



Changing dynamics of family structure in India

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Abstract

Family is the foundational institution of Indian society. The dynamics of family structure in India have undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting the intricate interplay between tradition, modernity, socio-economic factors and cultural shifts. Such transformation is influenced by urbanization, industrialisation, westernization, globalization, educational attainment, changing gender roles and advancements in technology.

Changes that have occurred in family structure of India include changes in family system, authority, marriage norms, decision making, fertility and child care and gender roles. These changes had a profound impact on women, trans-genders and children. The impact on women includes increased autonomy, dual responsibility and increase in economic opportunities, redefined gender roles, socialisation and burden of care. The impact on Trans genders includes increased visibility, personal identity, gender norm expectations, social support and policy support. The impact on Children includes identity formation, social support, single parent households and cultural identity.

Covid-19 also had a lasting impact on family structure in India which includes impact on family bonds, financial stress and reallocation of intra-familial tasks. Government legislations, policies and social welfare programmes too played a crucial role in shaping family structure in India.

As families adapt to these changes, they face both opportunities and challenges. By fostering open communication, setting boundaries, and prioritizing quality time together, families can navigate these changes and opportunities while maintaining strong connections and support networks.

Keywords: Family, dynamics, Covid -19, Opportunities and Challenges

Introduction

Family is the foundational institution of Indian society. The types of family vary in internal organisation, in its degree of autonomy, in sanctions and taboos by which it is protected and perpetuated.

India follows the philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, with Kutumb or family acquiring primacy in interpersonal social relationship dynamics. It promotes interdependence, social cohesion and co operation with the family forming the focal point of this social structure.

The dynamics of family structure in India have undergone significant transformations over the years, reflecting the intricate interplay between tradition, modernity, socio-economic factors and cultural shifts. This transformation is indicative of the broader structural transformations occurring within Indian society, influenced by urbanization, globalization, educational attainment, changing gender roles and advancements in technology.

Family-Etymology and meaning

The word family is derived from the Latin word 'Famulus' which means a servant. In Roman law the word denoted a group of producers, slaves and other servants as well as members connected by common descent or marriage. Thus, originally, family, consisted of a man and woman with a child or children and servants.

Sociological definitions of family

According to Burgess and Locke (1945) [1] family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household interacting and

intercommunicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister, creating a common culture.

Elliot and Merrill (1934) [4] defined family as the biological social unit composed of husband, wife and children. To MacIver (1961) [7] Family is a group defined by sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and up-bringing of children.

Distinctive features of family

G.P Murdock (1961) conducted a survey of 250 communities in the world and based on it he found that one kind of group was universally present so, he regarded that as "Elementary Family" hence

1. universality forms one of the distinctive features of family
2. The family is grounded in emotions and sentiments and is smaller in size. As a primary group its size is necessarily limited
3. It is the earliest social environment which surrounds, trains and educates the child. It shapes the personality and moulds the character of its members thus it has a formative influence
4. The family is the nucleus of all other social organizations. As whole social structure is built of family units therefore it influences the whole society
5. The smooth functioning of family depends on how best the members discharge their responsibilities in co-ordination with the other individuals of the family. As MacIver points out, "in times of crisis men may work and fight and die for their country, but they toil for their

- families all their lives” (vi) The family is peculiarly guarded by social regulations. The society takes precaution to safeguard this organization from any possible breakdown by divorce, desertion or separation
6. The family as an institution is permanent. Since it is based on the organic and emotional nature of man, it continues to exist. But as an association it may be temporary in character. These characteristics reveals the sociological significance of the family.

Functions of the family

The family as a social institution performs several functions. Kingsley Davies (1949) Speaks of four main functions of the family which includes reproduction, maintenance, placement and socialisation.

Ogburn and Nimkoff (1954) ^[9] have mentioned six major functions of family which include affectional, economic, recreational, protective, religious and educational.

MacIver (1961) ^[7] classifies the functions of family into essential and non-essential functions. The essential functions include stable satisfaction of sex need, production and rearing of children and provision of a home. Under non-essential functions he includes religious, educational, economic, health, recreation and other functions.

Characteristics of Traditional Family

Traditional family structure in India is characterised by the following features. At least two adult persons, in general, of opposite sex residing together, Division of labour among members, Economic and social exchanges, Sharing of many things such as food, residence and Authority over children and obligation for protection, cooperation and nurturance.

Types of family structures in India

Joint family-According to Iravati Karve (1965) ^[5] the joint family is defined as a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common, and who participate in common family worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred.

Historically, the traditional, ideal and most desired family in India used to be the joint family. It laid emphasis on family unity, integrity and loyalty. According to the Census of India (2011) ^[2], the extended and joint family or households together claim merely 20% of all households.

Nuclear Families-Many of the urban households are offshoots of rural extended or joint families. According to Census (2011) ^[2], of all the households, nuclear family constituted 70%.

Authority-In general, families in India adheres to a patriarchal ideology, follow the patrilineal rule of descent, and are patrilocal. Usually, the eldest male member was the head of the house and administered joint property. Examples of patriarchal joint families include Nambudaris of Malabar, the Mundas of Chhotanagpur and the Angami Nagas of Assam.

In some communities the headship rested with the eldest female member and is referred to as matrilineal. Examples of Matrilineal joint families include the Nairs of Malabar, the Khasis and Garos living on the Garo hills of Assam.

Gender roles-Traditional families in India endorse traditional gender role preferences with women's domain being limited to household work and child rearing while outside matters were handled by male members.

Marriage system-Edward Westermarck (1889) in his “History of Human Marriage” defines marriage as the more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of offspring.

Malinowski says that marriage is a contract for the production and maintenance of children. According to Robert H. Lowie (1920) ^[6] marriage is a relatively permanent bond between permissible mates. Indian society has been highly endogamous and marriage within the same caste has always been a preference.

Monogamy (state of being married to one person at a time) is the predominant form of marriage with some communities practicing polygamy (one husband with more than one wife) and some tribes practicing polygyny (One wife with more than one husband).

Changing family structure in India

Virtual disappearance of traditional joint family system and increase in number of nuclear families. Milton Singer (1959) ^[10] has identified five factors which have affected the family most which include education, industrialisation, urbanisation, and change in the institution of marriage.

Family structure is still patriarchal nature, but a rise in proportion of female headed households can be seen. Marriage was considered sacrosanct and for lifetime. In the past mate selection was mostly the prerogative of parents and elders, people married early with prevalence of instances of child marriages. But nowadays, there is an increase in separation and divorce rates and a shift towards love marriages, decline in arrange marriages and mate selection by individuals themselves, increase in average age of marriage with decrease in instances of child marriage are observed.

Earlier, Kinship ties were stronger and decisions were mainly taken by head of the household, less instances of family conflicts as family head had uncontested authority over family members. But today there is a shrinking of kinship ties and decisions are taken up by continuous consultations between children and parents on familial matters. Greater tensions and conflicts between wife and husband, parents and sons and between brothers is clearly visible.

In the past, number of children per household was greater with high total fertility rate, early pregnancy and childcare was responsibility of entire family. But today, the total fertility rate declined to two, postponement of first pregnancy and family planning, childcare responsibilities are increasingly coming under the domain of professional caretaking. Family's role as an agent of socialization for children has diminished.

In the past society was pronatalist with the desire to have a male child, Son-Meta preference wherein couples keep having children until they have the desired number of sons, restricted roles for female members with limited education and confinement to household work and childcare activities. But, today, increasing acceptance of girl child in the family. Increasing participation of women in education with increase in their role in economic activities outside household and decision making within household.

Factors affecting the family structure

Industrialization and Urbanization: It led to nuclearization of the family as more and more members are

moving away from larger family circle and living as individuals or members of a nuclear unit. Migration to industrial and urban areas in search of employment opportunities led to increased joint living in some parts of urban areas. The states with higher level of urbanization tend to have a higher proportion of single member households.

Culture: It determines the family structure by delineating boundaries, rules for interaction, communication patterns, acceptable practices, discipline and hierarchy in the family. Its impacts include, growth in individual families with focus on increased privacy and independence. Traditional authority of the eldest male in the Indian family system is diminishing with rising individualism and nuclearization. Increasing acceptance of non-traditional relationships such as homosexual relations and live-in arrangements.

Socio-economic mobility: Increasing access to education and employment opportunities have restructured the family dynamics in more than one way. Gender roles are being redefined in the wake of increasing participation of women in labour force and in household decision making. A high sense of individualism is growing among young people and they strive to improve their status in community outside the purview of family.

Globalization: It has resulted in movement of younger populations across the countries, especially from developing countries to developed countries. It also resulted in increased exchanges in goods, services, cultures and values. Penetration of consumerist culture has weakened the emotional bondage and many young members feel a sense of identity crisis in the family. Transfer of dependency burden of family from younger to older generations due to migration of prime working age members. Traditional decision-making responsibility of the male head of the family, in a patriarchal society started collapsing with foreign employment and improved economic status of women.

Demographic transition: Its major consequence is the change in the age structure of the population with the proportion of adults increasing and the proportion of children and elderly falling. Whereas a lesser number of children contribute to resource-saving leading to better investments in socio-economic indicators, a growing number of elderly members might neutralize the higher saving propensity. These individual-level changes in turn affect family formation, behaviours, choices and inter-generational transfers of resources and emotional support.

Technology: It has revolutionized the way families communicate. It enables instant connection regardless of geographical distances, contributing to connect with extended families. Disruption to traditional face-to-face interactions affects the depth and quality of personal conversations, which can increase conflicts within families. Technological apparatus is replacing the role of family as means of socializing and value inculcation in children.

Impact of changing family structure

a. Impact on women

Increased Autonomy: The transition from traditional joint families to nuclear or non traditional family structures has

often resulted in greater autonomy for women. However, women's autonomy is differentiated by economic status, caste, region, religion etc. For instance, women in richer joint households have more autonomy in intra-household decision making but less freedom of movement outside the home.

Dual responsibility: With more women joining the workforce, nuclear families often rely on dual-income households, requiring women to juggle professional commitments with traditionally established household duties and caregiving responsibilities. This can lead to stress, fatigue and health issues.

Economic Opportunities: In changing nature of authority in families, women have better access to resources for pursuing higher education and skill development, leading to improved employment prospects and financial independence.

Redefined Gender Roles: Women in nuclear families or non-traditional family arrangements often challenge traditional gender norms through their economic participation and role in decision making within the household. Household responsibilities are also being increasingly shared with their partners.

Socialization: The decline of the joint family system has impacted women's support systems and social networks. Increasing number of non-traditional family arrangements, especially single mother households, presents additional challenges in this regard.

Burden of care: In nuclear families, women have to bear the primary responsibility of caregiving to both children and elderly. With ageing of Indian society and changing nature of families, this will continue to pose a significant challenge.

b. Impact on Transgenders

Increased Visibility: With changing nature of family, visibility and acceptance of transgenders are increasing, especially in urban societies. However, the pace of their recognition and acceptance is slow compared to changes in family structure.

Personal identity: In traditional Indian family setup, it is difficult for transgenders to reveal their true personal identity and they live under mental stress, anxiety and depression.

Gender norms expectations: Transgenders face unique and complex issues as they confront cultural expectations of gender expression. Such gender norms expectations from part of most of the families and deviation is low.

Social support: Difficult childhood in traditional families results in social isolation, low self-esteem and self-worth among transgenders. They then seek support from chosen families, LGBTQIA+ community organizations etc.

Policy support: With recognition of transgender rights with the verdict of Supreme Court and Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, they can expect better access to resources, education and healthcare in Indian society.

c. Impact on Children

Identity formation: In nuclear families, children often develop a strong sense of individual identity and autonomy, while in joint families, they develop a deeper connection to their extended family heritage and traditions.

Social Support: In small households, children lack emotional and social support that comes from extended family relationships, impacting their well-being and social development.

Single-parent households: Increasing separation and divorce rates result in single-parent household which impacts the welfare of the child.

Cultural identity: Children often lose connection with their cultural heritage in modern family systems.

Impact of Covid-19 on family structure

Impact on family bonds: The mortalities resulting from Covid, its associated health risks and financial rupture has uprooted innumerable families. School and day-care closures, inadequacies in technology access, loss of contact with non-residential family members and increased strain, especially on women and children were other challenges that families faced. Some relationships have deteriorated due to existing financial and social strains, which particularly affected women. However, due to constraints and restrictions on movement, several families could live together making a fresh emotional and social bond.

Disproportionate impact: The pandemic disproportionately impacted lower-income families, families from ethnic minority and vulnerable groups, and women.

Financial Stress: The financial impacts of covid due to associated unemployment and health expenditure have strained family relationships, although the effects depend to a large extent on quality of the relationships and family well-being before COVID-19.

Reallocation of intra-familial tasks: There have been evidences of a narrowing of the gender disparity in paid employment, gender reallocation of time spent on childcare, and to a lesser extent, housework during the early stages of COVID-19.

Role of governance in shaping family structure

1. Impact of Legislations and policies

Demographic changes: decline in fertility and mortality rates in India due to health and family planning policies is majorly policy-induced.

Economic opportunities: Labour laws passed for benefit of employees like the Indian Workmen Compensation Act (1923), the Minimum Wages Act 1948, helped to reduce the economic reliance of members on the joint family for economic support.

Changes in marriage laws: Abolition of child marriages and prescription of the minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls with provisions for widow remarriages.

Family inheritance: Hindu Succession Act 1956 gave a daughter and a son equal right to the father's property.

2. Impact of Social welfare programs

The government's social welfare programs, including those aimed at poverty alleviation, healthcare, and education, had a crucial impact on family structure. Improved access to education and healthcare led to smaller family sizes as families prioritize quality of life over quantity of children. Social Security programs provide means for care of elderly thus making smaller households a viable unit for social functioning.

3. Urbanization and industrialization

Policies are major driving force behind urbanization and industrialization, which further led to significant shifts in family structure. Resultant migration and economic opportunities result in smaller family sizes, increased participation of women in workforce and shift away from traditional authority.

4. Gender Equality

Efforts to promote gender equality through legal reforms, such as laws against dowry, domestic violence, and child marriage have challenged traditional patriarchal norms and empowered women to make independent choices regarding marriage, family and career.

Way Forward

Promoting Gender Equality: Efforts towards promoting gender equality and redefining gender roles should continue through required policy and legal support. This includes effective enforcement of laws against dowry, domestic violence, and child marriage and laws promoting economic participation of women.

Supporting Marginalized Groups: Promote inclusion and well-being of marginalized sections including transgenders through targeted social welfare programs, access to education, healthcare and community support networks.

Effective family planning: Family planning programmes should include resources and assistance for caregiving responsibilities, creche facilities for working women and promoting counselling for resolving familial conflicts.

Addressing socio-economic disparities: These may include policies to reduce income inequality, improving access to basic amenities and create opportunities to every section of society.

Elderly Care: Special attention needs to be brought about the aspects of care related to the elderly population. Key stakeholders like families, government and civil society must come forward to create a robust mechanism for their care.

Responsible use of Technology: It is essential to use technology responsibly and maintain a balance between online and offline interactions. Educating families about the potential risks of excessive technology use and promoting healthy screen time habits can help mitigate negative impacts.

Cultural education: Government/education bodies/civil society can run campaigns for disseminating knowledge about Indian cultural heritage so that children and families can connect with their heritage.

Conclusion

From the traditional joint family system to the increasing prevalence of nuclear and non-traditional family arrangements, the landscape of Indian families has undergone significant transformations over the years. These changes have been driven by industrialization, urbanization, globalization, evolving governance framework among other factors. As families adapt to these changes, they face both opportunities and challenges. By fostering open communication, setting boundaries, and prioritizing quality time together, families can navigate these changes and opportunities while maintaining strong connections and support networks.

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