

A Study of Indian Family System

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Abstract

The present paper explores the issues of family in India. The structure of family has been studied with keen interest. Joint family and nuclear both have merits and demerits. Violence against women is noticed in the family of almost all casts, creeds and religions. The nuclear family has become the characteristic feature of the Indian society. Gone are those days when the authority within the family was primarily in the hands of family elders.

Key Words: Family, Society, Tradition, Violence, Women

Joint family constitutes one of the salient features of the Indian society. The present decade has brought drastic changes in the family system. Changes in the traditional family system have been so effective that it is steadily disappearing from the cities. Truly, there is completely no chance of reversal of this trend. In villages the size of joint family has been substantially reduced or is noticed in its fragmented form. Some have established into several nuclear families while others have taken the form of extended or stem families. Extended family is in simply a transitory phase between joint and nuclear family system.

The joint family or extended family in rural areas is surviving in its skeleton. The adult have shifted to cities either to pursue higher education or to achieve more attractive jobs. Many of the urban households are obviously offshoots of rural extended or joint families. A joint family in the native village is basically the fountainhead of nuclear families in towns. These days in most cases two brothers tend to form two independent households

even within the same city owing to the rising spirit of individualism, regardless of similarity in occupation, even when the ancestral property is not formally partitioned at their native place. There is a fashion to live in a nuclear family.

The nuclear family has become the characteristic feature of the Indian society. The census of India data shows that of all the households nuclear family constituted 70 percent and single member or more than one member households without spouse covered about 11 percent. The extended and joint family or households together claim merely 20 percent of all households. This is the overall picture about the entire country, whereas in the case of urban areas the proportion of nuclear family is somewhat higher still. The available data from the National Family and Health Survey-1 of 1992-93 (henceforth NFHS) suggest that joint family does not make up more than five percent of all families in urban areas (Singh, 2004). An extended family, which has a couple with married sons or daughters and their spouses as well as

household head without spouse but with at least two married sons, daughters and their spouses, constitute a little less than one fifth of the total households.

As the process of family formation and development has become relatively faster now than before, households are progressively more headed by relatively younger people. Census data from 1971 onward have clearly borne out that at the national level over three-fifths of the households are headed by persons aged less than 50 (Singh 1984). The reason is sharp to consider that proportion of households headed by younger persons is likely to constitute a larger proportion than this in urban areas where the proportion of extended family, not to speak of joint family, is much smaller than that of rural areas.

The establishment of financially independent, career-oriented men and women, who are confident of taking their own decisions and desire to have a sense of individual gain, has immensely contributed to the disintegration of joint family. Some believe that nuclear family is a safer matrimonial home to a woman. In previous days people generally lived in joint families, yet familial discord never escalated into extreme physical violence or death, as we so often come across such instances in the present day world.

Gone are those days when the authority within the family was primarily in the hands of family elders. The general attitude of members of the family towards the traditional patriarch was mostly one of respect and admiration. Loyalty, submissiveness, respect and deference over the household were bestowed on him. These attributes also encompassed other

relationships in the family, such as children to their parents, a wife to her husband, and younger brothers to their older brothers (Gupta, 1978). Within a household no one was imagined to ignore the will of his elders. The father, or in his absence the eldest brother, was consulted on all significant family issues like pursuing litigation in courts of law, building a house, buying and selling of property and arranging marriages, etc. The joint family did not give room to neglect or disregard of elders. The age-grade hierarchy was quite strong. Now the people of younger generation, particularly those with modern education, do not seem to show the same respect which their fathers possessed for their parents or elders.

The wife of the family head had authority and command. Truly, women's position depended on the position of their husbands in the household. The wife of the household head or mother-in-law was in charge of the household. Her word was considered as a law and was followed very sincerely. Her decisions were made for the welfare of the whole and not for the entire family and not for the individuals. Young women in the family were expected to be submissive and dutiful. Self-assertion, even in bringing up their own children, was considered as against family norms.

Now a day the parents very sincerely encourage their educated sons and daughters-in-law to take independent decision in a joint and extended family. This is not unusual when sons and daughters tend to possess a higher level of education and a greater degree of exposure of the world outside the family than ever before. Now boys and girls, contrary to the previous days, are beginning to assert

their wishes in mate selection. Parental decisions have lost their supremacy.

Moreover, the change in authority structure within the family made the women leader of the house. Most of the female household heads are usually independent and gainfully employed. In the absence of their husbands, either because of death, separation, transfer in job or business engagement, women are themselves competent enough to carry out the responsibilities of their family.

Child marriage was the part of custom in many cultures throughout human history, but has gradually diminished with the development of science and technology. An increase in the advocacy of human rights, whether as women's rights or as children's rights, has caused the traditions of child marriage to decrease greatly as it was considered unfair and dangerous for the children. Today, child marriage is usually found in countries where cultural practices and traditions of child marriage still have a strong influence. Although child marriages have been outlawed in our country, credit goes to social reformers and law makers to eradicate the tradition of child marriage.

The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act 1955 prohibit marriage among close relatives — called *sapinda* marriage. The *sapinda* relationship extends as far as the third generation in the line of mother and the fifth in the line of father. Marriage within the same sub- caste has been followed very strictly. The scheduled tribes are also endogamous, but most of the tribal communities practice clan exogamy (Singh 1997).

The dissolution of marriage has rarely been noticed in India for a long time.

Simply people had both respect for and fear of social values and public opinion. Individual choice has always been subservient to the communal sentiment or public opinion.

Despite all these there has been a significant change in the views and attitudes towards sanctity of marriage in the recent past, especially in modern cities. Marriage is no longer held to be a 'divine match' or a 'sacred union'. Now it is more like a transfer of a female from one family to another, or from one kinship group to another. The marriage is no longer sanctified as it was believed in the past, and is viewed only as a bonding and nurturing life-long relationship and friendship.

Marriage counsellors have occupied an important position to guide and show the amicable solution. Today in cities there is disenchantment with the system of arranged marriages in a large number of cases. The Indian family is faced with a new kind of social and psychological constraints. The women, however, tend to be more concerned about their marriage than men and in case of a problem they are expected to go for counselling. They are expected to take the lead to resolve conflicts and when they give up the effort, the marriage is generally over. In today's shifting values and changing times, there is less reliance on marriage as a definer of sex and living arrangements throughout life. Today in cities there is disenchantment with the system of arranged marriages. There is a greater incidence of extra-marital relationships, including open gay and lesbian relationships, a delay in the age at marriage, higher rates of marital disruption and more egalitarian gender-

role attitudes among men and women. It is reported that in big metropolises a new system of 'live-in-arrangements' between pairs, particularly in upper stratum of society, is steadily emerging as a new kind of family life. Anyway, a relatively higher divorce rate in cities, *interalia*, connote that marriage is an institution in trouble, or else expectations are so high that people are no longer willing to put up with the kinds of dissatisfactions and empty-shell marriages that the previous generations tolerated. High rate of remarriages clearly means that people are sacrificing their marriages because of unsatisfactory relationships.

Dowry has become one of the serious social evils of the Indian society in the present era. The menace of dowry has become so severe over the years that the Government of India had to enact the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961, which was further amended in 1986. But the legislative measures to do away with this practice have so far proved an ineffective exercise.

The dowry has gained social legitimacy across all communities and regions. In very rare cases demands for dowry are not noticed.

The painful fact about dowry related violence is that it is not confined to any particular group, social stratum, geographical region or even religion. Rather, it is regarded as a universal phenomenon, cutting across all sorts of boundaries, as it has already been stressed before. It is claimed to be on continuous increase in the country.

Violence within family is normally a male activity. The prime targets are women and children. The women have been victims of

humiliation and torture for as long as we have written records of the Indian society. Despite several legislative measures adopted in favour of women during the last 150 years, continuing spread of modern education and women's gradual economic independence, countless women have continued to be victims of discrimination and violence in the country (Singh 2002: 168). Increasing family violence in modern times has compelled many social scientists to be apologists for the traditional joint family- as happy and harmonious, a high-voltage emotional setting, imbued with love, affection and tenderness. India's past has been so romanticized by certain scholars that they have regarded the joint family as the best form of family. It is found that in India 40 percent of women have experienced violence by an intimate partner. Around fifty percent of the women experiencing physical violence also reported physical abuse during pregnancy.

Conclusion:

Spread of education, science and technology, and exposure to mass media, women have become active and aware of their rights and duties. There is awareness of the notion of gender equality, faith in the effectiveness of legal action to protect rights, and confidence in such institutions as family courts and certain voluntary organizations working for women. Yet there is no sign of abatement in gender related violence. Cases of domestic violence, like wife-battering and forced incest with the women of the household, are so personal and delicate that they are hardly reported to the police or law courts. In short, mutual understanding, love and tolerance are the basic need for the happy and peaceful family life.

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