

**ASPECTS OF FAMILY LIFE
IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN
INDIAN COMMUNITY**

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Hindu Religion and the Family

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Despite the intrusions by way of education, the secularisation process and socio-economic advances, traditional Hinduism over the last century and a quarter in South Africa has retained its subjective conservatism. However, interesting modifications by way of a newly introduced educational orientation of Hindu religious ideals makes the present time one of interesting change. The Hindu family and its incorrigible, though often poorly understood, sense of duty in respect of religious practices has been responsible for preserving its way of life despite the foreignness of the South African context. Traditional Hindu life has always decreed that family elders and their somewhat enigmatic pre-occupation with ritual law and caste rules should ensure the preservation of a way of life always described as "traditional". However understood, it has in fact been the bulwark that has helped to preserve Hindu lifestyles in recognisable form. So, whatever social and economic advances may yet ensue, Hinduism in its present form appears set to continue for some time to come.

This is, however, not to suggest that ritualistic Hinduism and diminishing caste consciousness are in any way intended to preserve the rigidity of Hindu traditionalism. On the contrary, these are now subject to the kind of modification which threatens the old order of things, developing life styles that accentuate changes that promise to escalate in the years ahead.

Perhaps the most influential social characteristic contributing to this traditionalism has been the caste system. Rigid caste differences have not, however, been applied with any form

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of inflexibility at all levels of social intercourse, and where this has sometimes been the case it has been exceptional. In South Africa, the caste structure has been buffeted by varying degrees of ascriptions to caste rules, with the result that modifications to the whole system corrode not only traditional caste practices but the entire theory of caste distinction. Perhaps the most predominant of the influences that have corroded rigid caste rules is inter-marriage. But social advances and, more fundamentally, economic influences, have tended to eliminate the exclusivity of caste as a social unit; which also means that where membership of caste was always acquired by birth and retained for life, marriages across caste barriers now ensure the preservation of caste rules in the breach rather than through accepted modes of practice. The South African format of caste rules has been rigid for Gujerati-speaking Hindus and almost non-existent for a large segment of Tamil, Telugu and Hindi-speaking people. Caste has, however, played a largely surreptitious role in family life and while it is sometimes considered a factor of importance, developing trends accentuate other aspects of religious life for the majority of Hindus in South Africa.

The emphasis placed upon religious practices has always been one of the outstanding features of life in the Hindu community, more especially the Hindu family. This has been the prevailing situation for many years but at the present time it is subject to considerable change. Hinduism as generally practised is regarded primarily as a way of life, a complex behaviour system rather than a belief system in which prescriptive modes are adhered to. Thus, despite their integration into a single community, the three streams of immigrants from Madras, Calcutta and Bombay continue to maintain communal differences while yet preserving a common cultural identity which is not always recognised as strictly homogeneous. A broad framework of eclecticism fashions the community and its linguistically-oriented loyalties. Differences are, however, attenuated by a division that marks Hindi and Gujerati Hindus from north India from Tamil and Telugu Hindus from the South.

Hinduism is often described as an approach to life, a *Weltanschauung* or synthesis of ideas and practices within an

eclectic behaviour system. (Ranganathananda, 1971). Thus the variety of scriptural sources accentuates traditional modes at the ritualistic level, while transposition to classical Hinduism at the theological level countermands adherence to a pattern of belief in some of the fundamentals of the classical tradition. Present indications thus point quite strongly to a restructuring necessitated by the academic formulations that reassert new approaches, which, while encompassing traditional values of caste, temple worship, celebration of festivals and observance of penance through fasts and vigils and ritual ceremonies, nevertheless demand a greater awareness of classical concepts of the theological-philosophical schools of thought.

Joint family ties have long been one of the most conspicuous features of Hindu family life (Kuper, 1960). These have thus tended to form the basic protective framework that has ensured stability in family life through an orthodox life style. The joint family system, although obtaining for many centuries, now evidences drastic changes. The joint family system was responsible for joint decision making on issues such as the arrangement of marriages, adequate provision of economic protection for unmarried daughters, widows, elders, and physically and mentally handicapped family members (Altekar, 1978).

Drastic changes now, however, concede the need for single members to live alone, for greater institutional care to be provided for those no longer offered the protective asset of joint family conveniences. In the days of the first immigrants, and for at least two generations of Hindus thereafter, joint families provided the coping mechanisms of family stability and security. From this developed the tradition of social consciousness that extended beyond family ties. However, social consciousness within the Indian community has long been stifled by economic and political factors in South Africa (Naidoo, 1975). Thus the problem situations which have been known to exist have always been accentuated by political difficulties that have attended the situation interminably. When service institutions have either been non-existent or have been unable to provide assistance in particular instances, joint families have often been relied on to provide all the help possible. Thus the extended family, by the very nature of the kinship system prevailing among Indians, has

provided for such issues as social and family discord and other problem situations (Kuper, 1960).

The institution of marriage has long been regarded with over indulgence. Where in the past a single wedding ceremony was known to have lasted an entire day or more, present trends have reduced the ritual to the space of a small part of a single day. Marriage within close family proximity is generally discouraged. However, marriage between persons of common ancestry on the mother's side is allowed, but is totally discouraged if ancestry is traced on the father's side. Second-cousin marriages are somewhat rare and first cousin ones even more so. When these do occur it is generally factors other than love or the need for marriage which dictate the terms of such arrangements. Marriages are now seldom categorised in any rigid caste framework. Arranged marriages are now very rare, but when these do occur caste tends to feature as an important factor. Monogamy is the rule; polygamy is never encouraged, but only justified under special circumstances. Polyandry is completely unknown.

The extended family traces its origin to a long-prevailing custom of kinship. Father's brothers are also fathers and are known as either big father or small father in relation to the age of the biological father. Mother's sisters are also mothers. Cousins are also brothers and sisters. A traditional rule is for the big father to receive the greatest respect and for the eldest mother to be treated with a sense of reverence. It is now, however, rare for families to extend beyond the nuclear family under a single roof or even in the same neighbourhood. Where in the past it was common for a woman to spend the first years of her married life with her husband in his parents' home, it is now common practice for couples to occupy their own dwellings immediately after marriage.

A family without effective kinship ties tends to suffer disabilities regarding religious practices and also social and economic wants. Although this need not be strictly true it is still somewhat rare for nuclear families to be totally severed from any form of extended kinship. When a marriage is contracted across caste barriers no recognisable stigma is attached. Where a marriage is contracted beyond a barrier of language no serious

difficulties emerge. But when marriages are contracted across barriers of religion or race a family could suffer isolation if extended family support is found wanting (Meer, 1969). Kinship ties are seldom severed however and family unity is often held as an ideal of Hindu cultural life. Since the behaviour of each member affects the reputation of the wider family, older relatives often feel a sense of responsibility to protect unwritten kinship rules. Hence the marriage of a Hindu to a Muslim or Christian Indian is not always viewed with sympathy, while the marriage of a Hindu outside the Indian community is even less so.

Most Hindu communities observe the patriarchical system of lineage (Altekar, 1978). For them the birth of a girl is generally not as welcome as that of a boy, the latter usually being considered a permanent economic asset and also a potential head of the family. He lives with his parents, or allows his parents to live with him, especially aged ones, and does not migrate, like the daughter, to another family after marriage. He also perpetuates the family name. The importance of the son is even mentioned in Hindu scriptures. The Atharva Veda contains formulae through prescriptive ritualistic chants to ensure the birth of a son in preference to that of a daughter. For this reason sons were generally sent to a guru for education and taught religious ceremonies which he performed in honour of departed ancestors. The influence of the eldest son is often indicated by his control over family affairs. For this reason his education was of particular concern.

Astrological predictions have long held a place of particular importance, not necessarily in family life *per se*, but in such matters as the choice of a bride or groom (Raman, 1979). The birth of a baby often sees parents scurrying off to the local pandit, who consults the almanac which decrees what name shall be given to the baby. Later, a proper horoscope is cast for matching with that of a prospective spouse when the time arrives. The casting of a horoscope has always been a matter of crucial importance in every Hindu household, as a matter of some concern that when marriage vows are taken, they are for keeps. Even when horoscopes are carefully cast, parents wait anxiously to see that the marriage is indeed successful. The practice has long ceased in

South Africa however, although certain aspects of it, such as consulting the almanac for the proper selection of times and dates for weddings, are still practised with meticulous care.

Several Vedic hymns decree that the bride should take over the reins of household duties from her mother-in-law as soon as possible. The wife of the eldest son becomes the *de facto* head of the family, more especially if the parents are aged. She also cares for any unmarried brothers or sisters still under her husband's guardianship. The roots of family life can be traced to several Vedic passages which emphasise the principle of identity of interests of the married couple. This follows as a natural corollary from the fact that husband and wife, as the Vedas say, complement each other. "Man is only one half", says a Vedic passage. "He is not complete till he is united with a wife and she gives him children". The lawgiver Manu regards the husband as identical with the wife in every way (Muller, 1964).

To maintain and support his wife is, according to Vedic law, the most sacred duty of the husband. The wife on her part, on the basis of *pativrata*, has her obligations. *Pativrata* is a solemn vow of commitment taken by the wife during the wedding ceremony, in which she promises to be true to her husband and lead a life of dedicated service to him. The Hindu housewife says with the Goddess Savitri that if separated from her husband she will desire neither pleasure nor prosperity nor even heaven (Bhattacharya, 1970).

The nuclear family living in isolation from the extended family is a very recent phenomenon. It is a characteristic of developing modernity and socio-economic demands. Dynamic social changes arising out of industrialisation and urbanisation have been responsible for the radical changes to the kinship structure within the Hindu community, which also have repercussions on the multi-dimensional security provided by the extended family. As mentioned earlier, some aspects of family life do provide the strong support system needed. But modern demands outweigh the limited security such a system is able to provide. Thus family problems form the nucleus of social welfare services, which arise primarily in the context of problem situations identified initially in such situations as marriage, widowhood and other domestic

situations. The identification of such problems is fairly easy these days compared with by-gone years, because of the breakdown of the joint family system. This has often been interpreted as one of the important reasons for the rapid escalation of social welfare services (Naidoo, 1975).

Rigid orthodoxy in Hindu family life no longer exists. Traditional religious commitments are weakening, with the result that only those institutions of religious practice still surviving at the present time help to perpetuate religious observance. It is largely these observances that help to identify religious life in the Hindu family. Compulsory religious ceremonies associated with the birth of a child, her reaching puberty, marriage and death are still strongly observed; also, ceremonies associated with buying a new car, moving into a new home or starting a new business. Then there are the festivals such as Sivaratri, New Year, Deepavali, Navaratri and others. The Sandhya or the lighting of the holy lamp is an important daily ritual. The observance of each and all of these ceremonies constitutes the backbone of religious life for the Hindu family.

The arrival of Indians in South Africa in 1860 was marked by much uncertainty, due to the newness and foreignness of the situation. The development of family life in South Africa since then always had to follow a troubled course, with uncertain theological convictions not assisting the situation in any positive way. However, family bonds have always been deep and these have contributed to family life in many positive ways.

Family bonds are usually a source of interest to people studying family life in the Indian community. Like its ritual religious tradition, which has always been viewed with a sense of awe and reverence for thousands of years, family life and its enigmatic traditions of family security have always assumed the same degree of importance among Hindus. These traditional bonds were established by Vedic law several thousand years ago and have always been viewed as irrevocable, with concomitant views that their violation would be regarded as sinful. While it is acknowledged that although these may not be regarded as ideal in the absence of more adequate coping mechanisms, they have

certainly contributed enormously to maintaining family stability for a very long time.

So many of the crises that now characterise urban family life have been held at bay for many more years than has been evident, in my opinion, in other communities. Traditional bonds thus appear to be the saving grace that helps to perpetuate healthy family life, and unless some serious interventions should emerge this will continue to be so for a long time to come.

For many years most religious functions, not necessarily those performed by priests, were primarily performed in the home by women (Hofmeyr, 1979). The circumstances that have prevailed in South Africa for many years perpetuated this system. Women were for a long time bound to domestic duties, which made the observance of religious rituals relatively easy. However, every passing year sees women becoming increasingly more economically active, each successive generation becoming less and less equipped to deal adequately with the demands of ritual worship.

Socio-economic demands of the present day require that there should be greater participation by women in earning a living. An increasing number of women are now joining the labour market at all levels and they find it almost impossible to both make a living and participate at the same time in any form of worship, let alone elaborate rituals. While it may be true that Indian women in all sections of the community are similarly affected, it would appear that Hindu women are at a particular disadvantage due to the nature of Hindu ceremonial worship conforming to a lengthy calendar of fasts and festivals.

The modern Hindu woman is today bent on acquiring more and more educational skills. Large numbers enter the teaching profession and many are attracted to the clothing industry, certain sections of commerce and other professions. In 1984, 42% of the student population at the University of Durban-Westville was female, and in 1985 the figure stands at 46%. The number of women enrolled at the local technikon and teachers' training colleges increases every year. The priority now given to education means that less and less attention can be paid to matters of

religious concern; certainly not of the kind grandmother took a great deal of interest in.

It must be remembered, however, that the performance of rituals created the feeling of being linked to the Divine and gave the Hindu housewife and her family the satisfaction of knowing that elements of God consciousness were ever present in her home. Hinduism has always been thought of as a ritualistic faith because rituals have always formed the core of worship in the absence of scriptural and other literary formulations of religious codes. For the educated, ritual Hinduism tends to lose its authority. As the joint-family system is now a thing of the past and caste-considerations are of little consequence a new kind of Hinduism has to replace the old.

The neo-Hindu movements such as the Ramakrishna Centre, Divine Life Society and others are now performing an invaluable function in this regard, which was previously only performed by the Hindu temple. The difference, of course, lies in the emphasis placed upon scriptural authority for every religious commitment in place of ritual performance not always correctly understood. The viable alternatives to ritual are scriptural texts and the plethora of literature produced by modern Hindu movements. By far the most significant development for Hinduism in South Africa in recent years has been the institution of the Department of Hindu Studies at the University of Durban-Westville. In the five years that the department has been functioning many students have qualified in Hindu Studies. The ultimate effect of the work of this department on the Hindu community is expected to be of immense value and certainly Hinduism in the future will inevitably take a very different course from that followed for more than a century in this country.

The ultimate hope, then, is that Hinduism as it will be practised will combine a more intellectual appraisal of religious responsibilities with the qualitative beauty of ritual worship. These, in combination, will inevitably have the value of contributing to the practice of religion as it was always meant to be, and in so doing the richness of family life will be preserved and a healthier community will contribute its share to a healthier, more stable and greater multi-religious South Africa.

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