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East Indian Family Structure and Relationships

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The object of this paper is to present an overview of East Indian family structure and relationships. What are the cultural beliefs and value systems of East Indians? Why do they behave in some ways like everybody else in Canada and in others they appear different? What kinds of insights and knowledge should prove helpful in bringing about better understanding between East Indian culture as represented by East Indians and western culture? Since East Indian families are products of Indian cultural heritage, it is necessary to begin the examination of the family structure and relationships in the Indian context.

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The Hindu View of Life

It is a curious fact that there exists an intimate relationship between societal development, its rituals and practices and its beliefs about the unknown, namely, 'the concept of God.' The Hindu civilization, probably five thousand years old or over, lends support to this proposition. The basic Indian belief is that there is one God who is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. To reach Him, there is no one way. To reach God there must be ways made available to suit each and every individual, and there should be respect for the faith that a person holds. The understanding of this point is crucial in appreciating the Indian tolerance not only for every shade of belief that exists within Hindu religion, but also for the followers of other religions.

The Indian concept of God is so powerful and pervasive that it guides every minute of our life. It is in this sense that Hindu religion is sometimes called a way of life.

There are certain basic beliefs that provide structures and rules for day to day life:

- (a) The whole universe is the creation of the Almighty, and therefore this whole universe is an illusion.
- (b) We each have a soul which is indistinguishable from the Greater Soul. Therefore our quest is to free our soul to know the Greater Soul and to become its part.
- (c) There is a cycle of birth and death and it is through our actions that we can free ourselves from this cycle.

- (d) Since it is through Karma (duty and actions) that we control the life after death, and since whatever we do is to be done as if we are God, the whole of life's actions are to be performed and seen as a duty.

Of course, these are not all the basic beliefs of the concept of Hindu God, but these are more germane to our topic here. From these beliefs we can readily see why it is not only our duty, but our religion, to be faithful and helpful to our own family, relatives, community, country and the world.

According to Hindu Dharma these are four aims of life: Artha, Dharma, Kama and Moksha. Artha means acquisition of wealth, Kama refers to the satisfaction of instinctive, emotional and aesthetic life. Dharma means knowing that Artha and Kama are only means and not ends. Moksha refers to the realizations of an inner spirituality. According to this scheme, the life is divided into four stages: brahmacharya (age of six to twenty-five) - a period of chastity and education; grahastha (age of twenty-five to fifty) - married life; vanaprastha (age of fifty to seventy-five) - to lead a hermit's life for study, sacrifice and self-discipline; and finally, sanyas - to lead an ascetic life with concentration on Brahman (God).

Castes and Marriage

Perhaps initially, according to division of labour, the Hindu community was divided into four principal castes: Brahmans (the learned men), Khastriyas (the warriors), Vaish (traders) and Sudra (the menial workers). These castes are endogamous groups. In practice the caste is again divided into a number of sub-castes, each of which is further sub-divided into a number of sections. These sections are in some cases divided into a number of sub-sections. For example, the caste Vania is divided into sub-castes -- lād, modh, nāgar. Modh is further sub-divided into goghava and mandalia etc. Similarly the sub-caste lād is divided into two sections, visa, and dasa. Visas are further sub-divided in ahmedabadi and khambhath etc. A caste exercises a tremendous influence over its members as it touches a man's life in all his social relationships. An excommunicated individual would lead a very miserable life.

Until 1872, when the special Marriage Act was passed, the man's marriage outside his caste was not legal. It was not until 1946 when the Hindu marriage Disabilities Removal Act was passed that marriages between different sub-divisions of the same caste were validated. However, the moral force of caste is still so great, that old traditions continue to persist.

Luckily, the people in Canada are forward looking. They do not believe in caste system. Sikhs never had this problem -- except, by tradition, a Sikh would tend to marry into another Sikh family.

The discussion on caste system, for our present purposes, becomes meaningful when its relationship with extended family system is examined. According to tradition, as laid down by Vasistha, marriage can take place only after the fourth generation on the mother's side and the seventh generation on the father's side. This means that until that situation exists, people have to regard each other as brothers, sisters and kindred relations.

Cultural Patterns and Joint Family

Among the important factors that have kept the cultural patterns virtually unchanged over the centuries, there are three worthy of note:

1. Eighty per cent of India lives in villages. The self-sufficient character of village life which got upset now and again due to monsoons and draughts, only strengthened the belief in Karma and in the maintenance of centuries old rituals, practices, rigidities and socially acceptable patterns of behaviour.
2. Village life was so organized that every caste had its proper place and duties. Conformity to caste was essential and rigidly imposed. Caste performed certain services which were not performed by any other agency, e.g. marriage and funeral rites. If a person was excommunicated from the caste, the whole community went against him.
3. The joint family system has been the third potent factor in continuance of cultural traditions. Family tradition was valued above everything, and the primary duty of the head of the family was to ensure that family traditions in all matters relating to life were perpetuated by their solemn observance. The traditional authority of the head over the junior members of the family was so awe inspiring that the juniors never thought of expressing their differences, whatever their convictions might be. The subordination and superordination designed to regulate the lives of the different members in the hierarchy of the joint household, recognition of the family as a unit for all social relationships, the place assigned to the family as a juridical unit in family quarrels - all tended to give the family such enormous influence that the individual lost his identity in it. The social environment never provided any opportunity to the individual to feel that he had interests apart from those of the family.

According to traditional Hindu concept the Hindu family has not been quite patriarchal. The father could give away all his property to his oldest son, or to all the sons, or to none of them. Eldest son seems to have enjoyed the most favoured position. Although the development of individual

family has not been proscribed, somehow the structure of the joint family has been maintained till this day.

In the division of the property, daughter's son, mother's brother's son, father's father's sister's son are all considered to be part of the family. Joint family tradition is strengthened even in the funeral rites. For ten days the rites continue and the immediate family is considered to be impure. In the immediate family are included several degrees of paternal relations and some degrees of maternal relatives.

Status of Women

According to Vedas, the Creator (Brahma) divided his own body into two. He became male by one half and female by the other half. So divided, man and woman become a perfect person only when united again in wedlock. The marriage ritual of holding wife's hand, and also, going seven steps together, are symbolical expressions of union on the two levels of equality and friendship. In all the religious rites, the ceremony could not be complete without the wife's presence.

In Vedic period women were educated. However, in post-Vedic literature the women's status declined. According to Manu the ideal of wifehood lies in complete subjugation of her personality. She should worship her husband as a God. In his opinion a woman should never think of independence from the father, the husband or the sons, because by so doing she will make both the families contemptible. However, with the advent of Bhagvadgita and the Bhakti (meditation and worshipping) movement, equality and freedom for women became explicit. However, it was the Indian National Congress, which was founded in 1885, and the national movement in which both men and women took part, that women gained true consciousness of their strength and place in society. In the upper class society it is considered fashionable for women to do some kind of social service. There has been considerable progress in the education for women.

The Constitution guarantees full freedom and equality of rights. However, tradition still can and does work against them. Most women still hold subservient positions in the household, and, yet, for an Indian male it does not upset him one bit to respect the economic, literary and political attainments of his female counterparts.

There have been two developments in the last two hundred years which have seriously raised the question of whether the joint family system in India is dying out. The first one concerns the impact of western civilization and christianity on the Hindu way of life. One thing we must note. The British policies in the old British Empire, always scrupulously avoided interference with their subjects' traditions, cultural heritage, value systems and beliefs. However, their democratic concepts and institutions did influence the Indian way of life. The stopping of Sati system (where the widow burnt herself alive with her husband), child marriages, education for women and dispensation of British justice where traditional laws lacked clarity did bring about what we may term as the reinterpretation of traditional values to meet the modern day challenge. For example, throughout the political struggle for India's freedom, the Indian commitment to democracy opened the doors wide open for better understanding between castes, active women participation and greater awakening among backward and scheduled (untouchables) castes.

The second influence that should logically adversely effect the breaking of joint family system into nuclear family units is the industrialization and rapid rise in the urbanized population. It is true that economic forces, employment opportunities and social mobility have created the problem of maintaining a traditional joint family under one roof and one kitchen. The Indian answer to this has again been one of adaptation. The old form where in the grandfather's household all his sons and their families stayed together and pooled their income, is giving way to a much smaller family unit comprising father, married sons, unmarried sons and daughters. Even where economic necessities have forced the formation of nuclear family units, the sets of relationships that exist in a joint family have been maintained. The recent sociological findings of Kapadia and others clearly point out that despite urbanization, by an overwhelming majority both educated and uneducated groups show preference towards joint family system. Among the reasons advanced for such a preference are: consciousness of benefits derived from joint living such as economic help, refuge in many crisis situations, proper upbringing of young children and restraining influence on clashes between husband and wife.

Let me make another point. Fiji Islands have about 250,000 Indian settlers. They comprise about 45% of the population. Under the Indentured

Labour scheme they were brought from India in 1880 to work on sugar plantations. The Fiji Indians have maintained joint family system. Similarly wherever East Indians have migrated, whether it was to Mauritius or East Africa, as labourers from villages or as professionals and businessmen from cities, the joint family system has not been affected.

East Indian Family in Canada

East Indians in Canada have generally patterned their life based on the nuclear family unit, that is, father, mother and unmarried children live in one residential unit. In this, they would appear to be strongly influenced by western customs. After all, if large numbers of families congregated in a single dwelling unit they would be subject to criticism by the neighbours and, perhaps, would also be breaking the zoning regulations. At the same time they have adopted the western concept of primary emphasis on economic self-sufficiency of the nuclear family. Also, in the division of the estate they are subject to Canadian laws. These adaptations have tended to support the popular view that in Canada the joint family system has broken down.

In my view the concept of joint family system in the Canadian context needs a new definition: While families are living in separate and economically independent households, the joint family system represents a set of inter-relationships that is emotionally and traditionally tied together as a functional unit. Sociological research is urgently needed in this area. However, some speculative observations can be made in support of my view that East Indian families follow joint family practices.

It is well known that East Indians send funds on a regular basis to support their families in India. They also try to help their immediate relatives to migrate to Canada and financially support them until they are on their feet. Where it is possible, marriages for the children are arranged by their families in India and some migration in terms of prospective brides and bridegrooms does take place. The joint family ties are maintained in rituals and practices connected with births, marriages and funeral rites.

Unlike Canadian families, every attempt (including social pressure), is made to keep unmarried children in the father's home. The social pressure on girls is more severe than on the boys. The father's authority is dominant in family affairs. His authority may be circumvented to some extent by emotional appeal to female authority and to uncles. Children are brought up

in the Indian tradition of respect to elders, calling them 'uncles' and 'aunties'. On all important matters the close relatives are consulted and their opinions are given considerable weight. They tend to band together on every conceivable occasion and these meetings strengthen the joint family bonds. Meetings are also used to inculcate proper upbringing of the children.

From the analysis that has been presented here, it is my belief that this East Indian adaptation of the values and beliefs of the Joint Family System to suit the Canadian way of life is not a transitory phase. Religious training and cultural education would further support its perpetuation.