

Emergence of Single Mother Families: A Case from Urban India

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Abstract:

The basic unit of society is family. There is a change in the structure and function of the family along with many other institutions of society. The factors like improvement in education, modern occupations, income disparities and spatial distance are affecting the solidarity of the family and its relationships. The social and economic changes have brought about a significant transformation in the traditional pattern of two-parent families in the past few decades. The single parent families are gradually increasing in urban India. Most often these families are headed by women with dependent children, forming single mother families. About thirty-three percent of household, worldwide, is estimated to be headed by women. These women are either divorced or separated, widow, unmarried or do not have a partner. The industrial development, urbanization, and socioeconomic changes are few important reasons for the making the single parent family as a viable unit in Indian context too. The increasing ability of women to earn income is one among few important factors in the increasing number of single mother families in the cities of India. The sociological research explored the changing lifestyles of families headed by women in India. The present paper will dwell into the changes in the family system in India with reference to the rise in single mother families.

Keywords: Family, Single mother, Society and Urban India.

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Introduction:

The basic unit of society is family. It forms an important organ which helps in the process of socialization. Family life has been evolving with the progress of society and modernity (Harlambos & Holborn, 2002). There are increasing number of research on family due to its multiplicity of characteristics. The structural, functional, developmental and integrative functions, that are fulfilled by the family in the society, forms an important unit of analysis for sociological investigation. Family studies on different perspectives have contributed in understanding the role, functions, forms, existence, growth and decline of family in the present changing world (Sooryamoorthy, 2012).

A family consists of a unit of intimate, transacting and interdependent persons who share some values, goals, resources, and responsibility for decisions as well as have a commitment to one another over time. When all families are living together, then it is considered as household but on the other hand, a household is a collection of people who live together in a dwelling unit (Steinmetz & Stein, 1988).

In India, family plays an ideal homogeneous unit with strong coping mechanisms. It has plurality of forms that varies with class, ethnicity and individual choices. There is distinction between family, household, elementary families, and other forms of families in the India. According to the concept of lineage, the patrilineal families are widespread while matrilineal families are typical in some communities such as Nayars in the southern state of Kerala, and Garos and Khasis in the north-eastern states. The patrilineal system is mostly found among Hindus than any other religious groups in India (Shah, 1998). It is also important to refer to the institution of marriage in order to understand the family patterns in India. Marriage is the basis of relationship which forms family. It was observed that every person is surrounded by a kin group among whom the person forms the centre, the *Ego*. The degree of relationship is taken into account from the person who forms the centre. These relations are closer to that person than any other individuals of the nation at large. A system of relationship organizes a family by the bond of consanguinity (Morgan, 1961).

The impact of different external forces including industrialization, modernization and urbanization on the Indian family system has helped the researchers in investigating various

dimensions of the Indian family. These dimensions include the study of parent-child relationship, marital relationships, conflicts, change in roles and power relations (Chekki, 1988). Apart from this, it is also observed that family as an institution is gradually changing in its structure and function along with many institutions of society. Several factors such as increasing divorce rate, cohabitation before marriage, increasing number of single parent families and single person households influences the Indian family system.

Changes in the Indian family system:

There are various changes in the Indian family system, due to the influence of westernization, industrialization, modernization and greater population mobility across the subcontinent. Marriage forming the vital institution for the formation of family, has determined the forms and types of families in different ways. Caste system in India forms a major social determinant. But the presence of endogamous marriages between castes is no longer made rigid in the country. Inter-caste marriages have become a common feature in the present generation. The partners are concerned of their own choices and also equal opportunities for forming a family. Most of the married couples prefer to have nuclear families. Earlier, in the patriarchal families, the decision making power was with the male members of the family. But the changes in the family system has provided a sense of equality among both male and female members of the family. This is mostly observed among the partners who are educated and urbanities. It has been observed that there is free selection of spouses, the arranged marriages have decreased, and the women are provided with their own rights in the country. The emphasize is given on the self- arranged marriages, where there is freedom to choose their own life partners (Giddens, 2006).

The influence of Western culture in the Indian society has transformed the Indian families. The sense of equality is widespread in the family and women are no more submissive. The recognition of the rights of women and children and the improved empowerment in the country has led to major changes in the Indian family system. Women are being recognized in the public sphere. They take part in decision-making of the family affairs. Their access to education and opportunity to take up jobs has widened their experience, which further consolidated their roles, functions and position in the family. The legal, institutional and constitutional structures provided more protection to women than in the past. The improvement in the position of women in the contemporary India, has led to the improvement within the family and the society in general.

There is significant growth of Urbanization in the country. This has effects on the arrangements in the family, which forces for adjustments and adaptations among the members of the family. Due to various job opportunities there is increase in migration from rural to urban places. Such kind of forced migration provides alteration within the family as it was found in case of Kashmiri Pandit families (Dhingra & Arora, 2005).

The Indian families form a social unit of interconnection and interdependence. But the changes in the Indian family are the outcome of what is taking place in the society at large. There is presence of some region-specific factors that has affected the Indian family system to a larger extent. Militancy in the region, for example, have decreased the intensity of cohesiveness and bonding within families in Jammu and Kashmir (Dhingra & Arora, 2005). The types of relationship that exist in the Indian families are not always similar and homogeneous. The transformation of every role and relationship in the family, has contributed to various realms within the family, such as roles, relationship, structure and functions. The changes in the society related to environment, values, structures and the inability to cope with such changes has influenced the Indian family (Shah, 2005).

The presence of care and support for the weak and sick members is always found in the Indian family. Particularly we can find a kind of security provided for the elderly people in the joint families of the country. The children in the family are provided with utmost care and with an emotional bonding which further leads to their socialization process (Sonawat, 2001). In the modern Indian families, the members are more child-centred and basically focus more on the development of the children, and parents prepare themselves to work to any extent to achieve this goal. This has brought up changes in the families where there is presence of elder members. The child-focused approach has undermined the caring of elderly including parents in the family. This has further led to increase in the old age homes in the country. The preferential treatment of boys over girls is gradually decreasing. As noted earlier, there is better position of women in the family. These changes are basically seen in nuclear and extended families and also in urban families where both parents are educated and employed.

Many feminists, Marxists and critical psychologists have focused on the dark side and the negative impacts of the family. An analysis of the family was made in industrial society. nuclear families stay apart from the kin groups and also from the wider community which results in conflict in the family. In the words of Leach, ‘the parents and children huddled

together in their loneliness take too much out of each other. The parents fight and the children rebel' (Leach, 1967).

There are also radical alternatives to the functionalist picture of the 'happy family'. It was analysed that there are exploitative aspects which exist in the family that create harmful and destructive interactive situations among the family members (Laing, 1976)

The changes in the Indian family system is also observed due to various societal problems such as the increase in divorce and separation rates, domestic violence, intergenerational conflicts, drug abuse and juvenile delinquency. Due to these changes there is inability to cope with the pressures of modern life but most of the Indian families have survived. They are able to modify, adopt and adjust with these changing social norms, structures and keep themselves together, despite of various stress and strain.

Trends of change in families in Urban India:

With the increasing growth of population in India, there has been shift in the population from rural to urban areas, which results in the growth of urbanization at a significant pace. The process of urbanization has a major effect upon the family system of India. The demographic characteristics, the socio-religious beliefs and practices influence the families in India. According to Hinduism's belief, there is inequality between the male and female members of the family, which emphasizes on the patriarchal structure of the Indian family system (Kapadia, 1972). But the influence of urbanization has affected the family structure as well as intra and inter-family relations and the functions that the family perform. In urban families, there is existence of a different set of relationship. There is increase in the number of issues like the marital disharmony, estranged marriages, separation, divorce, intergenerational differences, and conflicts in the relationships of the Indian families (Sooryamoorthy, 2012).

There is migration of Indian families to outer boundaries of the country. These transnational families have uprooted and have established themselves in a new environment. Immigrant families face challenges with respect to the family formation, family ties and living arrangements (Clark, Glick, & Bures, 2009). The transnational families suffer from incessant tensions and problems of family cohesion such as the resentment of the family against migrating, adopting and accepting the western culture. Thus these families are affected by structure, association, functions and value systems (Ahuja, 2014).

Urban areas are the driving force for modernization in the country. this has resulted in the spread of literacy, media exposure, which has further given importance to the economic participation and political participation in the country. It also implies social mobility which states that “to encourage rationality for the calculus of choice shapes individual behaviour and conditions its rewards. People come to see the social future as manipulable rather than ordained and their personal prospects in terms of achievement rather than heritage” (Srinivas, 1972). Due to the effect of modernization there are trends in the change of Indian families. Women are more educated and find better job opportunities in urban areas which help them in making their own choices in life. Divorce and remarriage are the new phenomena which exist among urban women. Women are free to take initiatives according to their choice to break their marital status if the marriage is unsuccessful. It has been found that urban women have greater freedom in participating in political affairs of the country.

During the post-independence period there were many legislations concerning the Indian family. The most important legislation was passed in 1956, dealing with succession, namely the Hindu Succession Act, 1956. This gave an impetus to women for full ownership of property inherited or acquired by her. Some other measures were the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955; the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 and Divorce Reform Act, 1969; which helped in empowerment of women in the country (Pylee, 1979), further influencing the family system.

Urban India is also the hub of various crimes against women. The crime against women can be recognized in different ways like the criminal violence, which consists of rape, abduction, murder; domestic violence, which consists of dowry deaths, wife bartering, sexual abuse and social violence like forcing of wife or daughter-in law, eve teasing (Ahuja, 2014). The victims of these crimes face various social and psychological problems in the society. This further leads to the change in the position of such victims in the family. They face stressful situations in the family life. Among these victims some become mothers out of the wedlock not by choice but by circumstances like rape, sexual abuse, cheating are known to be as unwed mothers, who are also categorized as single mothers.

These trends which exists in the Urban India, lead towards the emergence of different forms of families. Considering the change and status of women in the country, it is observed that women have the increasing ability to earn income, make choices with respect to their family life, take decisions on various aspects, thus forming single mother families in cities of India.

Single mother families in Urban India:

The term 'single parent' can be defined as parents who are not living with their spouse or a partner or those who are not married but taking the responsibility of raising a child or children as dominant caregivers (Partners in development initiatives, 2011). Thus a single parent family includes a single mother or father with their own children who are dependent on them. The single parent families can be either headed by the father or the mother. In the present scenario, where the position of women is changing in urban India, there is emergence women-headed families. In the report titled 'women-headed household' by Buvinic *et al* (1978) included the following groups of women widowed, divorced, abandoned, separated and single mothers; women whose husbands have migrated for considerable period of time and women whose husbands have lost their function as economic provider due to unemployment and ill-health.

Divorce or separation of couples with children leads to increase in single parent families. In United States, single parenting has become an accepted trend along with some other countries. For example, it was found that there has been increase in the number of children living with single parents from 1960s. such estimation is not found in India, rather there is estimation of the number of divorced, separated and widow persons. As women plays an important role in taking care of the child, so mostly the custody of the child is with the mother after divorce. The consequences of divorce lead the women to take decisions to be single mothers in their life, thus forming single mother family.

Conclusion:

In India, the estimation of number or proportion of single parents is not available. There is availability of the estimation of number of widowed and divorced or separated persons in the country. considering that world-wide majority of single parents are females, for example in the United States more than eighty percent of single parents are females, one can get a rough estimate of single parents by looking at the data on number or proportion of widows and divorced or separated women. As per the 2001 census, there were 34.4 million widows and 2.34 divorced or separated women in India. There is a rough estimation of single mother households in the country. as per the 2001 Census, 10.35 percent of the households in India were headed by females, which means out of the 193 million households, those headed by men were 173 million and the female headed households were 20 million in number. But

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according to the United Nations Database of Household size and composition 2017 report, in India there are 41 percent of single mother family where as in World it is only 21 percent. So single mothers are more in India compared to world average. From the above data, it can be derived that the types of single mother families will be different according to the category of women being single. But from the data mentioned it is not clear that which category of women are in majority considered for forming the single mother families. Even though there is unavailability of proper data with respect to single mother families in India, it can be observed that there is significant rise in the single mother families in India. The emergence of single mother families, especially in Urban India justifies the change in the family system of the country.

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