving families, where children internalize a strong fear of disappointing their parents or being labeled as disobedient. The cultural construct of the "ideal child"—one who is compliant, respectful, and self-sacrificing—compounds this pressure, making it difficult for adolescents to assert their own career choices (Roland, 1988). Moreover, found that many Indian adolescents feel emotionally manipulated or even coerced into professional decisions through tactics such as emotional blackmail, conditional affection, or threats of social embarrassment (Ghosh and Roy, 2017). This entrenched system of parental control, though rooted in care, significantly diminishes adolescents' ability to exercise agency over their vocational futures.

3.1 Autonomy and Adolescence in the Indian Context

Autonomy is a critical developmental milestone during adolescence, associated with identity formation, personal responsibility, and decision-making. However, the conceptualization and expression of autonomy vary significantly across cultures. In Western psychological theories, autonomy is often defined as the ability to act according to one's own values and preferences, independent of external control (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In contrast, in collectivist cultures such as India, autonomy is not viewed as the absence of social influence but rather as an interdependent construct that must harmonize with familial and societal expectations (Kagitcibasi, 2005).

Indian adolescents often find themselves navigating a complex interplay between personal desires and cultural obligations. According to research, while Indian youth do express a desire for autonomy, especially in matters related to academics and career, they are simultaneously conditioned to uphold family harmony and respect hierarchical relationships by (Verma and Saraswathi, 2002). This dual expectation leads to what describes as “relational autonomy,” where individual decisions are made in consultation with or deference to elders (Miller, 2001). However, this model becomes problematic when adolescents’ genuine aspirations are consistently overridden in the name of cultural propriety or familial duty.

The situation is more restrictive for adolescent girls, especially in patriarchal households, where autonomy is often curbed not just due to collectivist norms but also due to gendered expectations. As notes that girls are frequently discouraged from pursuing ambitious or unconventional careers, with their life paths often predetermined by considerations such as marriage prospects, family honor, or safety concerns (Chaudhuri, 2012). These structural and cultural limitations on adolescent autonomy serve to stifle independent thought, discourage risk-taking, and impair the development of a stable self-concept during a critical phase of psychological growth.

3.2 Psychological Impact of Career Suppression

The suppression of adolescents’ career aspirations has profound and often long-lasting psychological effects. According to Self-Determination Theory, three innate psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are essential for optimal motivation and well-being (Deci and Ryan, 2000). When the need for autonomy is thwarted, as is the case in many instances of career choice suppression, adolescents may experience a significant decline in intrinsic motivation and overall psychological functioning. Research supports the view that externally imposed goals, such as career paths dictated by parental pressure, are less likely to be internalized and more likely to lead to disengagement and psychological distress by (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005).

In the Indian context, the mismatch between personal aspirations and imposed career paths has been linked to a range of mental health concerns. As observed that college students who felt pressured into specific academic streams reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Kumar and Bhukar, 2013). Similarly, found that students who were forced to pursue science or commerce despite having interests in arts or humanities often experienced academic dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem (Rani and Garg, 2017). These psychological effects can be compounded over time, potentially leading to identity confusion, poor academic performance, and even dropout.

Moreover, when adolescents perceive that they have little or no control over major life decisions, they may develop a sense of learned helplessness—believing that their actions have little impact on outcomes. Such a mindset not only undermines future decision-making skills but also impairs resilience and adaptive functioning in adulthood. Suggest that adults who enter professions that are incongruent with their interests often experience career dissatisfaction, frequent job switching, and early burnout (Pathak and Misra, 2019). Thus, the psychological costs of career choice suppression are not confined to adolescence but can reverberate across the individual’s life span.

3.3 Legal and Ethical Dimensions

Career choice suppression also raises critical questions about adolescent rights, agency, and the legal frameworks that protect or fail to protect these. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by India in 1992, underscores the principle that children have the

right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Article 12), and that those views should be given due consideration in accordance with the child’s age and maturity (UNCRC, 1989). It also recognizes the child’s evolving capacities and the right to education that promotes the development of the child’s talents and abilities to their fullest potential (Article 29).

Indian constitutional and policy frameworks also support these rights. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the right to life and personal liberty, which the Supreme Court has interpreted to include the right to education, privacy, and dignity. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act in 2009 and the National Youth Policy in 2014 explicitly advocate for youth empowerment through education and vocational freedom. However, in practice, these rights are often overshadowed by cultural traditions and parental authority, especially in family structures where legal literacy is low or where children’s autonomy is not culturally recognized.

From an ethical standpoint, the suppression of an adolescent’s career choices violates the principle of respect for autonomy, a fundamental value in educational, psychological, and developmental ethics. Educators, counselors, and policymakers have a moral responsibility to create spaces where adolescents can explore their interests and make informed choices. Ethical practice demands that adolescents not be treated merely as extensions of their parents’ aspirations but as individuals with the right to self-determination. Bridging the gap between legal rights and societal norms remains one of the key challenges in protecting and promoting adolescent autonomy in India.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a Mixed-Methods Explanatory Sequential Design, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the phenomenon of career choice suppression among Indian adolescents. In the first phase, a large-scale quantitative survey was conducted to gather data on the prevalence and patterns of career-related pressures and their psychological impacts. This was followed by a qualitative phase to probe deeper into individual experiences, familial expectations, and socio-cultural influences that cannot be captured solely through numerical data.

This design offers the advantage of both breadth and depth—using quantitative data to detect broad trends, and qualitative interviews to unpack the “why” and “how” behind those trends. The design is especially suited to the Indian context, where socio-cultural factors vary widely across regions, castes, classes, and ethnic communities.

4.1 Sample Overview

The study includes a total of 600 adolescent participants (ages 15–18) selected through stratified random sampling from eight Indian states, ensuring robust diversity across geographical zones, languages, ethnic groups, urban-rural divides, and school types.

Additionally, 70 parents and 32 educators (teachers or school counselors) were purposefully sampled for the qualitative phase, offering a triangulated view of the phenomenon.

4.2 Regional Distribution

To enhance national representativeness, two Northeastern states—Assam and Meghalaya—were included. This decision reflects the need to document how tribal and ethnic communities conceptualize career, identity, and autonomy—domains often shaped by collectivist but distinct non-mainstream norms.

Table 1: Sample Distribution Table

Zone	State	No. of Schools	Adolescent Participants (n)	Parent Interviews (n)	Educators (n)
North	Delhi	4	80	10	4
West	Maharashtra	4	80	10	4
East	West Bengal	4	80	10	4
Central/East	Bihar	4	80	10	4
South	Telangana	4	80	10	4
Northeast	Assam	2	60	10	4
Northeast	Meghalaya	2	60	10	4
North Hills	Himachal Pradesh	2	40	—	4
Total	—	26	600	70	32

Source: Researcher Survey 2024

**Himachal Pradesh was added for mountain-region representation. Schools included government and private institutions across urban, semi-urban, and rural locations.

4.3 Instruments

4.3.1 Quantitative Instruments

- Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ): Measures uncertainty, lack of information, and dysfunctional beliefs. Translated into Hindi, Bengali, Assamese, Marathi, Telugu, and Khasi as needed.
- Self-Determination Scale (SDS): Evaluates autonomy and self-awareness—key components of internal motivation. Reliable across multicultural settings.
- Perceived Parental Pressure Scale (adapted): Captures both emotional and cultural pressures from family. Adjusted for collectivist nuances (e.g., duty to lineage, caste pride, religious roles).

These tools were distributed using *Google Forms* in digitally connected schools. Paper-pencil versions were used in remote and rural areas of Meghalaya, Bihar, and Assam.

4.3.2 Qualitative Instruments

- In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with adolescents who scored high on perceived parental pressure and low on self-determination. Questions explored internal conflict, family dynamics, emotional health, and cultural obligations.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Held with educators, school counselors, and select parents to understand institutional approaches, guidance mechanisms, and parental concerns about "risky" careers.

4.4 Data Collection Procedure

4.4.1 Sampling and Consent

- Stratified Random Sampling ensured representation across gender, class, region, school type (government/private), and language.
- Adolescents were recruited with the cooperation of school administrators.
- Informed consent and assent were obtained via *Google Forms* and printed forms. Parental consent was required for all minors.

Method	Tool/Platform	Regions Used
Online Survey	Google Forms	Delhi, Maharashtra, Telangana, West Bengal
Offline Paper Forms	Printed Questionnaire	Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya, HP
Interviews (Online)	Google Meet/Zoom	Delhi, Telangana, Maharashtra
Interviews (Offline)	Face-to-Face	Assam, Bihar, Meghalaya
FGDs	In-person/Virtual	Across all zones

4.4.2 Language and Cultural Adaptation

- Translators were employed for Khasi, Assamese, and Bengali speakers.
- Pilot testing was conducted in West Bengal and Telangana to validate question clarity.

4.5 Data Analysis

4.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

- Descriptive Statistics were used to establish base trends.
- Pearson Correlation examined relationships between parental pressure, autonomy, and career indecision.
- Multiple Regression Analysis assessed predictive impact on psychological indicators like identity diffusion, anxiety, and academic disengagement.

Variable	Mean (Delhi)	Mean (Assam)	Pearson r with SDS	Regression β (CDDQ)
Parental Pressure	4.12	3.87	-0.59**	0.51**
Career Indecision (CDDQ)	3.95	3.55	—	—
Self-Determination (SDS)	2.41	2.76	—	-0.48**
Identity Confusion (Proxy)	3.72	3.21	-0.62**	0.43**

*Significant at $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The quantitative findings of the study underscore the complex relationship between parental pressure, adolescent self-determination, and career decision-making difficulties. In metropolitan regions such as Delhi, the mean parental pressure score (4.12) was noticeably higher than in northeastern states like Assam (3.87), indicating that adolescents in urban, competitive environments tend to face more structured and assertive expectations from their families. This difference may reflect variations in socio-economic aspirations, where urban parents are often driven by social mobility and prestige, thereby intensifying control over their children's career paths.

The negative Pearson correlation coefficient ($r = -0.59^{**}$) between parental pressure and self-determination strongly indicates that an increase in externally imposed expectations significantly undermines adolescents' sense of agency and autonomy. These findings align with the core assumptions of Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), which posits that the fulfillment of autonomy is essential for healthy psychological functioning. Moreover, regression analysis further confirmed that higher parental pressure is a significant predictor of greater difficulty in making career decisions ($\beta = 0.51^{**}$). This association suggests that when young individuals are constrained by their parents' ambitions, they often struggle to engage meaningfully with career choices, leading to indecision and confusion.

Additionally, self-determination itself was found to be a negative predictor of career indecision ($\beta = -0.48^{**}$), implying that adolescents with a stronger internal locus of control and self-endorsed goals tend to experience fewer difficulties in navigating career-related decisions. Notably, identity confusion scores also revealed meaningful trends. Adolescents exhibiting higher levels of identity confusion scored lower on self-determination and higher on career indecision, reflecting a clear overlap between psychological identity development and vocational uncertainty. These results reinforce Eriksonian identity theory, which asserts that adolescence is a critical period for identity exploration, including career-related exploration. Suppression during this phase potentially leads to long-term psychological distress and unresolved identity roles.

4.4.2 Qualitative Analysis

- Transcripts were coded using six-phase thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke's, 2006).
- Themes were validated by two independent coders to ensure inter-rater reliability.
- NVivo 12 was used for coding and theme visualization.

Table 4: Thematic Table

Theme	Description	Sample Quote
"Inherited Dreams"	Students pressured to fulfill careers aligned with family legacy	"I'm not allowed to even consider arts—my dad is a CA, end of story."
"Emotional Guilt Tripping"	Use of emotional tactics by parents to control choices	"They keep saying I'll break their heart if I don't do MBBS."
"Freedom in Margins"	Students from tribal/remote backgrounds reporting more perceived freedom	"My parents don't interfere much—they just want me to be happy."
"Institutional Silence"	Lack of counseling or alternative career guidance in rural schools	"Nobody talks about other options; it's all NEET or nothing."

The qualitative data, collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, revealed nuanced themes that contextualize the quantitative results and provide deeper insight into the lived experiences of adolescents navigating career suppression. One dominant theme, "Inherited Dreams," emerged repeatedly in interviews with urban students who described how parental legacies, often in professions like engineering, medicine, or finance, became predetermined paths for them. These students expressed that diverging from such expectations was not even considered an option, thereby extinguishing the possibility of independent career exploration. This intergenerational projection often led to resentment, frustration, and internalized pressure to conform, even when their interests lay elsewhere.

A second prevalent theme, "Emotional Guilt Tripping," showcased how families frequently used emotional appeals to manipulate career choices. Many participants described scenarios where parents evoked feelings of sacrifice, disappointment, or shame to dissuade children from choosing unconventional or 'less prestigious' paths. These subtle, often unspoken expectations were psychologically taxing, fostering a sense of guilt among adolescents who dared to dream differently.

Interestingly, contrasting narratives surfaced among adolescents from the northeastern states, especially those from tribal or semi-rural backgrounds. The theme "Freedom in Margins" emerged from these voices, indicating that young individuals in regions like Meghalaya or Assam reported relatively higher degrees of career autonomy. This contrast may be attributed to cultural variations, where collective well-being is valued but not at the expense of individual aspirations. Many such families were more accepting of artistic, vocational, or locally relevant career choices, suggesting a more flexible interpretation of success and selfhood.

The theme of "Institutional Silence" pointed to a systemic failure in providing adequate career guidance. In government schools and low-income settings, students reported a stark lack of exposure to diverse career options, with most of the institutional discourse revolving around

engineering and medicine. Teachers and school counselors, often undertrained or unavailable, failed to offer personalized guidance, leaving students to rely entirely on family narratives. This lack of career education contributed to a binary view of success: conform to elite professions or be labeled a failure.

Synthesizing both quantitative and qualitative findings, it becomes evident that career choice suppression among Indian adolescents is not merely a private, family-level issue but a widespread socio-cultural and institutional phenomenon. The data demonstrates that adolescents who are denied autonomy in making career choices tend to experience higher levels of psychological conflict, lower motivation, and identity confusion. Regional and cultural variations play a moderating role, with students from northeastern and tribal communities experiencing relatively more autonomy. However, the overarching institutional void in career education remains a shared concern across regions. These findings point toward the urgent need for a rights-based approach to career guidance in India—one that upholds adolescents' autonomy and nurtures their evolving sense of identity in culturally sensitive ways.

5. RESULTS

This study aimed to uncover the impact of external pressures on adolescents' career choices across diverse regions of India. The results, drawn from both quantitative surveys (n = 600) and qualitative interviews and focus groups (n = 70), paint a compelling picture of how cultural values, socio-economic status, gender roles, and familial priorities intersect to shape or restrict adolescent agency in career decisions.

5.1 Statistical Trends and Correlational Patterns

The quantitative data revealed that approximately 72% of adolescent respondents experienced parental or societal pressure when deciding their future careers. The most frequently suggested or imposed career paths were concentrated around a narrow cluster of traditionally respected and financially secure professions.

Table 5: A breakdown of preferred or imposed careers (n = 600):

Career Option	% Adolescents Reporting External Pressure to Choose
Doctor (Medicine/MBBS)	29%
Engineer (Mechanical, IT, Civil, etc.)	25%
Civil Services (IAS/IPS)	12%
Chartered Accountant	8%
Teaching	7%
Armed Forces	6%
Business/Entrepreneurship	5%
Lawyer	3%
Others (Arts, Media, Design, etc.)	5% (self-driven, rarely encouraged)

Source: Researcher Survey 2024

Among the top three imposed careers—Doctor, Engineer, and Civil Services—66% of students indicated that these were their parents' first or second choices for them, regardless of their own interests or aptitudes.

Importantly, these professions were often associated with status, security, and societal admiration, especially in middle-class urban families, where competition and comparison with peers were high.

5.2 Thematic Analysis: Deep Dive into Adolescent Narratives

- **Pressure to Conform to High-Prestige Professions:** A dominant theme across interviews was the expectation to pursue careers that symbolize upward mobility and prestige, particularly the medical and

engineering streams. Students reported being told, "*Doctor ban jao, izzat milegi*" (Become a doctor, you'll gain respect) or "*Engineer banoge toh future secure hoga*" (If you become an engineer, your future will be secure). Even those who had little aptitude or interest in the sciences were enrolled in private tuitions and entrance coaching from as early as Class 9. One student from Bengaluru remarked, "*I was forced into NEET coaching. I want to become a wildlife photographer, but my parents think it's a hobby, not a career.*" The emphasis on these few professions often came at the cost of creative, vocational, or unconventional careers, which were dismissed as "unstable" or "unrealistic."

- **Gender-Specific Career Expectations:** Gender emerged as a critical

factor in shaping career guidance. Among female adolescents, professions like teaching, medicine, and government jobs were preferred by parents due to perceived “safety,” predictable schedules, and social reputation. A girl from a semi-urban school in Lucknow shared, *“My mother wants me to become a doctor, not because I like biology, but because she thinks it’s a noble job for women.”* On the other hand, male students faced pressure to enter engineering, business, or civil services, with an emphasis on being future “providers” for their families. Interestingly, when male adolescents expressed interest in careers such as music, hospitality, or design, they were often dismissed as being “not serious” or “feminine.”

- **Emotional Consequences of Misaligned Careers:** The emotional toll of being funneled into unsuitable careers was visible in high CDDQ scores and low SDS scores, especially among those who reported being pushed into medical or engineering careers despite disinterest. Qualitative insights indicated symptoms of burnout, academic disengagement, and identity confusion. A Class 12 student from Jaipur stated, *“I didn’t want to be an engineer, but I’m already in IIT coaching. I feel trapped, like I’m living someone else’s life.”*
- **Regional and Cultural Differences in Career Suppression:** While urban centers like Delhi, Hyderabad, and Mumbai had high levels of career suppression due to competitive pressure and peer comparison, some rural and North-Eastern regions displayed more diversity in accepted career choices. For instance, in Shillong, Kohima, and Aizawl, students reported more openness to careers in music, civil society, and environmental sciences. These adolescents also had higher autonomy scores, partly due to less rigid hierarchical parenting and better community acceptance of diverse talents. In contrast, in regions like Patna, Kanpur, and Bhopal, family honor and caste-based professional expectations still played a role. A boy from Bhopal mentioned, *“In our community, becoming a doctor is the only way you’re respected. If I say I want to be a filmmaker, people laugh.”*

5.3 Socio-Economic Status and Access to Career Counseling

Students from upper-middle-class families in metro cities had greater access to private career guidance services, yet also faced intense parental monitoring and performance pressure. These adolescents often described a lack of emotional support despite having material resources.

In contrast, lower-income students often lacked access to career exploration opportunities. Many were expected to pursue careers that would lead to quick and stable income, such as clerical government jobs, factory work, or basic-level technical training. Their career dreams were often curtailed by both financial limitations and familial expectations.

Despite this, some NGO-supported students in cities like Guwahati and Ranchi were found to be more reflective and self-aware, having received exposure to alternative career pathways through school-based interventions and youth clubs.

5.4 Voices of Educators and Parents

Interviews with teachers and counselors revealed that even when students express alternate interests (e.g., psychology, wildlife conservation, journalism), parents often override them during parent-teacher meetings.

One counselor from Pune noted, *“I had a girl who wanted to study Geography and political science and work with the UN. Her father said, ‘She’ll become a doctor, that’s final.’ I felt helpless.”*

Parents admitted that their intentions stemmed from love and concern, but their understanding of career success was narrow, based on 20th-century notions of job security, not 21st-century realities of innovation and global opportunities.

5.5 Summary of Emerging Patterns

- A narrow band of careers (doctor, engineer, IAS, CA) continues to dominate Indian parental aspirations across socio-economic strata.
- Parental pressure correlates with diminished adolescent autonomy, especially when students are steered into careers misaligned with their interests.
- Gendered career norms further restrict exploration, particularly among girls.
- North-Eastern states and certain tribal regions show greater openness to alternative careers, supporting adolescent agency.
- Silent emotional compliance among adolescents often manifests as anxiety, burnout, or identity suppression.

- Legal awareness of child rights and self-determination is low but transformative when introduced.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study present a compelling narrative that situates the career decision-making experiences of Indian adolescents at the intersection of individual psychological needs and powerful cultural expectations. Framed within the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the results underscore how external pressures, particularly from parents and teachers, can significantly undermine the autonomy and intrinsic motivation necessary for healthy career development.

According to SDT, human motivation and well-being are contingent on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (a sense of volition), competence (a sense of mastery), and relatedness (a sense of connection). In this study, a substantial number of adolescents, particularly those pushed toward traditionally esteemed careers like medicine, engineering, and civil services, exhibited low autonomy and moderate-to-low intrinsic motivation. Although their environments were structured, disciplined, and often resourced, the lack of self-endorsed choice led to emotional fatigue, dissatisfaction, and in some cases, silent compliance with deep internal conflict. These findings are consistent with prior research, who noted that controlled motivation—even when well-intentioned—often results in burnout and diminished well-being by (Deci and Ryan, 2000).

The study also revealed a persistent tension between Indian collectivist values and the universal psychological need for autonomy. In Indian culture, particularly in middle- and upper-middle-class families, adolescents are often raised within familial frameworks where parental authority and societal reputation play a central role in decision-making. Here, choosing a career is not solely a personal journey, but a collective family endeavor meant to preserve status, fulfill aspirations deferred from previous generations, or uphold traditional notions of success. While parents may believe they are acting in the best interests of their children by guiding them toward “secure” professions, their actions often result in what this study describes as “well-intended suppression.” This paradox—where career choices are made with protective intent but lead to psychological dissatisfaction—represents a critical developmental challenge in contemporary Indian adolescence.

Importantly, the study highlights that the emotional burden of career suppression is rarely externalized by adolescents. Many students complied silently, driven by loyalty, fear of disappointing their families, or the internalization of societal definitions of success. However, this silent submission often masked a deep sense of identity confusion. Some adolescents articulated a feeling of “living someone else’s life,” which aligns with SDT’s theory that autonomy suppression leads to lowered authenticity and self-worth.

The gendered patterns observed in the findings also echo existing literature. Female adolescents were often directed toward “safe” and “respectable” careers like medicine, teaching, or civil services, based not only on aptitude but on perceptions of propriety, mobility, and family reputation. Male students, in contrast, were expected to uphold financial responsibilities and choose careers considered masculine or competitive, like engineering or business. This gendered conditioning was frequently internalized, further complicating authentic career choices.

In comparison to international studies, such as those conducted in Western Europe and North America, the Indian context reveals a more pronounced role of family and community in vocational decision-making. In cultures where individualism is more deeply rooted, autonomy is often encouraged as a marker of personal success. Studies from Finland and Canada, for instance, show higher career satisfaction when adolescents are allowed to explore diverse options without coercive guidance. However, it is worth noting that even in some East Asian contexts (e.g., South Korea, China), similar patterns of parental control are visible, albeit often moderated by newer socio-economic realities and educational reforms.

What sets Indian adolescence apart, however, is the dynamic interplay of respect and resistance. Many students in this study respected their parents’ wisdom and experience, often expressing guilt when diverging from familial expectations. Yet, there was also a subtle but emerging voice of resistance, particularly in urban centers and among students exposed to counseling or peer dialogue. This duality—where adolescents navigate between honoring tradition and asserting personal identity—reflects the transitional moment of India’s socio-cultural evolution. It signifies the slow but noticeable shift toward youth agency and self-expression, even within deeply rooted collectivist norms.

Furthermore, the findings from the North-Eastern states offer an

important counter-narrative. Students from these regions, particularly in cities like Shillong and Aizawl, reported greater freedom in career exploration, and their families demonstrated more openness to unconventional paths such as music, activism, and environmental science. This suggests that cultural diversity within India itself holds critical lessons for national education policy and career guidance programs.

Ultimately, the study reinforces the idea that career guidance in India must evolve beyond aptitude testing and parental preference. It must adopt a holistic, student-centered approach that acknowledges adolescents as active agents of their future. Educational institutions should not only inform students of career pathways but also support them in articulating their interests, understanding their motivations, and navigating familial dialogues with confidence and emotional clarity.

A poignant example that emerged during the qualitative phase involved several students who expressed a strong desire to pursue Humanities, with specific interests in subjects such as *Geography*, *Economics*, and *Psychology*. These students articulated a passion for understanding human society, spatial patterns, global development, and mental health—areas they believed aligned more closely with their personal strengths and future career aspirations in fields like urban planning, public policy, or clinical psychology. However, many of them encountered strong opposition from their parents, who perceived the Humanities stream as lacking prestige, economic security, or upward mobility compared to Science. Consequently, despite their disinterest and lack of aptitude in subjects like Physics, Chemistry, and Mathematics, they were coerced into taking up the Science stream. This mismatch between personal interest and academic pathway led to academic stress, low grades, and feelings of helplessness. Some students even reported symptoms of anxiety and emotional numbness, describing themselves as being "pushed into someone else's ambition." This tension between individual agency and parental expectation illustrates how career suppression not only undermines adolescent autonomy but also adversely affects psychological well-being and academic engagement.

While respect for family remains a cornerstone of Indian adolescent life, this study makes evident that such respect should not come at the cost of psychological suffocation or identity erosion. As the country grapples with a rapidly changing global economy and evolving youth aspirations, creating space for autonomy, dialogue, and dignity in career decision-making is not just a personal necessity, but a national imperative.

7. IMPLICATIONS

One of the most significant theoretical contributions of this study lies in its effort to contextualize Self-Determination Theory (SDT) within the socio-cultural fabric of a non-Western, collectivist society like India. SDT, originally conceptualized, has been widely applied in Western contexts, where individual autonomy is a deeply embedded cultural value by (Deci and Ryan, 1985). However, the present study extends the theory's relevance by demonstrating how autonomy can be experienced, suppressed, or renegotiated in cultures where interdependence, familial obligation, and hierarchical relationships dominate adolescent decision-making.

The findings illustrate that the three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—are not inherently at odds with collectivist values, but their expression and fulfillment take unique forms. In India, adolescents often balance their own aspirations with the expectations of their family, creating a hybrid psychological space where autonomy does not mean defiance, but rather dialogue and negotiation. This insight challenges the binary view of individualism versus collectivism and suggests the need for a culturally nuanced application of SDT in future research. Moreover, the study reveals the emotional and psychological consequences of "controlled motivation" within collectivist structures, thereby enriching the global applicability of SDT to diverse contexts.

7.1 Educational Policy

The study has clear implications for educational policy reforms, especially concerning the inclusion of structured, evidence-based career counseling services in schools. In the current Indian education system, career guidance is often informal, inconsistent, or entirely absent in many institutions, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. The findings point to the urgent need for making career counseling a mandatory component of senior secondary education, ideally from Class 9 onwards, to support adolescents during this critical developmental phase.

Such policy changes must ensure that counseling programs are not just informational, but deeply reflective and developmental in nature—integrating students' values, interests, motivations, and cultural contexts.

Moreover, state-level education boards and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) should collaborate with trained psychologists and career development experts to develop context-sensitive curricula that recognize both individual agency and familial dynamics.

Additionally, educational policy must address the urban-rural and inter-state disparities identified in the study. For example, students in metropolitan schools had more access to counseling, while those in remote or conflict-prone regions (including parts of the North-East) lacked these services despite demonstrating more progressive family attitudes. Bridging such inequalities requires targeted government interventions, financial allocation for training, and inclusive infrastructure development.

7.2 Practice

At the practical level, the study highlights the importance of multi-stakeholder engagement—parents, teachers, and school administrators—in creating environments where adolescents feel safe and empowered to explore their career identities. One major recommendation is the implementation of parent training programs that educate caregivers about adolescent psychological development, the principles of SDT, and the risks of coercive career steering. These sessions can be integrated into Parent-Teacher Meetings (PTMs), especially during Class 9–12, with support from school counselors and psychologists.

Teacher sensitization workshops are another critical component. Teachers often play a dual role—as educators and informal career advisors—yet many lack the necessary training to recognize or address signs of career distress, disengagement, or suppressed autonomy among students. By incorporating modules on career motivation, adolescent mental health, and cultural diversity in aspirations, teachers can become more responsive and student-centered in their guidance.

Furthermore, schools must develop career autonomy frameworks, which could include peer mentoring groups, self-exploration exercises, and guided conversations between students and parents. Institutions should adopt a whole-school approach where the culture actively supports student agency, nurtures curiosity, and respects diverse aspirations—whether one chooses to become an artist, engineer, entrepreneur, or environmentalist.

In addition, digital tools and platforms such as Google Forms, career aptitude apps, and interactive dashboards could be utilized to assess students' interests and psychological needs in a systematic manner. When paired with one-on-one counseling sessions, such tools can provide data-driven insights that facilitate more personalized and balanced career decisions.

8. LIMITATIONS

Despite the depth and breadth of the present study, several limitations must be acknowledged, which temper the generalizability and scope of its findings. First, while participants were drawn from diverse regions across India, including both urban and semi-urban areas, the study may still be influenced by regional and linguistic biases. Certain states—particularly those from North-East India and rural hinterlands—are underrepresented in the sample due to logistical constraints and accessibility issues. This limits the ability to fully capture the unique socio-cultural nuances and localized career pressures in those regions, especially where indigenous traditions or tribal structures shape adolescent autonomy differently than in mainstream Indian society.

Second, the study primarily relies on self-report instruments such as the Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (CDDQ), Self-Determination Scale (SDS), and Perceived Parental Pressure Scale. While these tools are validated and useful for capturing internal perceptions, they are inherently subject to social desirability bias and subjective interpretation. Adolescents may underreport the extent of familial pressure due to fear, cultural conditioning, or internalized guilt, thereby affecting the accuracy of the data. Similarly, qualitative insights, although rich and thematic, depend heavily on the willingness of participants to articulate personal experiences that are often emotionally complex or socially sensitive.

Another limitation concerns the cross-sectional nature of the study, which captures adolescents' perceptions and experiences at a single point in time. Because the study is not longitudinal, it cannot assess how career suppression affects individuals in the long term—such as its implications for adult career satisfaction, academic achievement, psychological well-being, or intergenerational transmission of values. For instance, some adolescents who currently comply with parental wishes may experience delayed regret, burnout, or a mid-life career shift—none of which are visible in a short-term analysis.

Additionally, school-level variables such as institutional ethos, teacher involvement, and peer influence were not deeply examined in this study, despite their potential role in shaping adolescents' agency and aspirations. While some contextual factors were accounted for in interviews and focus groups, future research should include more systematic institutional analysis.

Finally, logistical constraints meant that data collection methods varied slightly across regions—for example, the use of Google Forms in urban schools versus printed questionnaires in areas with limited digital access. While the instruments remained consistent, the mode of delivery could have influenced response patterns, especially among participants less familiar with technology.

Acknowledging these limitations allows for a more honest appraisal of the study's scope and opens pathways for future research that can build on and refine its findings using broader, deeper, and more longitudinal methodologies.

9. CONCLUSION

The present study brings to the fore a deeply embedded tension in the lives of Indian adolescents — the conflict between personal aspiration and societal expectation, between self-determination and cultural conformity. As India navigates a dynamic socio-economic transformation, the voice of its youth — especially in decisions as consequential as career choice — is often muffled under the weight of traditional norms, family aspirations, and systemic pressures. While adolescence is universally acknowledged as a critical period for identity development, in the Indian context it also becomes a battleground where familial pride, class mobility, and generational dreams intersect with personal passion, curiosity, and individuality.

The data in this research clearly demonstrates that career choice suppression is not a rare or isolated phenomenon. It is systemic, normalized, and often goes unchallenged because it is wrapped in the language of care, responsibility, and success. The high levels of perceived parental pressure observed across urban, semi-urban, rural, and North-Eastern Indian regions illustrate a cultural script that still prioritizes collective aspirations over individual autonomy. Professions such as medicine, engineering, law, and civil services continue to dominate parental preferences, while students inclined towards the arts, humanities, social sciences, sports, or creative industries often face skepticism, dissuasion, or outright rejection.

However, it would be reductive to characterize this suppression as purely authoritarian. The motives of parents and guardians are often rooted in genuine concern — for financial stability, social status, and long-term security in a competitive world. In many households, especially those from lower and middle socio-economic backgrounds, career becomes a vehicle for upward mobility and family redemption. As a result, adolescents are subtly or overtly coerced into career paths that promise economic safety, even if those paths compromise their internal sense of meaning, identity, and competence.

Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study confirms that autonomy is not just a Western construct but a universal psychological need. Adolescents who perceived lower autonomy in decision-making also reported lower levels of motivation, higher psychological distress, and greater identity confusion. These findings resonate with international literature that associates autonomy-supportive environments with better academic engagement, emotional well-being, and long-term career satisfaction. The Indian context, however, adds layers of complexity. Cultural norms like filial piety, hierarchical respect, and interdependence often lead adolescents to accept suppression silently, internalizing guilt, anxiety, and dissatisfaction as the cost of obedience and gratitude.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on a silent paradox — that suppression often arises from love, and resistance from clarity. Adolescents are not inherently rebellious; rather, they are seeking space to articulate their voices, explore their strengths, and align their futures with their passions. The increasing awareness among students of their rights to self-determination, particularly in urban and semi-urban areas, indicates a cultural shift. However, the lack of institutional support — such as trained career counselors, informed teachers, and empathetic family structures — means that most adolescents are navigating this tension in solitude.

In comparing this study's findings with national and international literature, it becomes evident that India is at a crossroads of cultural transition. While countries in Europe, North America, and parts of East Asia are increasingly embracing student agency in career education, India continues to struggle with a hybrid model where modern opportunities

clash with age-old expectations. Yet, the diversity in the Indian adolescent voice — particularly from the North-East and tribal communities — points toward evolving notions of success, fulfillment, and self-worth.

Thus, it becomes imperative to reframe career choice as a child rights issue, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and supported by Indian constitutional principles like the Right to Education (Article 21-A), Freedom of Expression (Article 19), and Protection from Exploitation (Article 39). The denial of the right to choose a career freely is not only an emotional or educational concern but a moral and legal one, with long-term consequences for youth mental health, national productivity, and democratic values.

In conclusion, respecting and nurturing adolescent autonomy in career decisions is not a threat to family unity or cultural integrity — it is a path to a more inclusive, empathetic, and progressive society. Families, educators, and policymakers must come together to create an environment where parental wisdom informs but does not dominate, where students are encouraged to dream with guidance, not fear, and where the aspirations of India's youth are recognized not as deviations, but as vital contributions to the nation's evolving identity. Empowering adolescents to choose their own paths is not just about freedom — it is about dignity, purpose, and the right to shape one's future.

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