

RELIGION, FAMILY AND CONJUGALITY AMONG THE MIDDLE CLASS URBAN HINDUS OF NORTH INDIA

Sneh Shakti

Research Scholar

CSSS, J.N.U

New Delhi

Abstract

The Hindu family was always conceived to be joint and undivided; member of the family stay under the same roof, worship together, eat together and have a common property. These are the symbols of homogeneity in the family. However joint family has lost most these elements, a man can have his own house or have an independent kitchen in the same house without losing his share in the common property. He can change his religion but still be part of the family. Winds of change have swept over various traditional institutions and concepts. The institution of family has not remained untouched. Relationships between members of the family i.e. husband- wife, parent children and between siblings have also undergone changes. The pattern of family life is today is much different from what it used to be previously. The Children too are growing up in an environment that was much different from their parents. This paper studies the changing culture in and the new found values of family and marriage in India as a result of various factors of change and the role of religion in these new times in helping family and marriage sustain and endure in these times of crisis. The defining problem in my paper is that the current value system of the family, which has underpinned many other social structures within which the members of the family operate, stand in stark contradiction to the values that actually gave meaning to family.

Keywords: Family, Change, Family Values and Ethics

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Family is not an important thing it's everything"- Michael Fox

INTRODUCTION

Religion in the Hindu society has been the founding and guiding principle for both family and marriage. Our ancient scriptures and religious texts put a great deal of emphasis on family realtions. Traditionally religion has played and important role in effectively normalising roles and responsibilities of husband and wife, what one has to do in a situation is already given. For instance it is said in our ancient texts that the wife should be of one mind with the husband, she should be like a shadow, should be his companion in good works and should always remain cheerful and mindful of household duties. We hear of epic stories of Savitri and Sita depicting their infidelity, unconditional love etc. but men live more for honor. From ancient times husband and wife are regarded as dampati i.e. equal partners and joint owners of a common household but gradually the husband becomes supreme and senior partner and the wife, children and all the members of the family come under his guidance. Now this kind of structure and value in its own way did without doubt produce harmony and agreement in the family and the kept close knit.

However due to various internal and external factors of change like liberalization, globalization, secular-democratic structure of the polity with emphasis on freedom and equality have rippled their effects to both structure and function of the family and marriage.

Antonio (1983) has discussed nine such values that are causing the contradiction. To discuss a few, emphasis on individual achievement (in contrast to family as a group) which is central to the middle class families where more primacy is given to individual and his efforts. For it is very important for a child to perform brilliantly at

school, be best in sports or whatever field one want to be in. Now the problem with this kind of approach is that while inculcating these new values in the children we don't realize its effects on the family. Then achievement of work ethic is important to improve one's socio economic status, importance to material comfort which has become an end it self, value of equality and specially freedom is the most sacred one. Then there is the idea of freedom which is has become very pronounced in every relationship and it can be best sourced from the Protestant belief where one was supposed to achieve salvation on one's own without the support of a priest interceding for them. So Within families children are taught to be independent and responsible for their behavior. In inculcating and supporting such values we have stressed the importance of the individual rather than the group. Hence what we produce is an individual who is aggressive, activist and instrumentally oriented. Such values have challenged various existing values on which the family stood. For instance patriarchal authority in the family- families today's are much more equal than they used to be in past. Secondly family existed as a group it always took precedence over individual's choices and interest, thirdly Ascription – membership in the family is gained through birth ,it didn't have to achieved. While parents earlier too advocated achievement principles but they never disavowed those who couldn't attain.

There is mutual interdependence of the two institutions (family & religion), however there are problematic elements for both. The emphasis in my study is on families' search for support from religious doctrines and practitioner in times of trouble. Issues to be addressed various changing rights of women in the family, changing family values and authority structure, various alternate lifestyles and choices that children may bring in the family; Issues like extramarital sex, divorce, separation for couples, premarital sex, unwed motherhood, inter-caste marriages etc. for adolescents and adults were less apparent previously. Such events disrupt the traditional accommodations between the religious and family institutions and it may be very sorrowful for the individual in both the groups and then it also throws a challenge for religion to change according to changing circumstances and provide a new kind of support to family, to let the family as an institution to endure. For instance Antonio and Aldous (ALDOUS, 1983) has noted Parson from his book "Sociology and Social Psychology" that the strain from the unexpected and the uncontrollable is compounded by the question of why anyone in God's creation has to experience such tragedies and if anyone has to, why those who seemingly flaunt society's standards "flourish as the green bay tree". "The discrepancy between the expectations and

actualities, and between moral standards and the ways of the world, cause families to utilize religion and religious functionaries to make sense of these experiences" (ALDOUS, 1983). Of the many problems that families face today, the most urgent is the problem of getting along with each other and most religions and system of beliefs are not currently ready to deal with such issues and that's why there has been a spurt in so many national and international bodies/NGO's/Ashrams/Dharma Gurus who propagating not something new but the same old theology more suited to current needs of the people. To substantiate my argument I would quote "NO one age is may be more religious than another, but Ahlstrom convincingly argues that some periods make more excruciating demands for change and adjustment than others even dream of" (ALDOUS, 1983). Families currently are in a similar situation.

Extending the argument from here I will discuss the need to reaffirm a few family values and what can be the role of spirituality in ushering in such family values. The debate on family values and ethics is not new. Morality has never been very far away from family life. All politicians and religious leaders have argued over and emphasized on the importance of family values. "Measures of family breakdown may be taken to be indices of a wider moral decline and equally a weakening of family ties may be seen as contributing to a wider social and moral breakdown." (MORGAN, 2011). The study of family ethics and values in the contemporary times. One of the reasons is the evolved psychology of men and women and the social conditions that propelled the evolution of human personality. Though it can't be denied that there are some constants like thrill for passion, need for some kind of rational control, reciprocal love between mother and child, habits, social conventions, conflict between individual choices and societal norms; such aspects manifest themselves in some or the other form generation after generation. However with evolving industrialization changes in higher education, empowerment and emancipation of women have transformed the controlling condition of human life, the attitude, the temperament of women and men. And these changes have settled so deeply in the fabric of society that it is considered absolutely "normal" and thus there is no chaos or clamor for reconsideration of the given situation.

Bourdieu's use of the term "Cultural Capital" can be used to understand the concept of family values and this is how much family values are important. It can be understood as accumulated and cumulative wisdom. The benefit of having clear cut and established family values helps us to make better choices in life; ones likes and dislikes

are all based on family values. It is also a very important and deep method of influencing people for a particular type of calling. Taking the case of India in India for instance we can see some castes and communities like Marwaris, Parsis, Jains flourish in business, this is mostly due to sorted, clear cut values in the family. Similarly we find families with a line of successful singers. The goals of such families are based on concrete values are very clearly laid out and it is ensured that no other values or goals stands in juxtaposition to that particular goal that has to be achieved. While most other families in the urban area are infested with dwindling and conflicting values. One can see that family that is the site of our most intimate experiences is today infested with resentment & disharmony and its dysfunction is being manifested in all those institutions that are underpinned by the institution of family i.e. market, economy, polity etc. Families today can be understood as no less than suspended war zones, this phenomena is visible only among the so called "upper middle class". Culturally, spiritually and emotionally they have been uprooted, this is what D.P Mukherjee has termed as "uprooted middle class". Their pursuit of life is basically to figure out "Who am I?" It is because of this that a very deep seated anxiety about their cultural identity has developed.

In such predicament management of contemporary families becomes an imperative. Management of family is value based; it is about those values and ethics that led to its creation in the first place and what should these values and ethics is in the contemporary changing times. Values refer to wants and needs of the people and that how we as members of certain families can prosper by ensuring happiness, harmony and moral consensus. Then comes the ethics that is not to make members think what is right or wrong but to think very broadly. Family ethics is required so that members can understand their roles and statuses inside the family and how it reverberating change or affecting the larger world. The study on crisis of the outside world should not be just understood in relation to what is going on between two parties outside, but they should be understood in association with events transpiring inside the family.

The crisis in the family ethics occurs when members find themselves stuck in such predicaments that they don't know what to do exactly. Then what is required that a more objective evaluation of their effects of their behavior should be done at the individual and at the societal level. While one may say that the talk about family values and morality is meaningful but themes like ethics for family may seem unfit since ethics is a more formal codification of what is right and wrong, something where the

actors involved are groups, organizations, professional bodies etc. While in morality the actors or the doers are individual and society. So as mentioned above Ethics is a more formal codification of right and wrong by the organized groups of society that Tonnies is has called Gessellshaft i.e. association and not gemeinschaft i.e. community. Professional bodies have a code of ethics while a community practices morality and that is why even Emile Durkhiem spoke of ethics in professions and morality in civil society. But though ethics are more formal in nature but its practioners are still the members of society and the purpose of ethics is not just to regulate interpersonal relationship but it is also the desire to do well and be good to others so that there is overall love, happiness and harmony and so is the purpose of family. Moreover family too can be understood as a “moral association”.

The purpose of family ethics is to establish a relationship between the goals of the members of the family and the strategy used to achieve it. Giri has in “Values Ethic and Business” has quoted Edward Freeman and Daniel Gilbert that ethics is not merely “having good intentions or feeling sensitive. Ethics is about association with others and the real point of connecting ethics and strategy means to decide which principles you really believe as good ones to follow and to reason them out in real-life cases” (GIRI, 1998). Thus Giri has explained ethics as not about just doing right or feeling right or wrong but it is also about actions that we take with others and the real reasons we have for a particular strategy or action, so that we can connect to the goodness of the individual or society as a whole. Ethics is basically a better sense of reasoning, an understanding of who is harmed or affected or benefitted by each alternative, whose trust in the family is protected and who’s violated. Ethical questions in the family are involved from the beginning. Values on the other hand gives life and meaning to the agenda of ethics. According to Taylor it is a scheme of qualitative distinction which helps us to draw the line limits and boundaries of our practice.

Contemporary families must not be understood as just constituting of its members but as those individuals who have competing interests, a sense of autonomy, sense of self-respect etc. Stress on Values of individual achievement which is in fact central to middle class families ,achievement of work ethic to improve one’s socio economic status, importance to material comfort which has actually become an end in itself , value of freedom and equality have become the heart and soul of modern day families. This kind of crisis has turned all of us into apprehensive, paranoid beings where all of us are living in anticipatory fear of not just people outside but also inside

the family. There is a sense of distrust within the family, moral consensus has been replaced by moral conflict. Within families children are taught to be more independent and solely responsible for their behavior, in inculcating and supporting such values we are producing individuals who are aggressive, activist and instrumentally oriented. Later on such families face serious dialectics between the "I" and "WE" paradigm because the values required to inculcate "WE" paradigm were never sown. Apparently in this era of equalitarian modern secular, democratic principles those values that instill the feeling of "WE" not just in the family as a whole but "WE" in every member of the family is supposed to produce docile, weak, push-over sort of personalities. In such situation integration instead of being the answer becomes the biggest challenge. Robert C. Solomon (1992) says "integrity in the face of conflict of the virtues, is the challenge rather than the answer. The answer, in two words, is moral courage".

This kind of depraved value structure which has replaced our normal social structure has a very debilitating impact on the society as a whole. Here I would draw an example cited by Giri; Giri draws an analogy from the market. He talks about of the "Theory of Organizational Determinism" that organizations are deterministically guided by their environment. He however rejects this approach by arguing that organizations create their own external environment as much as they respond to it. The same is true for Family and that is why it is an important subject of research, because the problems of the family are no longer contained in the family they find manifestation elsewhere also, where the members of family participate. This kind of orientation has transformed family from being the site of primary satisfaction of all needs to being a business organization where one has to keep proving ones potential in order to sustain ones identity and place in household. Thomas Donaldson in Ethical Issues in Business (1988) has said that it is important for us to realize that competition can be a moral force that can help us be honest with our self and make it just about more profit. Thus we really need to ask these questions whether this kind of achievement principle that we are encouraging is healthy competition or sick, depraved and debilitating competition. Keeping in view increasing number of cases of hostile situations in the family we need to understand that through changing times we need to have new set of ethical boundries between parents-children and between parents themselves, if the instution of family has to survive at all.

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