The Impact of Environmental changes on Indian Family System

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Abstract

The institution of family in analysed the backdrop of socio-cultural changes in the Indian society. The conflict, tensions and demands on individuals and families are examined and implications for individual-family interface are indicated. It is argued that individuality and relatedness both need t6o be emphasized and solutions to the challenges have to be worked out within the indigenous framework.

The study of family in the Indian context is a complex enterprise and making generalisations about the Indian family is hazardous. The reasons for this state of affairs is twofold. Firs, this institution is situated indiverse cultural traditions which define the structure and functioning of family in different ways. Second, the contemporary influences from economic, educational, political and cultural forces are directing the patterning of families in several ways. As a result we notice considerable variation in the configuration and functioning of Indian families which evince the elements of continuity as well as change. The present paper is somewhat informal analysis of this situation based on the experience and reflections of the author.

The Tradition

The institution of family in India has traditionally served as the basic unit of human social life. The sociality motion of person, as opposed to the notion of person as a separate entity having clearly delineated boundaries, has been the Indian ideal various social institutions are practices have grown to nourish and maintain harmony between the twin goals of individually and relatedness. Family has proved to be a strong and powerful instruments to this end. In addition to the provision for necessary support for survival, family also worked as a buffer and helped in maintaining an members, family also extended the scope for stability and development and allowed realisation of various personal and social goals.

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Families represent dynamic organizations. Like open systems they are reciprocally related to the social environment. It. Also, like living organisms they grow and change. The nature and structure of family varies from the perspectives of it's members too. Thus while it is located in the same space for men during their entire lifespan it changes for women after marriage except in matrilineal tradition. There is considerable variety in the kinship relationship. In fact the kinship universe in the Indian society is very large. All families follow a cyclical pattern in their life span. In the beginning, families are joint, then they split and form nuclear families which grow and follow the same cycle. The structure, composition and roles in families often undergo important changes. The broad-spectrum social changes also influence families. For instance, the age of marriage of girls is increasing. Women arc asserting their rights. The generation gap is widening. Competition is increasing and conformity is decreasing. The mass media is playing a crucial role in shaping the desires and ideals of the people. All these factors are introducing new elements in the family dynamics.

Family as a Value: The Indian Tradition

Indian family system, however, still maintains certain distinctive characteristics. instead of being a deliberate arrangement on the part of a single individual or a person, it operates on a continuous basis to nurture the relationships, interdependencies and shared goals. As a result, people's identities, self-esteem and ideas about worthiness are often conceived and organised around the notion of family. In this way family constitutes a value. This is reflected in the development of what Rolland has described "we self regard" and fan3ilialsclr'. This kind of expanded self is not only open to others hut is constituted by the significant others. Such a person endeavours to act as a part or clement of the whole. As such, his major task happens to fit into the social network of family. He or she is embedded into it and owes existence to the shared reality. This view is in sharp contrast to the view of separate, independent and autonomous view self liberalised self popular in most of the industrially well-developed western cultures. In fact these two traditions have resolved the self-society relationship in two different ways.

The Indian family-orientation maintains the social bond, facilitates group goals, enhances cohesiveness among the group members by promoting sharing, cooperative spirit and interdependence. This is achieved through a hierarchical1y organised authority structure in which individual differences in motivation, aspiration and goals arc ignored to a considerable extent particularly when they appear as threats to the structure of group goals. This kind of scenario often prevails in the middle class families in which decision making is guided by a dominant concern for the overall care of the family as a single unit. This necessarily requires appropriation of individual's wishes and needs. The extent of appropriation varies across different domains. Thus marriage and job arc treated as family matters whereas pursuit of knowledge and religious activities from a domain with greater scope for individual freedom. The Indian village clearly projects such a Situation.

Since long, the functioning of family as an organisation has been situated in a nested hierarchy in which family, caste group or community and village were intimately related to each other. The families were called kutumb and parivar and often consisted of individuals from several generations. Known a joint families Ibis kind of familial configuration is taken as the natural form of family. In such a setting, growth, development and various activities are organised with peculiarly societal or communitarian focus. Individuals are shaped within the framework defined by this focus and the calendar of life events is designed and programmed to cater to the needs of family. Apparently this system did operate reasonably well for quite a long time as far as social harmony and cohesiveness was concerned. However, within crease in social mobility, Western education, migration to cities, urbanisation and industrialisation, this system is suffering a major setback.

The Changing Scenario

Economic pressure, growing needs of individual family members, consumerism, destruction of rural-agricultural base and growth in size is increasingly making the sustainability of large size families more and more difficult. The social, economic and emotional costs of such pattern of family life is making them unviable. As a result, the members of joint) families are distantly

located at different places. The structure of these family units is becoming nuclear which consists of wife, husband and children. These units, however, frequently maintain relationship with member of horizontally and vertically extended families on materned as well as paternal sides. The strength of these relationships depends upon physical proximity, social status and degree of contact with villages. For instance, families having agricultural land and other properties which are sources of income have stronger contacts with their relations and village community than those who have lost their roots in villages (or small towns). it may he noted that the links with the extended families are occasionally expressed in various rituals and ceremonies (e.g. Upnayan. Arranged marriage, which is still the most frequent form of marriage, happens to he a matter decided at the level of family. Of course, increasingly the consent of brides and bridegrooms is being sought.

Thus, what we notice is that for a vast majority of Indians, family continues to he the greatest concern. However, individual desires and wishes arc emerging very strongly and a tension is being experienced between these two orientations. These tensions arc closely related to the loss of power of the institutions of religion, caste and kinship. New individual-centred and somewhat secular institutions are emerging. This situation is leading to discontinuities of various types. The attitudes, values and beliefs, once held in high esteem, are being questioned and reprioritized. Concomitant to this, changes are visible in commitments, identities and relationships of the people. For want of space a dedled analysis of these issues is beyond the scope of this presentation. However, it may he pointed out that freedom from caste and family blessed occupations, women's education and urge for personal accomplishment constitute as most crucial factors determining the family dynamics. With increasing emphasis on individuation and autonomy modern parents are deliberately trying to shape their children's lives in a different way. Stricter child rearing coupled with greater expectations on the part of parents is creating an unprecedented demand on children. Also, with increase in the number of employed mothers the ecology of family is undergoing salient changes. The interaction pattern, its temporal organisation and quality among the members of dual career

him lies evince considerable shift from the earlier pattern. Its effect partly depends on the nature of supplementary substitute child care and nature of mother's job.

The Challenge a Head

The changes in family, scenario in Indian context are pointing towards increasing instrumentality of the family system. This is tin inevitable outcome of heavy competition for procuring the resources, high degree of individualism and over concern with material gains. One's identity with family is becoming utilitarian. Mother words people are engaging themselves in social relations in an exchange framework in which perceived rewards and costs are the decisive factors. The breakdown of joint family is also partly related to this change. Increasing emphasis on rights than duties, expectations than obligations and personal concern than the concern for family are contributing towards high degree of intra and interpersonal conflicts in urban middle class families. Such conflicts take different forms in the life span of a family. Being developmental in its constitution the composition of family varies across time. It cannot he considered invariant or Static. Thus daughters or sons remain as such in relation tà their parents throughout their lives but they also grow arid through various stages develop their own families. In this way he/she has to (a) maintain relationships with parents and (h) perform the functions of an independent person. This reflects the tension between being and becoming. Of course it is experienced differently by sons and daughters during their life courses. The fact, however, remains that such conflicts are major threats that demand innovative solutions on the part of family members. This is particularly important in the context of destabilising influences of contemporary culture which stresses on immediacy, functional (or utilitarian) values, practical considerations, comfort and pleasure. Raving market as its basic model or root metaphor everything is conceptualised in terms of (monetary) exchange organised on short-term basis and people are viewed as commodities or (human) resources. All this is dehumanising and disturbing not only because they arc not in conformity with the Indian tradition hut also due to the fact that they have not proved to be effective solutions in Western societies. It is, therefore, necessary to strengthen the

complementarity and interdependence of individual and family or community. Indigenous constructive effort to this end is warranted for enhancing the quality of human social life.

Conclusion

In conclusion it may he observed that family system in India, particularly, in the urban educated class, is undergoing transformation. The economic, social and cultural threes are reinforcing individualism and changes intrinsic to the traditional family system arc leading to structural changes. They are questioning the roles, obligations and relationship which have been nourishing the inherently social texture of the Indian family. The tensions experienced in the course of pursuing personal (individual) goals and familial goals are becoming an important source of stress. This situation calls for a perspective which views individually and relatedness as mutually constitutive and complementary. Such a solution shall constructively utilise indigenous values in which family happens to he a value in itself rather than mere instrument for personal growth.

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