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Individualism has brought India's traditional family to the brink of extinction

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If current trends continue, the turn of the 21st century may witness the extinction of one of society's most ancient and influential establishments, the joint family. In India, the joint family is a sacred institution deeply rooted in Hindu heritage. It has been heralded as the cultural stronghold that has borne Sanatana Dharma intact through India's inimical dominations. Lately, its prestige has plummeted. Though extended families exist in most parts of rural India and some cities, joint families are harder and harder to find.

A joint family consists of many relatives living under one roof and sharing one kitchen and often a single bank account. Extended families include members who live in other dwellings or locales, near or far. With the nuclear age's nurturance of nuclear families, most joint families have completely disintegrated. Many that have stayed together have independent kitchens, checkbooks and lifestyles, conditions contrary to the oldest customs.

Few people welcome this trend toward dissolution. But they

don't lament, either. Most simply call it inevitable. However, religious leaders, elders and members of functioning joint families are apprehensive, knowing that this family structure, better than any, preserves Hindu values and attitudes irrespective of the moral turbulence that may rage outside the home's walls. To lose this safe haven of Vedic culture, they feel, would be a body blow to dharma.

The joint family forms a veritable domestic fortress, aptly symbolized in India by the giant banyan tree, whose every branch grows roots which in turn support and feed the main trunk. Joint families insure not only the biological continuity of the human race, but also the cultural continuity of society. They successfully transmit ideologies, customs, traditions, beliefs and values from generation to generation. Individuals may come and go, but the family stands as a unit. Members are publicly known more by family name than individual identity. The social security, both material and psychological, that a joint family provides is unique and inestimable. Shared responsibilities result in minimal concern over the basics of life--money, food, shelter and clothing. Such concerns typically become all-consuming in a nuclear family; a single husband, wife and their children living together.

The Harilelas of Hong Kong (left) are living proof of the joint family's value. Naroomal and Devibai Harilela came to China from Sindh in the early part of this century. In the 1930s, their family was penniless. The six brothers sold newspapers on the street to make a living. Continuously encouraged by their mother to stick together, they advanced in their profession to eventually join Hong Kong's most successful businessmen. Their Harilela Group today owns hotels, restaurants, travel

agencies, real estate and stores. They have always lived as a joint family--now numbering 50--and have for many years occupied a palatial mansion in Hong Kong, defined by separate quarters, and common dining, puja and gathering spaces. Their mother taught them to pool their resources, work hard, be patient with each other and be prepared to sacrifice--the essential principles of every lasting commmunity.

Failing families: I grew up in a joint family in Karnataka, surrounded by 13 uncles, four aunts, grandparents and other live-in relatives. The joys and pleasures of growing up in such environs are unbounded. I carry with me most wonderful memories of childhood, filled with fun, affection and care. I miss those evenings after dinner when grandfather would collect all the "grandies," tell us a story and show us the various constellations in the sky. As I recall it now, it seems like a bygone dream. Our family disintegrated for all the reasons that a sociology text would enumerate. It's sad, but breaking up was inevitable.

Many joint families in cities have fragmented. Even the Prabhat family, featured in Hinduism Today [May, 1995], has decided to part. The reasons are many. Glaringly evident are disagreements over property and assets. After the head of the family expires, the brothers dispute their shares. "This is because the elders have not inculcated the right values in the family. Growing materialism drives them to crave for more. It is as if they were waiting for the head of the family to die. It's disgusting when you hear of such instances, which are common now," laments Mr. Raman, a retired engineer.

"Most joint families disintegrate when the elders lose moral authority," says Mr. A.V. Subba Rao, an advocate. "Also, there is a common tendency for the head of the family to be partial to certain children and grandchildren. Often, a glaring favoritism is shown towards the daughters and daughters-in-law. Secondly, some children are exploited, while others are coddled. This differential treatment breaks down the relationships rather than bringing about unity."

Often it is the eldest son who selflessly supports a large family, sacrificing many of his own ambitions. Sadly, however, his sovereignty may be rescinded by younger members once they settle down independently. They fail to acknowledge his service. My father suffered immensely, both emotionally and monetarily, because of this trend. Such instances are common.

Geetha, a young lecturer, moved out of a small joint family simply because she could not get along with her sister-in-law. "My mother-in-law favors her kids," she complained, while the employed sister-in-law said, "She would never lend a helping hand in the kitchen." These petty differences eventually led them to part.

"With education and employment, women have become more independent, and growing individualism attracts them towards nuclear families," opines Mrs. Shankaran, who lives alone in her Bangalore bungalow. Her two sons live separately with their wives, but visit their widowed mother frequently.

Even functional joint families are being transformed. One

distinct trend in liberal families is the mother's use of the joint family as a day-care center to look after her children while she pursues studies or a career. The Nanis are a well-known family of theatre artists in Bangalore. After marriage, Bhargavi joined the Nani joint family of four generations living together. "They were traditional, and there was discipline we had to abide by. For instance, a daughter-in-law had to wake up early and dress in a sari with kumkum on her forehead. None of the elders objected to my being employed. They took care of my children. I had no worries on the home front. They would even allow me to act in plays," says 60-year old Bhargavi. "I enjoyed living in this family immensely. It did call for a lot of adjustments, but the advantages outweighed the disadvantages," she affirmed.

Today the Nanis continue to live as a joint family with their two sons, daughter-in-law and their children, but a basic shift has occurred in family protocol. "Those days we adjusted to our elders. Now we adjust to the youngsters," Bhargavi revealed. "They are too individualistic. You cannot impose your views on them. You have to be broad-minded and make a lot of compromises."

Why won't you stay? As the sun of modernization has risen, the inconveniences of a joint family now seem to eclipse its merits. The head of the family, with absolute power, may disallow an individual the liberty to express opinions or pursue creative desires. Members with such aspirations can feel constricted. If their desires exceed the commitment to family duty or the will to resolve differences, their departure is assured. "Industrialization shattered the very foundation of joint families," asserts Mr. Venkatesh Murthy, a professor of

mathematics. "But we cannot say we did not want industrialization. People are now more concerned with their rights than duties. The personal self has become all important. No wonder joint families are on their way out!"

Joint families all-too-often treat women as non-entities, relegating them to the four walls of the kitchen. My mother would rarely step out of the kitchen or socialize with family members and relatives. My aunts, on the other hand, had freedom to socialize. When my mother had an opportunity to talk, she would do so shyly from behind the door. Education and women's liberation have beckoned women to break free of such shackles.

As the rural class finds new avenues to explore, enticed toward urbanization, the urban families give way to growing individualism and self-reliance. Want of privacy and consumerism induce a certain selfishness that leads towards a nuclear family system. The accelerated growth of metropolitan cities and Western influences fuel this trend.

Reforming family: Ironically, the West may be approaching the other end of that materialistic road. Members of an "intentional family" essentially adopt each other and live together as a joint or extended family. They may have been total strangers before their merger, but they instinctively yearn for togetherness. Usually, these are individuals have no family of their own or who live far from their birth family. Their common desire for a safe neighborhood and secure home environment with friendly, caring faces binds them together as a new family. The elders adopt the younger members and become

their grandparents, while they in turn are looked after and given special care as they grow old.

It began in the early 1970s, a time when many felt that families were breaking down, a time of loneliness and isolation. The idea of forming new families with people who barely knew each other was a risky proposition. But many of these families survive today. Children who have grown up within these kinships are now parents. Like a normal family, they have had to face the pain of death of family members, divorce between some couples and the loss of several who have left the group. Yet, some say they like their foster family better than their birth family.

Wherever we look, the continuance of the joint family seems precariously perched on the aspirations and allegiance of each of us. Are we out to fulfill our own interests? Or, are we willing to sacrifice a little of ourselves for the greater whole? Tradition tells us such sacrifice reaps rewards in excess of that which was forgone. It also confirms that we each learn in our own time, at our own pace. "To keep a joint family, a spirit of selfless service, tolerance and broad-mindedness is a must. In modern living, to find these virtues is extremely rare," concludes Murthy.

Family Matters

Dr. Prem Sahai of Iowa, USA, is an authority on the Hindu joint family. His years of study were largely motivated by the desire to keep his own family together. Below, he succinctly summarizes for Hinduism Today the basic structure and duties.

Membership: Father and mother; sons and wives; daughters until married; grandsons and wives; granddaughters until married; great grandsons and wives; great granddaughters until married.

Head of the family: Father with support of mother. In the absence of the father, the most capable elder son with guidance of his mother and support of spouse. In the absence of the elder brother, a competent younger brother takes over.

Distribution of duties: The head of the family assigns members according to their abilities and availability. The mother is responsible for nurturance, clothing, household activities, gift giving and acceptance of gifts. She consults her daughters-in-law and wives of younger brothers and educates them for proper decision-making in her absence.

Religious ceremonies: The eldest son is to perform all these duties. His spouse joins him. Others share and cooperate as they are able.

Basic principles:

1. Every member sees that others get the best and most of resources. Each person himself asks for the least, and last.
2. All are willing to endure to relieve the others' burdens.
3. No one owns anything. Each is a trustee for the joint family, extended family, society and the nation.
4. Everyone's voice and opinion has value and importance.
5. Everyone's conduct is such that intentions can never be questioned. This includes honoring the traditions and fulfilling

spoken and unspoken expectations of the extended family, society at large and
the venerable principles of Sanatana Dharma.

One Dynasty Thrives

Many helping hands make for light work

Defying all notions of disintegration, the Narasinganavar family has demonstrated to the world that the undivided family is still viable. About 25 km from the city of Dharwad, Karnataka, in the small village of Lokur, 170 kinfolk have lived harmoniously for seven generations. They are bound together by their Jain religion. "Why should we fight," exclaims 72-year-old Lokappa, punctuating his point with a perky fist. "God has given us everything, and we are happy. Togetherness is our strength, and cooperation is our support."

Their mansion, Jaina Bhakta Nivas, is the nerve center for all activity. It is where the women and children are housed and where food for all is prepared and served. They have another house for married couples, a granary and their own Jaina temple.

This fantastic family's sojourn began when Narasingappa migrated to Lokur from Hathangalada, Maharashtra, 400 years ago, with his brothers and children. There have been no fights or disputes over property in their history. Now, Parasanna, Lokappa and Bheemanna, the three brothers, live with their uncles, cousins, children and grandchildren. The oldest is their maternal uncle, 90-year-old Annappa. The youngest is

Bheemanna's yearling grandson.

Being educated, the responsibilities of finance and decision-making were entrusted to Bheemanna by his elders from early on. Now, at age 68, all directives are issued by him. The elders may collectively decide on issues, but Bheemanna's word is faithfully followed by all, including elder Annappa. This solemn discipline and mutual respect is the secret of their unity. "Mutual love and affection is what has kept us going," avers Bheemanna.

Full control over the finances remains in the hands of Bheemanna, who makes the necessary purchases and investments. Clothes are bought for the entire family at Diwali and new year. "Money is a corrupting force and the root cause of all trouble," avowed Lokappa. "Everyone in our family is content because all needs are provided for. No one has an individual savings. No one is rich or poor. All are equal. There is no greed, selfishness or jealousy."

Agriculture is their occupation and source of income. The family owns 200 acres of cultivable land, a dairy of 60 cows and buffalos, a flour mill and a fertilizer and pesticide shop. All requirements of food, grains, vegetables, milk, edible oils, etc., are produced from their own efforts. All that they purchase from outside are clothes, soap and tea. "We had a mere 60 acres 40 years ago," certifies Lokappa. "Every year the profits are invested on purchasing land or equipment for our agriculture. We do not distribute the profit among ourselves or buy fancy items. Whatever we buy benefits the entire family."

Being Jaina, they are strictly vegetarian. The women prepare over 1,000 rotis a day, with 40 ladies taking turns four to five at a time. They begin at 5am and continue till late afternoon, only to begin again by evening. They use no modern mixers, grinders, cookers or gas stoves. This to me seemed like the most strenuous aspect of their chores, but they seemed perfectly cheery. They sing while working, chat when free and share each others' saris and jewelry. There is no bossing around.

In fact, fear and punishment are not found in this family. "Mistakes are very rare. No one oversteps their limits, each one knows his duties and abides by the codes of the house. If someone errs, we stop talking to him for a while and shun him. With that, he realizes his fault and makes amends," explains Thimmappa.

This family is an efficient example of division of labor. Each member is entrusted with a definite responsibility, such as operating the flour mill, maintaining the edible oil extracting unit, textile shop, fertilizer shop or repair of vehicles and implements. The family is totally self-reliant and self-sufficient. Not once during my visit did I come across someone lazing around. All the women were continuously engaged in household chores. I could see that every member contributes his or her might. These are tireless workers.

The Narasinganavars' life is peaceful and simple. Traditions continue. Elders serve the family selflessly and lead an austere life, setting fine standards for the others, as Bheemanna verified, "All that we know is to work hard, be sincere and live

an honest life."

Another Breaks Up

How one congenial clan called it quits

The Reddy family had lived as one unit for four generations in a village near Kaiwara, about 80km from Bangalore. The men worked in the fields. Some women assisted, but most handled the household chores and took turns in cooking--a substantial task at 50 kgs of rice and 100 ragi balls each day! The family lived comfortably. Why, then, did they divide?

Mr. Narayanaswamy Reddy's young daughter, Susheela, confided, "Out of the 50 men, only 10 or 15 worked. The others simply lazed around, taking life for granted. This inequality led to the breakup."

Distraught by the split is Narayanaswamy's mother, 70-year-old Chokkamma. She was working in the fields when I met her. She related that, at barely eight years old, she entered this huge house of 60 members and grew fond of the family. "I advised them not to break up, but who listens now-a-days? They have fought and parted," she said dejectedly.

It was 90-year-old Sonappa, the eldest male, who had managed all family affairs. Gradually, as he started losing hold on the men, his responsibilities were transferred to Chandrasekar and Narayanaswamy.

Womenfolk are commonly blamed for the breaking up of a family, but this family attributes collapse of their dream to the men's conscious decision "to make lazy men responsible." "The women never brought in differences. In fact, they wanted the system to go on. Even now they get along famously," says Chandrasekar.

Upon break-up, their land holdings of 80 acres fragmented. Each got only 3/4 of an acre. "But everyone is doing very well now, even with this small piece of land. Those men who never worked are now hard workers and are reaping good harvests from their fields," says Susheela.

"We had no differences, and we wanted to continue as one unit. Even to this day we feel like one big family. There are no ill feelings," maintains Chandrasekar. But Susheela laments, "We visit each other, but it can never be the same."

One City's Successful Family

Sagacity and self-sacrifice spell affluence in Bangalore

Modern stresses, city strains and rampant materialism conspire to make urban joint families irrelevant or even extinct. Many city-dwellers feel that the Narasinganavars (see page 24) have achieved their rare success only because they live in a village, with agriculture as their occupation. But the family of M.M. Krishnamurthy has been living jointly for four generations in the midst of bustling Bangalore. They even run a family business.

Krishnamurthy's 40-member family is known as the "MM Industries family," MM industry being the family business. Septuagenarian Krishnamurthy, second of four brothers, is the head. He rejoices in joint living, he told me, "I cannot explain the joys of living together. One has to live and experience it. It requires so much adjustment and patience. It teaches you so many things."

Krishnamurthy's father, Munivenkatappa, and uncle Mallappa, who lived together along with their parents, started the business in South Bangalore. Their children still live together and continue the family enterprise which today is a local landmark. "We prosper only because of our unity. Everyone in the family is expected to do their own job," Krishnamurthy told me.

The men were educated at Ramakrishna Vidyasala of the Ramakrishna Mission in Mysore, where their culture and discipline have their roots. At home, upon rising, every member first goes to the puja room and only after praying comes for breakfast. They celebrate Ganesh Chaturthi and Janmashtami on a grand scale, and host a spiritual retreat at their house, presided over by the RK swamis.

The family maintains astonishing harmony and togetherness. The ladies share housework equally and get along well. "No one is jealous of the other. Everyone has what they want. I find that the ladies often exchange their saris and jewelry. They take a rare joy in this," reveals Krishnamurthy.

Girls in the MM family are allowed to study as much as they want, but they are not permitted to work. "It's against the family tradition," states Krishnamurthy. The women visit their relatives and attend family functions. Viewing movies is very rare.

How does the family adjust to the inevitable problems? "The secret of staying together is a lot of sacrifice and compromise. One magic that works here is to overlook and ignore petty mistakes. We turn a blind eye. But if a member continues to err, I correct them once and recall ten mistakes of theirs in a row. There is no scolding or punishment. Silence is our secret agent. Soon, they realize their mistake and fall in line," Krishnamurthy explained. Talking back to elders and disobedience are absent here. The elders by their exemplary conduct have paved the way for unity.

"All the earning members contribute a portion of their income to a common finance pool. All family expenses are met by this account. A perfect record of all expenses is kept with vouchers," says Krishnamurthy. Youngsters are not given pocket money. Only the earning members handle money. All requirements are met by the elders. Youth cannot go out without the permission of their parents or elders.

To me, Krishnamurthy divulged two secrets of a successful joint family, "To live together like this, everyone must contribute to the family, not just money, but also sharing the work equally. And there must be a strong leader, a kind of benevolent dictator."