

## **Family and Women: The Core of society and the pivot of the system.**

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### **Abstract:**

Man is born in and brought up by family. It is the nucleus of society. It becomes incomplete without the present of a woman around whom the familial relationships are centred. Family as a unit of society is permanent and universal because of its stable presence all through human history. But it has undergone several changes and varies from place to place due to cultural conditioning. Several dimensions of family as a social unit such as familial relations, rules of inheritance, residence pattern, practices associated with family life are to mention but a few important aspects of continuity and change in family system. The position of women is also a matter of discussion as it indicates the overall nature of society at large. The present paper discusses the nuances of family and the position of women in family structure in general.

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Family has been at the centre of social structure of any society and women occupy a very significant position in the existence and functioning of the family. The popular saying that the “man builds the house, and the woman makes it a home” signifies the centrality of family and the crucial position of women in it.

Significance of the family lies in its universality and persistence over millions of years of history of human society. But it does not mean that family is rigid and resistant to changes. This is true in respect of Indian family as well. The spate of literature on Indian society and culture generated by ethnographers, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists documents the continuity and change in family system in India. However, the studies suggest that the twentieth century recorded certain far reaching changes in the family system under the influence of industrialization, westernization, modernization and movement of population across the sub-continent (Singh, J P). Since then the Indian family has progressively confronted with various kinds of challenges and problems.

Family system in India and the position of women therein have been influenced by various practices that have their roots in the fathomless tradition of Indian society. The practice of child marriage, widowhood, dowry system, caste-based vocation and educational system are to mention but a few practices that have influenced the family system and position of women in India all through the periods of history. The intricacies of Indian ethos and ideologies posed a significant barrier to the creation of a comprehensive and unified national policy on family in India. Despite the fact that Indian subcontinent has been ruled by several dynasties at different points of time and later conquered and colonized by the Muslim rulers and British administration, the social fabric of Indian society maintained its integrity through its age old systems like joint family, village panchayats and caste system amidst bewildering complexity. However it is hazardous to offer a generalized view of the nature and problems of the Indian family system. Due to the lack of a comprehensive policy on family system and its associated practice like inheritance, succession, marriage, adoption, divorce and maintenance the problems and challenges continued unabated over centuries.

However, the Government of India has indeed taken several useful legislative measures relating to dowry, dissolution of marriage, women’s right to property, practice of child marriage and other practices affecting the family system and women’s position in different communities. A recent addition to the list of social legislations to contain the problems of family and maintain the status of women in it is the Domestic violence Act. The multiplicity of castes, communities and religions in India and their associated cultural diversities prevent the government from introducing a comprehensive national policy on family in India.

According to the 2001 Census, there are 192.7 million households in India, spread over 0.59 million villages and about 5000 towns. Indian society exhibits considerable variations between regions, between rural and urban areas, religions, classes, ethnic and caste groups. These variations considerably influence the level of literacy, sex ratio, age at marriage, education, incidence of dissolution of marriage, size of household, marital practices, gender relations, authority structure within the family. As a result, the problems of family and the position of women also vary along with them.

However, over the years several changes took place in the family system. These changes are the disappearance of the traditional joint family, increase in the life expectancy of women, increase in women's literacy and education, increased participation of women in employment sectors and politics, rise in the age at marriage, freedom of marital choice, shrinking of kinship ties etc. In the course of these changes, many new problems have surfaced, while some of the old ones have either disappeared or got further intensified. The advent of science and technology, modern education, social legislations and the impact of globalization are the important forces that have affected the family system in India.

In the light of these forces the problems associated with Indian family and women need to be analyzed in the historical and contemporary contexts. Based on the problems of family and women in the past and at present, certain observations may be made on problems of family and women in Mangalore.

### **Traditional problems of Indian family and women.**

Since time immemorial the joint families have been one of the salient features of Indian society. It has been an ideal form of family on account of the economic and social security guaranteed by it to its members. The economic activities and the domestic affairs used to take place smoothly on account of the large size and jointness in ownership, maintenance and use of family property. However, there were also certain serious problems in such families, like constant quarrel between members, lack of privacy, authoritarian behavior of the head of the family, and low status of women. Among the members of the lower classes, poverty, illiteracy, child labour, illhealth and alcoholism, were the most common problems in their families. There were certain common social problems associated with family system in India irrespective of caste, class and religious differences. Dowry system was one such problem. Many of the families have gone to ruins on account of dowry. Many girls remained unmarried throughout their life, many ill-suited marriages took place, and many cases of harassment, wife-beating and dowry deaths have been recorded in history. Divorce, desertion and separation were the cases of dissolution of marriage, which was most common in the past. Lack of a strict and comprehensive policy on marriage, divorce, and inheritance resulted in evil practices like bigamy and polygamy, abandonment of wife and children and exploitation of wealth and property of the brides' families in the name of marriage. One of the most inhuman custom associated with family was the practice of Sati, which was banned by a legislation in 1829. Consequent on the evils associated with the family, the position of women and children remained very low. Low level of literacy and education, lack of power and authority and subordination to patriarchal authority within the family were the conditions of women of the upper classes, while the plight of the women of lower classes consisted of illiteracy, illhealth, and illtreatment at home by male members. The rigidities of caste system have contributed to the problems like early marriage, widowhood, infanticide, neglect and illtreatment of girl children.

### **Problems of modern family.**

With the advent of modern education, westernization, urbanization and social awakening created by social reforms and other movements in the previous centuries and the onset of globalization in the present century many changes took place in the family system in India. These changes took place at the structural as well as functional levels. The passing of joint families and emergence of elementary families, changing household size, structure and composition, reduction in kinship network and contacts, transfer of economic, health, recreational and other secondary functions of the family are a few of them. Education of girls and employment of women are the significant factors in bringing far reaching changes in Indian family system. The passing of several legislations relating to marriage among various religious communities, adoption, inheritance and succession, divorce and prohibition of dowry have contributed to the eradication of some of the traditional problems of family and women. Thanks to various legislations, women now enjoy the rights of inheritance, maintenance, and protection against capricious use of divorce. Remarriage of young widows is possible nowadays. Domestic violence against women and children has been brought under control by the recent legislation.

Despite all these developments, some of the problems of family and women got intensified in recent years, and some new problems have surfaced. On account of the disintegration of joint family and emergence of elementary family, many of the social security functions of the family have become difficult. On account of employment of women balancing of domestic work and job role became a matter of serious concern in small families. Problem of adjustment between spouses and between parents and children are the matter of everyday life.

Apart from the problems inherited as backlog from the past like dowry system, divorce, and domestic violence, many new problems have emerged in modern times. Some of these problems may be grouped into the following categories:

A) Problems emanating from the change in household size, structure and functions, like problem of care for the aged, problems in child care and parenting, and domestic workload.

B) Problems arising on account of the nature of environment, like substandard housing, lack of modern household amenities, and lack of sufficient time for familial interactions.

C) Problems arising on account of developments, like dearth of brides for certain categories of boys due to high education of girls in some communities, incidence of inter-caste marriages and consequent familial difficulties, ill-treatments and violence.

The nature and types of problems of family and women in India have changed drastically on account of the recent changes in the nature of our society.

**Some observations regarding the problems of family and women in Mangalore:**

The empirical data available from various sources help us to make certain general observations regarding the problems of family and women in Mangalore.

The household size and composition is significantly changing. Gone are the days of joint families and families with large number of members. Dual earner families are on the increase, especially among the middle class. Consequent on these changes, caring for the elderly is emerging as one of the greatest problems of the modern families. Child care and parenting are also the significantly affected area of functions of family. Domestic workload and overwork are the daily hassles for working women.

Increasing size of population of the city add fuel to the problem of housing and accommodation in Mangalore. Increased demand for suitable houses leads to the escalation of land value in Mangalore, which results in the increase of substandard housing and problem of slums. Needless to say that it entails the problems like drainage, drinking water, supply of basic amenities, contamination, congestions, and spread of epidemic diseases.

Some of the problems of family and women in Mangalore are the result of development taking place in the city. The increasing rate of educational attainment of women and their employment creates a situation in which the young boys of marriageable age are unable to find girls for marriage. The men of marriageable age engaged in occupations like priesthood, catering, agriculture, and other petty business etc find it difficult to get brides. It is now the girls who have a greater scope for choice of life partner rather than the boys who had the same position in the past. This situation is somewhat similar in respect of most of the castes and classes of people.

On account of the increase in life expectancy and decrease in the size of household, taking care of the elderly has become the greatest problem of modern families. Migration of younger members in view of education and employment left the elderly parents alone at their home. The problem is more explicit in the case of female elderly people.

Women in modern society experience new challenges and problems. Thanks to the rise in female education the priority for the young women has now been shifted from marriage to career. Women are now seen working as clerks, typists, receptionists, nurses, doctors, school and college teachers, lawyers, social workers, police, social activists and people's representatives and so on. With women assuming greater public roles in society they began to experience newer problems both in their families and in workplace. Modern education and gainful employment gave women greater freedom and authority within the family and outside as well. Fewer number of children and reduction in the household activities on account of modern technology, and movement from agricultural to industrial mode of production have all resulted in elevation of women's position in general. With the increased participation of women in public life, the scope for harassment and violence against women has also increased.

Change in the age at marriage is yet another important positive development especially from the point of view of the family and women. The mean age at marriage was reported to be quite low in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and so also in earlier days. The mean age at marriage for females was about 13 years between 1901 and 1931 census and it did not differ much between different communities. Of all the legal measures the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 was quite effective. Rise in age at marriage became conspicuous after Independence. Subsequent legislations and amendments raised the age at marriage and banned the practice of child marriage. Consequent on the rise in age at marriage, the cases of elopement, intercaste marriages and premarital sexual relationship became more common and they used to end up in tension and conflict between families and between communities which have been commonplace phenomenon in Mangalore.

The dissolution of marriage has been quite uncommon and rare in India for a long time. Hindu marriage is considered as life-long union for the couples, and the same is true even in the case of other religious communities as well. Even in the event of frequent mental and physical torture, most Indian women stay in marriage because of social stigma and difficulty of remarriage or staying alone.

The problem of dowry which had been a serious social evil of the traditional society prevails in castes and certain communities. Marriage negotiations tend to breakdown if there is no consensus between the bride's and bride grooms families regarding the payment of dowry. There are many instances of bride burning,

harassment and dowry deaths. In some communities and castes the bridegrooms look for girls who are employed instead of demanding dowry in cash or kind.

Violence within the family setting is increasing and it is women and children who are the prime targets of it. The women have been the victims of humiliation and torture, and quite often it remains unnoticed. Domestic violence in the form of wife-beating, physical abuse of women and children and mental torture are on the increase in recent years. In most cases of domestic violence alcoholic addiction of the husband plays a significant role. This is more true in the case of lower class families.

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