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INDIA'S CHANGING FAMILY : PROBLEMS AND POLICY FORMULATION

A study of varied literature on Indian society, particularly generated by ethnographers, historians, Christian missionaries and subsequently, by sociologists, suggests that the twentieth century recorded certain changes of far reaching importance in the family system under the process of westernization, industrialization, modernization and greater population mobility across the sub-continent. Ever since then the Indian family has progressively confronted and combated various kinds of problems and challenges, and yet India does not have any family policy per se so far; albeit the Government of India has indeed taken several useful legislative measures relating to widow remarriage, women's right to property, child marriage, succession, adoption and maintenance, dowry, dissolution of marriage concerning different communities and most recently domestic violence, which have impacted the Indian family system in more ways than one. It is, however, recognized that the formulation of a single national policy given the large size and heterogeneity of a society like that of India is really a difficult task. Barriers to the creation of a comprehensive national policy in India are intricate parts of Indian ethos and ideology. This is perhaps the important reason why India has not so far succeeded in evolving a common civil code despite public demand for it through various social and political fora in the recent past. Muslims, who comprise about 12 percent of India's population, are opposed to the idea of a uniform civil code in the country. Anyway, in order to do that one must have a reasonably good understanding of problems that the Indian society has been facing. Here we would like to throw some light on the major problems that confront the Indian society in general and a family in particular. It is really imperative that one should understand the hurdles in promoting social protection and intergenerational solidarity for the well being of family as a social institution.

At the outset let me move a word of caution— it is hazardous to offer a generalized view of the nature and problems of the Indian family system which have persisted over the years, as the subject is quite complicated for the reason that the Indian society is very vast and is characterized by bewildering complexity. The Indian society exhibits considerable variations between regions, between rural and urban areas, between classes, and finally, between different religious, ethnic and caste groups. The Indian society is, in fact, a congeries of micro-regions and sub-cultures and differences between which are quite crucial from sociological angles. Furthermore, the differences are also discernible with respect to the level of female literacy, sex ratio, age at marriage of girls, incidence of dissolution of marriage, household size, female workforce participation rate, marital practices, gender relations and authority structure within the family.

It would be noticed from the subsequent discussion that the magnitude of changes that the Indian family has experienced over a period of a century appears to be far greater than the expectations of Indian sociologists and anthropologists. The virtual disappearance of traditional joint family from the urban scene, increase in the life expectancy of women from 23 years in 1901-10 to 72 years (it is higher than that of men by five years) in 2009, rise in the proportion of female headed households, decrease in the average age of household heads, increase in separation and divorce, greater tension and conflicts between wife and husband, parents and sons and between brothers, increased freedom of marital choice, passing of child marriages, shrinking of kinship ties, continuous consultations between sons and parents on familial matters, greater involvement of females in decision making process, increase in the mean age at marriage of female from 13 years in 1901 to 18.3 years in 2001, rise in the level of female education, decline in fertility from 4.3 in 1971 to 2.72 in 2009 are concrete and clinching evidence to suggest a whole range of changes in the family system— its structure, functions, core values and regulative norms (Singh, 2004: 129-166). In course of these changes many new problems have surfaced, while some of the old ones have got further intensified.

The passing of joint family system

Since time immemorial joint family has been one of the salient features of the Indian society. But the twentieth century brought enormous changes in the family system. Changes in the traditional family system have been so enormous that it is steadily on the wane from the urban scene. There is absolutely no chance of reversal of this trend. In villages the size of joint family has been substantially reduced or is found in a fragmented form. Some have split into several nuclear families, while others have taken the form of extended or stem families. Extended family is in fact a transitory phase between joint and nuclear family system. The available data suggest that the joint family is on its way out in rural areas too (Singh, 2004: 134-140).

Joint family or extended family in rural areas is surviving in its skeleton or nominal form as a kinship group. The adults have migrated to cities either to pursue higher education or to secure more lucrative jobs or to eke out their living outside their traditional callings, ensuing from the availability of better opportunities elsewhere as well as the rising pressure of population on the limited land base. Many of the urban households are really offshoots of rural extended or joint families. A joint family in the native village is the fountainhead of nuclear families in towns. These days in most cases two brothers tend to form two independent households even within the same city owing to the rising spirit of individualism, regardless of similarity in occupation, even when the ancestral property is not formally partitioned at their native place.

The nuclear family, same as elsewhere, is now the characteristic feature of the Indian society. According to the census of India data, of all the households nuclear family constituted 70 percent

and single member or more than one member households without spouse (or eroded families) comprised about 11 per cent. The extended and joint family or households together claim merely 20 per cent of all households. This is the overall picture about the entire country, whereas in the case of urban areas the proportion of nuclear family is somewhat higher still. The available data from the National Family and Health Survey-1 of 1992-93 (henceforth NFHS) suggest that joint family does not make up more than five per cent of all families in urban areas (Singh, 2004:137). An extended family, which includes a couple with married sons or daughters and their spouses as well as household head without spouse but with at least two married sons, daughters and their spouses, constitute a little less than one fifth of the total households.

With further industrial development, rural to urban migration, nuclearization of families and rise of divorce rate and the proportion of single member household is likely to increase steadily on the line of industrial West. This is believed to be so because the states, which have got a higher level of urbanization, tend to have a higher proportion of single member households. Similarly, about a couple of decades ago almost 20 per cent households contained only one person in the USA (Skolnick and Skolnick 1980: 2). More or less, a similar situation exists in other developed countries as well, and above all, not a single country has recorded decline in the proportion of single member household during the last three decades. In fact, the tendency is more towards increase in the proportion of single member households.

As the process of family formation and dissolution has become relatively faster now than before, households are usually headed by relatively younger people. Census data from 1971 onward have clearly borne out that at the national level over three-fifths of the households are headed by persons aged less than 50 (Singh 1984: 86-95). There is every reason to believe that proportion of households headed by younger persons are likely to constitute a larger proportion than this in urban areas where the proportion of extended family, not to speak of joint family, is much smaller than that of rural areas.

The emergence of financially independent, career-oriented men and women, who are confident of taking their own decisions and crave to have a sense of individual achievement, has greatly contributed to the disintegration of joint family. Disintegration of joint family has led to closer bonds between spouses, but the reverse is also true in certain cases. For many, nuclear family is a safer matrimonial home to a woman. In bygone days people generally lived in joint families, yet familial discord never escalated into extreme physical violence or death, as we so often come across such instances in our day-to-day life and also know through national dailies.

The dissolution of the joint family has brought up many larger social issues as well as individual problems of a practical and psychological nature. The elders are no longer venerated as wise authorities of what is right and wrong, but dismissed as old fogies with no grasp of the

changing times, behaviour patterns and values. Retired parents living with their children is not so a common practice in the Indian cities and old age homes are no longer a bizarre concept. The demand exceeds the supply which gives rise to commercialization of the worst kind in running such homes. Incidentally, the persons aged 60 and above comprises 7.5 percent of the total population of India which is quite huge in terms of number (about 80 million in 2009), and the size is likely to grow due to the ageing of population. In this age group females outnumber males and widows outnumber widowers and yet there exists virtually nothing at the initiative of the state for the welfare of such a vulnerable population, either due to resource constraints or general apathy. According to the NFHS-2 (1998–99), about 15 percent of the old people are living independent of their sons, while the 2001 census data have revealed that 70 percent of the total households are without a single person aged 60 and above. This is important particularly because the life expectancy at birth has reached nearly 70 years. Here one should not construe that all the elderly people finally separated from their sons for all practical purposes. Anyway, under the prevailing situation, the non-governmental organizations and civil societies are expected to play an important role to help out those ageing people who are destined to lead an uncared and solitary life. At the same time, there may be some amount of solace as well because the kind of problem relating to intergenerational solidarity Indian society is facing is a relatively much less serious phenomenon compared to the developed world, since a vast majority of the elderly people tend to live with their sons or if not with them for some reasons, their sons or other kinsmen remain in constant touch with them to attend any exigency which may arise in their life.

Change in authority structure

Once the authority within the family was chiefly in the hands of family elders commonly called Karta in Hindi. The general attitude of members of the family towards the traditional patriarch was mostly one of respect. Loyalty, submissiveness, respect and deference over the household were bestowed on him. These attributes also encompassed other relationships in the family, such as children to their parents, a wife to her husband, and younger brothers to their older brothers (Gupta, 1978: 72). Within a household no one was supposed to flout the will of his elders. The father, or in his absence the eldest brother, was consulted on all important family matters like pursuing litigation in courts of law, building a house, buying and selling of property and arranging marriages, etc. The joint family did not allow the neglect or disregard of elders. The age-grade hierarchy was quite strong. Now the people of younger generation, particularly those with modern tertiary education, do not seem to show the same reverence which their fathers had for their parents or elders.

Among women patriarch's wife was the paramount authority. In fact, women's position depended on the position of their husbands in the household. The wife of the household head or mother-in-law was in charge of the household. Her word was law or at least had the same force. Her decisions were made for the entire family and not for the welfare of the individuals in it. Young women in the family were expected to be dutiful and obedient. Self-assertion, even in bringing up

their own children, was blasphemy. Widows and those spurned by their husbands were assured of the family roof, though mostly as voiceless members.

With a view to absolving themselves of responsibility now parents cleverly encourage their educated sons and daughters-in-law to take independent decision in a joint and extended family situation, leave aside urban areas, the similar situation has started to emerge in rural areas too. This is not unusual when sons and daughters tend to possess a higher level of education and a greater degree of exposure of the world outside the family than ever before. Now boys and girls, contrary to the old practice, are beginning to assert their wishes in mate selections. Parental decisions are no more supreme. Changes concerning erosion of authority of old guards, particularly in matters of mate selection, are on gradual decline in rural areas too.

Yet another interesting fact about the change in authority structure within the family is that about nine percent of all the households are headed by women, while the NFH Survey-1 (1995:46) gives a slightly higher figure (about 10 percent). Most of the female household heads are usually independent and gainfully employed. In absence of their husbands, either because of death, separation, transfer in job or business engagement, women are themselves able to run the affairs of their family. Long distance migration of men for employment is also an important reason for the emergence of such households. The phenomenon of female-headed household assumes significance in the Indian society because in the past when the joint family system was so preponderant that the female-headed household was quite an uncommon phenomenon.

Changes in marital practices

The traditional system of values of the Indian society, especially that of Hindus, has been such that it stood for the practice of early as well as universal marriage for females. Child marriage or pre-puberty marriage all through has been an archetypal institution of India. The mean age at marriage was reported to be quite low in the 19th century and so also in earlier days. The mean age at marriage for females was about 13 years between 1901 and 1931 censuses and it did not differ much between different communities. Of all the legal measures the Child Marriages Restraint Act 1919 (and its further amendments in 1949, 1955 and 1978) happened to be quite effective one. Changes in the age at marriage really became conspicuous during the post independence era, that is, during the period onward 1950. The act was further amended in 1978 wherein boys' marriage age was raised to 21 and girls' age to 18 years. On the whole, the state level census information for the last one hundred years has revealed a clear rise in the age at marriage for girls. During 1891-1991 the age at marriage increased by 4 to 7 years in different parts of the country. Data from NFHS-2 (1998-99) have shown further increase in the age at marriage of females from 18.5 years to 21.5 years at the national level which greatly destabilized the persistence of high fertility regime in the country (the Census of India, 2001 has estimated a lower figure). Out-of-wedlock birth is highly unacceptable and hence extremely rare in India.

Here it is not suggested that the practice of child marriage has now disappeared from the Indian scene. Doubtless, a large number of child marriages do still take place every year. Child marriages during the annual Akha Teej festival in the State of Rajasthan are a notable example. The NFHS-1 data have clearly shown that only 6.5 percent of the girls in the 15-19 age group were married by age 15 in urban areas. However, this percentage was recorded larger in rural areas (21 percent) (Das and Dey 1998: 96). According to the 2001 census, out of 593 districts in the country there are 190 districts where the mean age at marriage of females is less than 18 years. But the incidence of child marriages is much less frequent now than ever before. Persistence of child marriages implies that laws prohibiting such marriages is not so effective. In terms of absolute number the incidence of child marriages is quite substantial, but the state machinery is not so efficient or successful in tackling such a serious social evil because of poor regard for law generally.

Yet another important marital practice is consanguineous marriage which has been the notable feature of a large segment of the Indian society since long. Through the ages the system of cross-cousin and cross-uncle niece marriages has been the most favored kind of marriage in South India. The most desirable mate for a man has been his own sister's daughter or mother's brother's daughter (Driver and Driver 1988; Nair 1978: 121, 131). In the face of rising dowry practices across the country consanguineous marriages have appreciably declined in South India in recent years. However, such marriages have remained tabooed among the vast majority of Hindus of North India. The Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act 1955 prohibits marriage among close relatives—called sapinda marriage. The sapinda relationship extends as far as the third generation in the line of mother and the fifth in the line of father. In North India only Muslims, certain scheduled castes and scheduled tribes tend to practice consanguineous marriages. Singh (1997: 8-9) has reported that most of the tribal groups practice consanguinity of both types such as marriages with the father's sister's daughter, the mother's brother's daughter and the elder sister's daughter.

The Indian society has been a highly endogamous. Marriage within the same sub-caste has been followed very strictly. The scheduled tribes are also endogamous, but most of the tribal communities practice clan exogamy (Singh 1997: 8). Polygamy, more particularly polygamy, has been one of salient features of Indian family. It has been more popular among Muslims than Hindus. Here it is not suggested that the incidence of polygamy is more common than monogamy. The polygamous males often derived support from age-old scriptures and mythological stories. But mainly those who had no issue from the first wife practiced such marriages. With the rise in the level of literacy the incidence of polygamy has receded even among the Muslims despite the fact that such marriages have got full cultural and legal sanction. While monogamy is the predominant form of marriage, there are a large number of tribes practicing sororal polygamy and non-sororal polygamy (Singh 1997: 8).

Dissolution of marriage

The dissolution of marriage has been quite uncommon and rare in India for a long time. Hindu marriage is taken as a life-long union for the couple, as it is a sacrament, rather than a contract between the couple to live in a social union so long as it is cordially feasible. Even in the event of frequent mental and physical torture, most Indian women persist in marriage, since remarriage of divorced or separated women is quite difficult. Morality relating to sex is so highly valued that every male wants to marry a virgin girl only. In the past Hindus demanded pre-nuptial chastity on the part of both, but now it is by and large limited to females. Virginity is regarded as the girls' greatest virtue and a symbol of respectability. Under the circumstances remarriage of women is so difficult that annulment of marriage is a very hard choice or option.

Despite all these there has been a significant change in the views and attitudes towards sanctity of marriage in the recent past. Marriage is no longer held to be a 'divine match' or a 'sacred union'. Now it is more like a transfer of a female from one family to another, or from one kinship group to another. The marriage is no longer sanctified as it was believed in the past, and is viewed only as a bonding and nurturing life-long relationship and friendship. The rather flippant and superficial reasons given by many women and men to break a marriage may not portend well for the future. Indian marriages are still largely resilient and lasting, whereas in many developed countries they seem to break up for seemingly trivial reasons. Marriages are very vulnerable or fragile there. One in every four or five marriages breaks up despite more space and freedom in the West. The longevity of marriage in most developed countries ranges on an average from five to seven years. While in India divorce rates are among the lowest in the world. Only one marriage out of 100 marriages end up in divorce in India. These days divorce rates in India's urban sphere are, however, shooting up.

Marriage counselors, formerly pooh-poohed at, have today assumed a lot of importance in guiding couples through stormy seas and averting the imminent pain of divorce. Today in cities there is disenchantment with the system of arranged marriages in a large number of cases. The Indian family is faced with a new kind of social and psychological constraints. The women, however, tend to be more concerned about their marriage than men and in case of a problem they are expected to go for counseling. They are expected to take the lead to resolve conflicts and when they give up the effort, the marriage is generally over. The men feel that the expectations of the women are immense, and they cannot please them however hard they may try, despite huge contribution towards the sustenance of the family. They are under pressure to improve financial contribution, share in raising the children and provide emotional support to the wives.

In today's shifting values and changing times, there is less reliance on marriage as a definer of sex and living arrangements throughout life. Today in cities there is disenchantment with the system of arranged marriages. There is a greater incidence of extra-marital relationships, including

open gay and lesbian relationships, a delay in the age at marriage, higher rates of marital disruption and more egalitarian gender-role attitudes among men and women. It is reported that in big metropolises a new system of 'live in arrangements' between pairs, particularly in upper stratum of society, is steadily emerging as a new kind of family life. Anyway, high divorce rates, inter alia, connote that marriage is an institution in trouble, or else expectations are so high that people are no longer willing to put up with the kinds of dissatisfactions and empty-shell marriages that the previous generations tolerated. High rate of remarriages clearly means that people are sacrificing their marriages because of unsatisfactory relationships.

Problems of dowry

Now, let us come to the rising problem of dowry which has become one of the serious social evils of the Indian society in the recent years. Dowry, or the bridegroom price, refers to a lump sum of money with or without some tangible assets constituting an essential part of the wedding settlement, which is transferred by the bride's household to that of her prospective spouse before the actual solemnization of marriage. Sometimes dowry also accompanies or follows the marriage of a daughter. The dowry and its cognate problems have become so serious that the marriage of daughters tends to bring in nightmarish experiences for scores of parents these days. The menace of dowry has become so severe that the Government of India had to enact the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961, which was further amended in 1986. But the legislative measures to do away with this practice have so far proved an ineffective exercise.

The dowry has gained social legitimacy across all communities and regions. Marriage negotiations tend to break down if there is no consensus between the bride's and bridegroom's families regarding the mode or amount of payment of dowry. Dowry, as said before, has become such an essential consideration for marriage that rarely any marriage can take place without it. It may be regarded as a functional imperative for family formation in contemporary India. In very rare cases demands for dowry are eschewed. If the groom's parents, for instance, sense that they can reap greater economic or personal benefits in modes other than the dowry in a lump cash from bride's parents, dowry is not demanded under the pretext that it is an evil of Indian society.

When the dowry amount is not considered sufficient or the expected demands are not met easily, the bride is often harassed, abused and tortured. The dissatisfied husband takes recourse to violence to show his displeasure with the marriage in order to extract additional transfers from the wife's family by threatening her with separation if new demands are not complied with. The dowry related harassment most likely arises from complete lack of respect for the woman and rapacious avarice for money. The woman, as a bride, is subjected to humiliation and brutal behavior, because she is the softest and the surest means of extracting maximum amount of money or property from her parents to enhance one's economic position in society. Since the bride is helpless in her new home and physically so powerless that she cannot retaliate against the coercive tactics or actions

of others. Not many women have enough guts to divorce their husbands on the ground of frequent mental or physical torture, since they have nothing to fall back upon in a traditional and poorly developed country like India.

The disturbing fact about dowry related violence is that it is not confined to any particular group, social stratum, geographical region or even religion. Rather, it is regarded as a universal phenomenon, cutting across all sorts of boundaries, as it has already been stressed before. It is claimed to be on continuous increase in the country. It has been often reported that like clockwork every 12th hour a dowry related death claimed to have taken the lives of over 20,000 women across the country between 1990 and 1993. It has also been reported that at least three girls are burnt for dowry related demands every day in the State of Karnataka. This may be taken as a matter of grave concern, for the incidence of dowry death is one of the typical problems of the Indian society (Singh, 2005: 199-220). In view of continuing failure of the state through legal means, the civil societies should come forward to fight the menace of dowry. The crux of the matter is that those who have got sons or more sons than daughters tend to have developed vested interests in the persistence of this practice.

Domestic tension and violence

Violence within family settings is primarily a male activity. The prime targets are women and children. The women have been victims of humiliation and torture for as long as we have written records of the Indian society. Despite several legislative measures adopted in favor of women during the 20th century, continuing spread of modern education and women's gradual economic independence, countless women have continued to be victims of discrimination and violence in the country (Singh 2002: 168). Increasing family violence in modern times has compelled many social scientists to be apologists for the traditional joint family- as happy and harmonious, a high-voltage emotional setting, imbued with love, affection and tenderness. India's past has been so romanticized by certain scholars that they have regarded the joint family as the best form of family.

With the rise in the level of education and exposure to mass media, women tend to have greater awareness of the notion of gender equality, faith in the effectiveness of legal action to protect their rights, and confidence in such institutions as family courts and certain voluntary organizations working for women. Yet there is no sign of abatement in gender related violence. Cases of domestic violence, like wife-battering and forced incest with the women of the household, are so personal and delicate that they are seldom reported to the police or law courts. We are sure that the recent legislation of anti-domestic violence act of 2005 would certainly take care of the problem of gender-based violence of the Indian woman to a very large extent.

There are data showing that in India 40 percent of women have experienced violence by an intimate partner. These stark figures underline the fact that, although the home and community

are places where women provide care for others, they are also places where millions of women experience coercion and abuse. A study of five districts of the State of Uttar Pradesh has revealed that 30 percent of currently married men acknowledge physically abusing their wives (UNC 1997). Similarly, the multi-sectoral survey done by the International Clinical Epidemiologists Network (INCLIN) has reported that two out of every five married women reported being hit, kicked, beaten or slapped by their husbands. About fifty percent of the women experiencing physical violence also reported physical abuse during pregnancy.

Socialization

There has been appreciable decline in fertility over the years. This has not been possible without recording drastic changes in the attitude of people towards the size of family and the value system of patriarchy and paternity. Based on studies on fertility behavior and contraceptive practices one can conclusively contend that perhaps no element of the Indian social system has experienced greater changes than the system of family during the post-independent period. This is clearly borne out by various empirical investigations. Despite considerable decline in fertility or lesser burden of children on the family, there is no improvement in the quality of care of children especially in rural areas. There hardly exists any pre-school or community centre in villages. There also does not exist even a basic facility of play ground for children. The older children have to mind the younger children at home and sometimes they are also expected to lend helping hands to their parents in the household chores as and when required. The poor children learn the expected roles of life of their own with the passage of time, while the well-off peasantry send their children to private schools (also called public schools in the Western world) in towns and cities for better schooling of their children.

The urban woman is in a position to exercise much greater authority than before. Despite her increased duties, the urban woman seems to have emerged as the stronger partner. It is she who monitors children's homework, tutors them in areas of weakness or laziness. Mothers dropping and picking up children— from school or coaching classes in computer and cricket or tennis— by bus, moped, scooter or car, is a common sight today. It is true that fathers have also shaken off age-old male chauvinism and begun to help in housework and child rearing; but it is the mother who shoulders a 'man's weight' in these labors and responsibilities. Mother has become the primary agent of socialization. But all mothers are not equally free to mind their children.

In cases of working mothers, children are placed in an entirely different situation. The demands of city life are such that both wife and husband tend to remain outside their home for work even at the cost of interests of their children. Working couples are unable to give proper care and affection to their children. Obviously, latchkey children of working couples are strangers to the sense of security enjoyed by their own parents. The system of surrogate mothers or the Montessori and Kindergarten systems of schooling has proved to be a very poor substitution for family as an

agent of socialization. With the diminished role of family as an agent of socialization juvenile delinquency is on the increase. In the past children enjoyed security of a kind unknown today. In the extended or joint families, they were always assured of playmates and attention. Growing up under the joint care of adults made them feel responsible for all the extended members of the family, besides their own parents. It was not uncommon for an aged aunt or granduncle to spend her or his last years happily in the home of a nephew.

Now children are at greater strain than ever before because in general parents intend to accomplish those things in their life through their children what they themselves could not be able to achieve, no matter how difficult they are. Children are put under great stress and strain to score high marks at schools to be able to meet the ever-increasing challenges of fiercely competitive world of education and employment. In addition to helping their children achieve higher goals of life, women, sometimes both the parents, have to work harder with a view to attaining economic independence and maintaining a higher standard of living of their family

Some new extra-familial roles and challenges for women

Now considerable changes are noticeable in the traditional role of women. Once the priority for the young women was the husband, but now it has shifted to their careers and in addition deep resentments tend to surface when the husbands are reluctant to take part in the household chores. Stay-at-home women who give up careers to be good mothers and homemakers find this role daunting and frustrating, as they have to meet the demands of little children and cope with the never-ending drudgeries of housework single-handedly. The woman's fatigue and pent up frustration is heaped on her husband producing the inevitable lacuna in the marriage. The changing role of Indian women is believed to have created problems of adjustment in marital life in cities (Gupta, 1978: 84).

The urban women are seen in many different roles. With 54 percent of the level of female literacy rate in India at the 2001 census, though much lower by the Western standard, it is not unusual to see women working as clerks, typists, receptionists, nurses, doctors, school and college teachers, lawyers, police, social workers and social activists. Women can assume still greater public roles in society than what we see today. They tend to show lower workforce participation rate because not many suitable jobs are available for them outside their home (Singh, 1996: 56-70). But on the contrary countless people often believe that women inherently tend to have stronger attachments with family and household responsibilities. The important problem with women is that they must fit any schooling, job, or political activity around those family roles.

On the whole, with the rise in education, urbanization and opportunity to proper employment, women are much freer now to come out of their homes with a view to meeting their family expenses.

According to the 1991 census, of the total population of women at ages 15-59 (59 million) in urban areas about 14 percent of them are working outside home to earn their living. This suggests that every seventh woman in the working age group is gainfully employed outside her home. Most of the working-women (about 70 percent) are engaged in industries, trade and commerce and different categories of service sectors. At the national level there are 4.5 million female employees in the organized sector according to the Employment Review (1995-96) of the Ministry of Law (Government of India). This implies that a good proportion of women are economically autonomous. In fact, the women would have shown a much higher level of workforce participation, had there been not so much unemployment in the country. With the rise in education and economic development, the women would steadily move towards greater economic independence in course of time (Singh, 2002).

With the rise in modern education, gainful engagement, quality of health condition and a fewer number of children, family life may not be always well. The State of Kerala can be cited as one of the examples. Those who are unhappy with current state of family life are on the gradual increase in the state. It is all the more acute in urban areas where the hold of traditional norms and values has largely dissipated. The consumer culture sweeping the urban society and the breakdown of the extended or joint family system have contributed to this. Reports show that the number of cases pending in the family courts is on the increase. The number of children running away from homes has also gone up. Consumption of alcohol has touched an all time high (George, 2000: 42). Modernization has created dilemmas for family life. Under the new socio-economic urban milieu there has been a tremendous increase in the family violence. With a view to tackling increasing violence in the family, the Government of India introduced a very useful Domestic Violence Act in 2005. This would certainly go a long way in restraining the incidence of domestic violence in the country.

Concluding remarks

The increase in the number of single member household, break-down of traditional joint family system, increase in divorce rate, individual male migration, erosion of authority of patriarch, the loss of traditional family values, increase in the number of working mothers in cities and single parents and consequent problems in nurturing of children, rise in domestic violence, dowry related harassment to women and the like are indications of the danger that the family and ultimately society are increasingly facing in India. To combat the continuing erosion of values and the family, it is suggested that there should be a set of strong, consistent policies to strengthen the Indian family system. Otherwise, India would be left with no choice, but to face the same problems which are generally faced by many families of developed countries now. There is no doubt that the family needs an increased support in the areas of child care, social services, income assistance and health services than ever before. It is, however, recognized that the formulation of an effective single national policy given the large size and heterogeneity of society like that of India is quite a difficult

and cumbersome task.

The formulation of alternative family lifestyle is fraught with serious problems of various kinds. The state may not have the required political will to do so perhaps for some political expediency or mileage. Since India is a soft state, law does not always prove to be so effective and hence, it may be difficult to regulate the Indian family system through a formal public policy. Increasing state interventions in informal organization like family may be unpalatable to many and it could be counterproductive as well. It is, however, not stated that the development of a national policy would be an exercise in futility. In fact, there is a need of Family Policy Council in each state of India to conduct policy analysis, promote responsible parenthood, facilitate strategic leadership involvement and influence public opinion. It should be an autonomous entity with no link with state except for financial aid and they should have a uniform purpose: helping in responsible parenthood, serving as a voice for the family and assisting advocates for family ideals who aim to recapture the moral and intellectual high ground in the public arena. One has to recognize that under the prevailing circumstances the civil society can play a more significant and successful role than the state. Anyway, because of rising individualism, competitiveness and openness in society, increasing material ambitions of individuals and family and greater autonomy in life, hassle-free family may be a distant dream. Wittingly or unwittingly people are expected to be ready to pay the likely prices for all these.

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