

UNDERSTANDING EAST INDIAN CULTURES

The Extended Family and Festivals

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Introduction

The institution of the extended family is not unique to India. But in India it has a special importance since it constitutes the social framework within which customs are practised and traditions passed on from generation to generation. The acculturation process and social education also takes place within this framework. The Indian way of life - especially its social aspects - must be seen with reference to the extended family. Similarly, customs, traditions and festivals are invested with a special meaning when their social function within the extended family is properly understood. When viewed in this fashion these festivals become an integral part of day to day living of an Indian instead of being merely a means of perpetuating the symbols and beliefs of an ancient tradition.

This talk will restrict itself to exploring the interaction between the extended family and the various festivals that are celebrated in India. The object here is to find out what these festivals mean in terms of the social orientation of Indians and how an Indian is helped by these festivals to understand his role in the extended family as well as society outside the extended family. Finally, an attempt will be made to suggest how outsiders to this tradition can reach out into this community and introduce certain practices which may be deemed necessary in order that Indian families may be better able to cope with Canadian society.

It may not be out of place to add that what follows constitutes broad generalised statements about Indian society and exceptions to these statements abound in India. Nor do they refer specifically to Sikh community in particular, since the speaker did not feel competent to do so. However, it can be safely said that the social organisation and concept of roles described here would apply to the Sikh community and the specific festivals mentioned are celebrated by the Sikh community, though perhaps not with the same gusto as Hindus.

Economic and Social Aspects of the Extended Family

- composition of the extended family: may include several generations; extended families are usually made up of all the married male members of a lineage (including their wives and children of course).
- the extended family offers social and economic security in an uncertain world.
- it works because a person's prestige depends upon the status and economic standing of the whole family; this persuades the more successful members of the family to look after the less successful.

Role of the Woman in the Extended Family

- children have very much closer relationship with the mother than with the father.
- women take a more active part in the non-academic educational and acculturation process of the children.
- women conduct the ritual and ceremonial functions and therefore are the perpetuators of tradition.
- "man worships God; women worship the God in man."

Role of the Man in the Extended Family

- men function as bridges between the outside world and the extended family.
- they take less part in bringing up the children, generally speaking less than the family men in Canadian society. Besides, they concentrate on the male members of the progeny.
- they participate in ceremonies and festivals less intensively than the women members of the family.

Social Function of Festivals and Ceremonies

- they help to transmit the classical myths and legends of Indian culture; various festivals celebrate significant events in these myths.
- the myths are populated by idealised models of human beings in specific roles.
- these models are used as guides to help people fashion their own behaviour in terms of their dealings with others, particularly with other members of the extended family.

Festivals

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| Diwali &
Dussehra | -- epitomises the victory of the ideal man - Ram - and celebrates his virtuous fulfillment of different roles: husband, son, king, brother, etc. |
| Raksha
Bandhan | -- brother and sister ties are celebrated. |
| Karwachowth
& Shivratri | -- symbolises wife's loyalty to husband; there is no reciprocal festival. |
| Durgapuja | -- worship of mother; devotion and fear of man for his mother is celebrated in this festival. |

Conclusion

Since the woman's role is central in the formulation of early habits and in the concepts that are inculcated in children, it is more important to reach the housewife rather than the man in the family, if any new ideas are to be introduced into the family. Here particular reference may be made of personal health and hygiene habits, learning habits, attitudes to education etc. The difficulty of reaching the housewife in the Indian community must not, on the other hand, be underestimated, since communication with the society outside (apart from kith and kin and close friends) is conducted by the man in the family.