

The Great Indian Family: Some Reflections

We have always taken pride in our celebrated Indian family values, asserting their superiority over similar values of any other culture. But notwithstanding many positive and wholesome attributes of our hoary family values, much negativity appear to have crept into the same over the years or have never been acknowledged to be part of our value system as they represent too uglier or seamier sides of our culture to be accepted.

Take, for example, the ubiquitous son preference in our society, a problem also afflicting the Chinese society, which owing to its single child norm has also been facing the problem of sex selection in favour of the male children. The Son preference norm is so strong in our society that people would go to any extent to have a baby boy. But reverse sex selection is rarely seen, i.e., those having baby boy as their first child going for sex selection to have a baby girl as their second child. The parents and our supposed near and dear ones often keep up the mental pressure in various ways us to nudge us into having a baby boy. The parents or parents-in-law often target the womenfolk, i.e., the daughters or daughters-in-law to push for a baby boy. And the result of it all this is the skewed sex ratio we have in our society, and the same is also resulting in increased crime against women or forced bachelorhood for many men.

Another value relates to describing a good soul in our society as a 'cow', which often means a dumb person and this appellation is often used for our daughters-in-law. In our society, the dumb daughters-in-law who serve their in-laws without a murmur are supposed to be the best of their ilk. But educated, smart or quick-tongued daughters-in-law are often branded as bad specimens. When the Indian parents start the hunt for their daughters-in-law, they generally scout for such a dumb 'cow'. A stereotypical 'Bahu' (read daughter-in-law) is in many cases preferred to suit their selfish interests and old age comforts rather than a human being who would be more compatible for their sons. Naturally, such arranged marriages don't last long as they are predicated on wrong foundations.

It is people of such kind who ask for the dreaded dowry in the name of various excuses including for securing the future of their children. However, most of them desire dowry as an insurance cover for their own old age. This applies more to the people with low self-esteem,

inferiority complex or unplanned old age. That is why, the caste marriages are insisted upon because in inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, the scope for dowry is almost nil. Caste marriages and caste values are, therefore, promoted to put a premium on the marriage worthiness of the men-folk, i.e., to jack up the amount of dowry.

Parochial societal notions of religion are also said to be responsible for a blinkered world-view, which together with limited education engender all wrong notions about family and culture. Ergo, universal liberal education is required to reinforce and supplement our family values. This would better equip our culture, whereof our family values are a sub-culture, to be more amenable and open to liberal values of human society and also be ready to adopt better ideas and values from other cultures.

Ours being a patriarchal society, the patriarchal values get so imbibed by the hoi polloi that they become their second nature. The people, of both gender, become great defender of those values. The people schooled in patriarchal values would not like more rights for women or equitable gender relations as they see the same as threats to the dominance of these values in society. The dominance of such family values after having been associated with a convoluted sense of cultural superiority work at various levels to ensure suppressing anyone and everyone who comes forward to challenge them.

Newer, liberal values are perceived as a threat to traditional values, challenging the established notions of various aspects of social life. The redoubtable mothers-in-law would not like their daughters-in-law to have more freedom or better status vis-à-vis their husbands or the family as they did not have the same available to them. So the control and restraints exercised over the daughters-in-law are actually psychological ventilation of delayed retribution against the society, sublimating as atrocities and churlish behaviour against the younger women in the same roles.

The attempts at intra-family one-upmanship also result in psychological torture or physical assaults, often reported as dowry harassment cases under 498 A of the Indian Penal Code. In many cases, such shenanigans lead to marital break-ups or dowry deaths as well. These senior family members including parents at times conspire against their own children to prove themselves right. They don't mind going to any extent to serve their selfish interests as well represented and portrayed in many of those gooey Indian TV soaps. Sometimes the entire clan or society comes forward to support such people. It could be very well noticed in many pathological judgments and 'honour killings' by the clan Kangaroo Courts masquerading as *khap panchayats* in North India. These are extreme cases, but such stories in one or the other form could well be heard from different parts of our society. These discontents keep simmering all the time in many families. Various stories with poignant details are heard with sickening regularity in a good number of families. Sometimes these coolies of family values go extra mile to break and spoil all relations at the pretext of protecting their wards, which is actually an extension of their own selfish interests.

The perception of being neglected often forces some parents to do such things as spoils the healthy atmosphere inside a family thereby making it difficult for many to continue as part of the joint family. Many parents obstruct the marriage of their children to the person of

their choice, resulting in all sorts of problems including dowry deaths, marital atrocities, wife battery and what not leading to broken marriages and broken families. Hence, the breakdown of our celebrated joint family system.

The pathologies of Indian family system shall take a while to go. However, one does feel that these are transitional problems which shall go as Gen X pass on the baton to the next generation as they would be better educated and better equipped to be tied down with the moth-balled values. Hence, healthy relationship within and without family is expected once such people are in charge of our families. However, in the meantime we have to ensure better universal education imbued with liberal values as ought to be practiced in a futuristic society. There is need for a conscious attempt at promoting such humane values as ought to be germane to a modern, liberal society.

Salient Points

- Despite many positive attributes of our family values, much negativity appears to have crept in our society like ubiquitous son preference.
- Result of male preference is the skewed sex ratio we have in our society and the same is also resulting in many evils like increased crime against women.
- In our society, we describe our obeying daughters-in-law as a 'cow'. But Educated and smart ones among them are branded as bad specimens.
- Most of us desire dowry as an insurance cover for own old age. This is one reason why the caste marriages are insisted upon.
- The perception of being neglected often forces some parents to do things which spoils the healthy atmosphere inside a family.
- These are transitional problems which shall go as Gen X pass on the baton to the next generation as they would be better educated and better.

Glossary

Scout: a soldier

Ilk: family

Ubiquitous: existing or being everywhere

Seamier: disagreeable

Hoary: grey or white with age

Ergo: therefore

Amenable: ready or willing to answer

Hoi polloi: the common people

Convolutd: twisted

Redoubtable: that is to be feared

Retribution: the distribution of rewards and punishments in a future life

Churlish: rude

Gooey: sticky

Masquerading: a party, dance, or other festive gathering of persons wearing masks

Simmering: to make a gentle murmuring sound

Poignant: keenly distressing to the feelings

Sickening: causing or capable of causing sickness

Pathologies: the science or the study of the origin, nature, and course of diseases

Moth-balled: unused

Imbued: to inspire, as with feelings, opinions

Germane: closely or significantly related