

**MAJOR ASPECTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL REALITY
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FAMILY AND SOCIETY**

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ABSTRACT

The post-colonial Indian society presents a complex configuration of diverse entities in a seemingly unified polity. Its strength lies in its rich diversity with an ability to unify the disparate strands. In the absence of an integrating power, it is vulnerable to internecine disturbances. On the one hand, Indians have made very impressive strides in certain areas like strengthening of democratic institutions; agriculture; science and technology; defense; Human Resource Development; and economy. On the other hand, Indian society is ridden by a host of problems and challenges like communalism; casteism; gender discrimination; corruption, favouritism, nepotism; criminalization of politics; population explosion; excessive urbanization; consumerism; changes in life styles; extremist violence; unemployment; poverty, inadequate healthcare; and insurgency.

Whether it is the Indian society which is divided on the basis of religion, caste and gender or the affluent societies in the west where people are getting bored of the mechanical way of life and are seeking new avenues of sustenance for maintaining inner balance and harmony, the healing touch should start at the family level and then spread to the entire society. Perhaps it is possible to evolve a responsible operating family set-up that ensures the individual identity of each member and at the same time provides opportunities to derive benefits of the traditional family system. Offering a nurturing environment to the children, it should facilitate harmonious interactions with other systems in the society, thus paving the way for societal harmony. The present research paper focuses on some the major aspects of the contemporary social reality with special reference to family and society.

INTRODUCTION

The post-colonial Indian society presents a complex configuration of diverse entities in a seemingly unified polity. Its strength lies in its rich diversity with an ability to unify the disparate strands. In the absence of an integrating power, it is vulnerable to internecine disturbances. On the one hand, Indians have made very impressive strides in certain areas like strengthening of democratic institutions; agriculture; science and technology; defense; Human Resource Development; and economy. On the other hand, Indian society is ridden by a host of problems and challenges like communalism; castism; gender discrimination; corruption, favouritism, nepotism; criminalization of politics; population explosion; excessive urbanization; consumerism; changes in life styles; extremist violence; unemployment; poverty, inadequate healthcare; and insurgency.

Unlike the American society, which acquired over a period of time a distinctly American character in the process of fusing all the migrated cultures as if in a ‘melting pot’, in Indian social structure diverse religious, ethnic, political, economic and linguistic identities coexist as in a ‘salad bowl’. In the absence of the evolution of a Pan-Indian character and identity, frictions and maladjustments have led to frequent disturbances to the peace and harmony among the different sections of the people.

SEVERAL DIVIDED IDENTITIES IN THE SALAD BOWL

There are several divided identities in the salad bowl with reference to religion, caste, language, region variation, economy, gender, politics and education:

- 1. Religion:** Hindu/Muslim/Christian/Sikh/Jain/Parsee
- 2. Caste:** Forward Caste/Other Backward Caste/Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe
- 3. Language:** Hindi/Non Hindi
English
- 4. Region Variation:** Local /Non-local
Urban/Rural
- 5. Economical:** Rich/Poor/Below Poverty Line
- 6. Gender:** Male/Female
- 7. Political:** Centre
Left Centre Right Centre
Left Right
Extreme Left Extreme Right
- 8. Education:** Literate/Illiterate

MAJOR ASPECTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL REALITY

A society is a system in which people live together in organized communities having shared customs and laws. The strength of a society is drawn from the cohesiveness among the different sections. If the members share common values, customs and laws, the society as a whole lives in peace and harmony. But the Indian society lacks homogeneity because different

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sections have different value systems that keep them apart. In the absence of shared value systems, the different sections of the society 'fall apart'. When these value systems are provoked to conflict with one another there is violence, hatred and intolerance. This is the picture of the Indian society.

A society is like a complex living organism with different sections being interconnected and interrelated. The healthy functioning of a society depends upon maintaining a dynamic balance in the interrelatedness of the different parts. Any maladjustment or malfunctioning will upset the balance leading to tensions and conflicts. In the ancient times the Indian society was largely homogeneous with a clearly defined structure and harmonious relations among the different sections by following a well-defined and well-devised code of conduct. As the society became more and more pluralistic and as the performance of the duties deviated from the accepted norms, society came to experience a great deal of friction leading to violence and disharmony. It is in such a situation that appropriate reformative measures need to be taken to restore harmony and balance.

One of the duties of the government is to take appropriate action that ensures peace and harmony in the society. Corrective reformative action is also sometimes taken by individuals and Non-Governmental Agencies (NGOs). It was when after a long period of foreign rule Indian society was losing the central energy to hold all the parts together in a state of healthy balance that reformers like Dayananda Saraswathi and Swami Vivekananda initiated reformist action to revitalize the society. Later under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi social awakening became a part of the agenda for national liberation.

India obtained freedom by paying a heavy price in the form of partition on the basis of religion. This religious divide continues to keep the different sections of Indian society apart, and in a fractured state of hostility and suspicion. To elaborate:

... in the case of sects and religions, self-awareness has resulted in the reinterpretation of traditions, "communalism", and even revivalism. Revivalist movements such as the Arya Samaj, the Sanatan Dharma Sabha, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Sikh Khalsa and the Aligharh Movement, have founded educational institutions imparting modern knowledge, provided hostels and so on. This has produced in the course of time a body of men with western knowledge but who also emphasize the distinctness and superiority of their particular sect or religion. Between them and the nationalists there was an irreconcilable conflict, which has resulted not only in the creation of India and Pakistan, but has provided each country with certain built-in threats to its own survival and development.¹

Partition entailed a lot of violence and bloodshed. The wounds caused by the communal violence continue to fester because of the unresolved Kashmir issue over which the two countries were driven to fight once in 1965 and again in 1971. Complete healing of the wounds is dependent on the resolution of the Kashmir issue. The recent Kargil war is a pointer to the persistence of communal hostilities.

The ghost of partition continues to haunt and take human toll whenever there is recurrence of communal violence, as it happened when the eastern wing of Pakistan was

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dismembered leading to a new state called Bangladesh and, on a minor scale, in the post-Babri Masjid demolition violence and again in the recent post-Godra communal riots in Gujarat. Several provisions contained in the secular framework of the Constitution for giving protection to the religious minorities have not helped much to exorcise the ghost of communal discord.

The peace and harmony in Indian society is largely dependent on an effective bridging of the communal divide by promoting a spirit of tolerance, understanding and respect for the human. A culturally activist agenda should be able to grapple with the stubborn issue of communalism. This is the contemporary reality which has triggered several responses from intellectuals, social activists and creative writers.

Another aspect of Indian society is characterized by the issue of discrimination on the basis of caste. In the hierarchical caste system, the exploitation and suppression of the lower castes by the upper castes has generated a great deal of social tension. The hierarchical structuring of the Hindu society needs to be rearranged in a systemic way so that all the parts are of equal importance for the whole to function in a state of harmony and dynamic balance. The corrective measures taken by the government relate to the empowerment of the weaker sections and the *Daliths*, in particular, by means of 'positive discrimination' so as to restore the harmonious functioning of the system.

Certain Constitutional measures like reservations for the suppressed castes in education and employment are meant to ensure social justice. Initially it was a time-bound programme but in the context of growing social inequality and in the absence of integration, the Reservation Policy is being renewed every ten years. The benefits of 'progressive discrimination' have not really helped those at the bottom level, though a kind of creamy-layer at the surface has appropriated the benefits. The issue of reservations, which is solely intended for social justice, is unfortunately being politicized. In addition to the effective implementation of the Reservation Policy, several socio-cultural and humanitarian programmes are needed to minimize inter-caste friction and generate goodwill and harmony.

Another aspect of the contemporary social reality is the practice of discrimination against women. Viewed against the society's rich cultural heritage, gender discrimination seems to be of comparatively recent origin. It may be during and after the period of foreign invasion when the cohesiveness in the social system started dissipating under foreign domination that gender bias started striking root. In the earlier period when the societal concerns were governed by a well-defined set of values, women were treated with great respect. In the Upanishadic period, women joined men in their search for the ultimate truth. *Rishis* like *Gargi* and *Maithreyi* were as well informed as their male counterparts. In the later times women held a very responsible position in the structure of a family. Though the headship was assigned to the male member, his female counterpart had to perform several roles for the welfare and progress of the entire family. In the Hindu pantheon there are several goddesses who are different forms of the primordial energy that is considered to be the female principle known as *Adiparashakthi*. The male and female principles were never held to be in conflict with each other. It is their complementarity that sustained the family and the society. The male and the female principles have their own distinctly separate traits. In the analysis of Fritjof Capra:

... in our society the values and attitudes that are favoured and invested with political power are the typical masculine values—competition, domination, expansion, etc—while those neglected and often despised—

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cooperation, nurturing, humility, peacefulness—are designated as female... these values are essential for the male dominated industrial system to work... a new synthesis was now needed that would allow us to express a healthier balance of the so-called masculine and feminine values.ⁱⁱ

Gender relationships in a healthy state should have a dynamic balance. The male principle is assertive, unyielding, dominating, aggressive and has the tendency to cause violence. On the other hand, the female principle represents gentleness, love, compassion, harmony and capacity for warmth and goodwill. When women's position became weak due to various historical forces, the absence of the balancing power of the female principle resulted in the overdomination and aggressiveness of the male principle. It is this cultural dynamic that led to the male dominance and the resultant women's weakness.

Women's liberation movement and the movement to empower women, when successfully implemented, are intended to free women from male domination and reposition them with equal status. There are several Constitutional provisions aimed at liberating and empowering women. In addition, there are several non-government agencies devoted to fighting for women's rights.

For the society to function in a balanced way, gender discrimination should cease and all avenues of employment should be kept open for women to gain equal status with men. Though the social scenario is slowly changing in favour of the empowerment of women, instances of male domination in different forms like sexual harassment, rape, and dowry deaths are capturing the headlines in the mass media every day. The tragic potential contained in the discrimination on the basis of caste and sex is explored very poignantly by Arundhati Roy in her Booker Prize winner, *The God of Small Things*.

It is at the family level that individuals experience the impacting of problems of cultural divisiveness and caste-gender discriminations as well as a host of other factors like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, social inequality and excessive urbanization. Families of the minority communities, particularly Muslim families, tend to live in clusters apart and away from the families of the majority community because of a feeling of insecurity. This phenomenon is very common in villages and towns. But it does not help to promote communal harmony. Families of minorities keeping their identity separate does not help either. To promote communal integration families of different communities should live closer together and cultivate a cordial interpersonal relationship.

The joint family has been for generations a cornerstone of Indian culture. It was an excellent support system for children to grow up in. It helped to make individuals acquire social skills in order to become productive members of society. It provided support, guidance and a sense of belonging to its members. It is a kind of human laboratory in which children learn the chemistry of living and loving. As long as the Indian traditional joint family system was in good use, it promoted a value system that sustained the great Indian culture for centuries together. An able and competent head of the family provided for its members lessons in patience, tolerance, cooperation and adjustment. It also helped them to learn how to take collective responsibility. Children grew up under the abiding love and care of parents. The head of the family as *grihastha*

had to discharge well-ordained duties and responsibilities. More importantly, cordial familial relations continued beyond the stage when children became adults.

In the post-colonial Indian society, the joint family system had to face several challenges resulting in its gradual disintegration. The rapid growth of population and consequent scarcity of arable land forced the members of the family to migrate to towns and cities seeking employment. Industrialization attracted people to come out of their traditional families. Similarly, urbanization affected the family structure. Certain internal factors like the head of the family becoming selfish, incompetent and jealous resulting in estrangement in relations contributed to the collapse of the system.

The joint families gave way to nuclear families. The nuclear family has an inherent weakness in that it cannot provide to its children the same support that the joint family did. This has resulted in several behavioural and psychological aberrations. Many nuclear families became dysfunctional on migrating to towns and cities because of poverty and unemployment. Child-labour, bonded labour, juvenile delinquency, and a tendency to become criminal and cases of suicides of those who have heavy debt burdens are factors that render the families dysfunctional. The mutuality of love and care in the relational grid of the traditional joint family is getting eroded by egocentric individuality under the influence of Westernization. The native Indian social profile is composed of varied hues of regional ethnicities. Each region has its own uniquely beautiful styles of dress and cuisine. Under Western influence, local identities are merging into a dull gray imported style. Several families tend to become dysfunctional because of the practice of gender discrimination. Gender bias leads to problems of foeticide, neglect of the girl-child, dowry deaths or bride burning. Male chauvinism, sexual harassment and rape are the other problems resulting from gender bias. The *Dalith* families have become dysfunctional to the extent that they face the problems of privation and humiliation caused by the bias of the upper castes.

All the problems faced by both the society and the family can be attributed to various processes of realignment in the post-colonial situation. The transitions are from a colonial state to a democratic power structure; from a feudal set up to an egalitarian social order; from an agrarian society to a state of increasing industrialization; from a mainly rural community to growing urbanization; from an altruistic joint family to an individualistic nuclear family; and from a closed and rigid orthodoxy to an open and transparent modernity. The post-modern Western society had to grapple with problems which were largely of its own making. The individual felt bored and lonely though there was tremendous advancement in science and technology. People were devoid of 'social concern'. They rejected the value system and the result was untold misery through wars and destruction. They rejected conventional 'straight values' and questioned their authority that was leading the world towards human extinction by a powerful war machine and by the damage done to the eco system. At the personal level the stressful life of the individual had to encounter many threats to health like schizophrenia and suicidal tendencies.

The urge was for expansion of consciousness, for personal growth and self-actualization. The search manifested itself in the form of two movements: the Hippie Movement and the European Student Movement. Fritjof Capra who identified himself with the movements of the 60s describes what it was like to be part of the Hippie Movement:

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The sixties brought me without doubt the deepest and most radical personal experiences of my life: the rejection of conventional, 'straight' values; the closeness, peacefulness, and trust of the hippie community; the freedom of communal nudity; the expansion of consciousness through psychedelics and meditation; the playfulness and attention to the 'here and now'—all of which resulted in a continual sense of magic, awe, and wonder that, for me, will forever be associated with the sixties.ⁱⁱⁱ

The hippies were sadly misguided in thinking that a new consciousness could be created by using a chemical formula called LSD. Though it helped to widen the consciousness, it was artificially induced and hence it was not a true widening. On the other hand, excessive use of the LSD led to risky disturbance of the inner balance. Hordes of these Hippies came to India seeking the so-called 'spiritual high'— those 'ragged white mendicants in loose pyjamas and bandanas who milled around ashrams and sadhus and yogis.'^{iv} They ended up as 'dregs of Western society'^v and the Movement fizzled out because spiritual transcendence needs self-discipline, dedication and the grace of a competent *guru*. Though the Movement failed, the urge for spiritual realization persisted.

The European Student Movement was also not able to turn its visions into realities during the 60s, as noted by Capra:

But it kept its social concerns alive during the subsequent decade, during which many of its members went through profound personal transformations. Influenced by the two major concerns of the seventies, the feminism movement and ecology, these members of the new left broadened their horizons without losing their social consciousness, and at the end of the decade began to join the newly formed European Green parties.^{vi}

In the Western family system, which is 'nuclear' in its composition, the parental care and concern is largely limited to the extent when the child becomes an adult. The adult child does not feel obliged to repay the love and care he/she has received as a child from the parents. Individual freedom is held to be more valuable than filial bonds of love and responsibility.

The exercise of the right of the individual freedom has resulted, particularly in the USA, in the formation of the so-called 'variant family forms'. Apart from the two-parent family, there are families of single parents, blended families, same sex families and adoptive families. Curiously, the concept of postmodern family completely discounts the relevance of the traditional family. The adult child calls it exploitation if he is asked to take care of his parents when they retire. The only genuine relationship is for his friendship, but not kinship.

CONCLUSION

Whether it is the Indian society which is divided on the basis of religion, caste and gender or the affluent societies in the west where people are getting bored of the mechanical way of life and are seeking new avenues of sustenance for maintaining inner balance and harmony, the healing touch should start at the family level and then spread to the entire society. Perhaps it is possible to evolve a responsible operating family set-up that ensures the individual identity of each member and at the same time provides opportunities to derive benefits of the traditional family

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system. Offering a nurturing environment to the children, it should facilitate harmonious interactions with other systems in the society, thus paving the way for societal harmony. As Arnold Toynbee has rightly said, ‘Mankind is surely going to destroy itself unless it succeeds in growing together into something like a single family.’^{vii} Healthy families ensure the society’s progress and prosperity. Conversely, a dysfunctional family is symptomatic of a fractured society.

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