HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE FAMILY IN INDIA

Contents

Ancient Period - Hinduism

Background The development of Indian society during the classical period highlighted three major characteristics. Religion was strongly emphasized (more than in China), as Hinduism took shape; Buddhism, the other major religion, ultimately had less influence in India itself as opposed to other parts of Asia. The caste system was closely linked to Hinduism, establishing rigid boundaries for social groups that defined what jobs they could do, what their social contacts were; marriage outside the caste was forbidden in principle and usually in fact. Finally, India was often divided by a variety of regional states; while there were two periods featuring larger empires, these did not establish strong traditions for central governments or, indeed, for extensive political life.

Hinduism Hinduism strongly emphasized the importance of marriage and procreation as religious duties, as well as obligations to the larger family and ancestors. Family life fulfilled *dharma* appropriate to the relevant phase of life. Having children, particularly male children, was obviously essential to preserve the family line. Husbands and fathers, in fulfilling their functions, paid a debt to the gods, along with appropriate sacrifices and prayers. Most Hindu households had a space for prayer and religious contemplation.

Extended family: functions Indian society placed great emphasis on the extended family. Households often combined several generations. Children were often encouraged to develop relationships with aunts and uncles that were as strong as those with their own parents. The economic importance of the extended family loomed large, providing the basic work force in agriculture and business alike. Kinship contacts could help rural migrants to cities find jobs. Many Indian merchants used kin to establish farflung trading links, rather than developing more impersonal business bureaucracies (this would also be true for merchant families in the Middle East).

Extended family: regulations Extended families also established prohibited categories for marriage selection, beyond immediate kin. These varied by group and region. At the same time, though again depending on region and linguistic group, marriage of certain cousins was both permissible and in fact common – for example, the children of two brothers (but not perhaps the child of a sister – again the specificity was important). Kinship marriage, subject to specifics, would also be an important part of both Middle Eastern and African traditions.

Marriage It is not clear if arranged marriage loomed larger in classical India, for family formation, than in other societies – it certainly does today – but it was certainly the standard basis for mate selection. Fathers took the lead, often consulting informally with their wives. Parental involvement may have been particularly important because of the complex caste and extended family rules about eligible partners. Children were expected to accept parental choice without dispute even though (in the upper classes particularly) they often had never met their bride or groom before the ceremony. (Girls might be married as young as 8, though in these cases they did not take up coresidence until later.) Hindu marriage celebrations themselves were unusually extensive and festive, multi-day affairs aimed at launching the new family with appropriate joy and support.

Sexuality and emotion Sexual desire was a category recognized in Hinduism, and it possible that it gained greater emphasis in the Hindu tradition than in some other regions. Certainly the famous sexual manual, the *Kama Sutra,* produced in this period (probably around 200 CE), was an unusually elaborate

guide to emotional and sexual fulfillment, with considerable attention to the pleasure of both parties. All literate cultures produced sex guides, but the detail and emphasis in the Indian document were distinctive. Sexuality was also strongly emphasized in much Hindu art. None of this provides direct evidence of sexual practice, but at least the cultural context was somewhat distinctive. On the other hand, early marriage for many girls was clearly designed to impose the institution before any signs of sexual stirrings. Marriage tradition interestingly allowed a get-acquainted period of three days for bride and groom after their ceremony but before undertaking sexual activity, possibly resulting in greater opportunity for sexual and emotional compatibility despite the fact that the marriage itself had been based on other criteria.

Parents and children Hindu emphasis on the spiritual potential of each person may have discouraged infanticide, though the data are not conclusive. Certainly both pregnancy and childbirth were widely celebrated, with special religious rituals at a birth. Young children of both sexes were indulged, with many opportunities for play, though more serious training set in after early childhood (including rigorous religious education for sons in the Brahman class). Mothers were particularly responsible for indulgence, offering breastfeeding as an occasional treat even after a child was largely weaned.

Later developments The creation of an Islamic minority in India after the classical period altered family patterns in some respects, particularly in northern India – even among Hindus (see chapter 11). After the classical period also, Hindu families in some regions – not all – adopted the practice of ***sati,*** where a widow would throw herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband, on grounds that she had nothing else to live for. As with foot binding in China, this showed a tendency for heightened gender distinctions in the further evolution of agricultural societies. At the same time, many of the traditions for family life established in the classical period continued with less adjustment.

Study questions

1. What were the most distinctive features of the traditional Indian family?
2. What were the differences between Confucian and Hindu endorsements of the family as an institution?
3. What are some obvious complexities in discussing the role of gender in Indian family relationships?

Further reading

S. Vats and S. Mugdal, eds., *Women and Society in Ancient India* (Om Publications, 1999)

Suvira Jaswall, “The Position of Women in Early India: problems and perspectives,” *Proceedings of the India History Conference* 42 (l981)

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Ancient Period - Buddhism

Renunciation In launching his own spiritual journey, the Buddha, born into a wealthy family, renounced not only riches but family itself, abandoning his wife and children. An early Buddhist writing described the feelings of a renunciant when his family did visit: “He feels no pleasure when she (the wife) comes, no sorrow when she goes; him I would call a true saint released from passion.” The notion that family entanglements were a distraction from the goals of personal enlightenment remained an important strain in Buddhism through the classical and postclassical periods and beyond. This was why almost all the Buddhist monastic movements insisted on celibacy.

Overall approach Buddhism was the only major religion not to provide an explicit religious endorsement for family, a belief that forming and maintaining families fulfilled a religious duty and formed part of the divine plan for mankind. It contrasted in this respect not only from Christianity and Islam, but also from Hinduism, Judaism, and even Zoroastrianism. Family life could be construed as one of the deceiving miseries of human life. An early Sutra thus intoned, “Leaving behind son and wife, and father and mother, and wealth and grain, and relatives, and sensual pleasures to the limit, one should wander solitary as a rhinoceros horn.” Statements about the dangers of family life were common in Buddhist writings, focused

not only on the concerns family involvement could generate but also on the desires involved. Women were sometimes warned about the risks of childbirth. Even for the majority of Buddhists who continued to form families, the notion of higher and separate spiritual goals might affect degrees of commitment.

Impact on family forms Because Buddhism had no elaborate family policy, it tended to adapt to whatever family forms already prevailed in the regions the religion penetrated – which meant that there was tremendous diversity among Buddhist families. In a few cases, this included acceptance of polygamy, though in general Buddhist families were monogamous. In other cases, Buddhist monks maintained active families alongside their religious commitments (this seems to have been particularly common in postclassical Japan). Monks in monasteries in India often made regular contributions to their parents. In some cases also, whole families made a commitment to spiritual renunciation together. In other instances wives made every effort to support their husbands when the latter decided on a path of renunciation, maintaining some semblance of family contact. Buddhism overall was a very flexible religion, with many specific variants, and family variety was a clear consequence. At the same time, this same flexibility prompted widespread acceptance of patriarchal family structures.

Relevant principles This said, some features of Buddhism had more general applicability to family conduct, and these began to be codified in writing during the later phases of the classical period and beyond. Respect for elders was one such precept. Buddhists urged submission to the wishes of parents, particularly fathers, and in this respect worked to stabilize family life in fairly traditional terms. General precepts of nonviolence, honesty and consideration for others had obvious applicability to family behavior – though we have no decisive evidence of the extent to which these principles affected actual behavior. (One of the really intriguing challenges in comparative family history involves speculation on whether some cultures inhibited, or promoted, family violence more than others; unfortunately clear data only emerge in recent times.) Obviously also, Buddhism could inform family life even when worldly renunciation was not involved, as parents instructed their children in principles ranging from abstemious behavior to the importance of contributing to a local monastery. Mothers played a considerable role in this kind of moral instruction. Finally, as with Hinduism, many Buddhists set up small family shrines, where family members could pray and meditate.

Childhood Buddhist parents In practice organized a variety of rituals to protect their children from harm, some of them taken over from Hindu forms. Many children attended Buddhist schools, and certainly were regaled with stories of the religion's saints. Opportunities in Buddhist schools may have been particularly important for girls. Some youngsters, identified as spiritually gifted, were sent into monasteries or convents at an early age. On the whole Buddhists tended to oppose child marriage, believing that parties should be able to offer informed consent.

Tensions in China The spread of Buddhism to China raised particular problems, given the contrast with the strong existing Confucian commitment to the primacy of the family and procreation. Many Confucianists actively opposed Buddhist conversions and the establishment of celibate monasteries as inimical to the family and its social obligations. This ultimately played a role in the decisions of the Tang dynasty, by the 9th century, to turn against Buddhist activities, though a strong Buddhist minority survived. At the same time Buddhists themselves offered compromise. Buddhist passages (imported from India) such as "the wife consoles the husband" were shifted to "the wife reveres the husband", along with "the husband controls the wife". References in Indian Buddhist writings to kisses and passion were simply deleted. A Buddhist term for morality was altered to read "filial submission and obedience". A number of stories highlighted the tensions that could erupt when a child (particularly a daughter) defied parental order and joined a Buddhist group. At the same time, some Chinese husbands (not themselves active Buddhists) reported some delight when their wives participated in Buddhist meetings, for it distracted the women from potential contests for power within the family and made paternal control easier. All this tends to highlight Buddhism's flexibility and regional specificity when it came to family life, and the fact that it did not break through traditional patterns in any systematic way.

Study questions

1. Why it is difficult to identify a Buddhist family type?
2. What were the main Buddhist concerns about family life?
3. How might Buddhism come to terms, at least in part, with established Chinese family values?

Further reading

Liz Wilson, “Buddhism and Family,” *Religious Compass* 8 (2014)

Liz Wilson, ed., *Family in Buddhism* (State University of New York Press, 2013)

Jose Cabezon, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender* (State University of New York Press, 1992)

Postclassical Period : Islam in South Asia

Background Islam initially spread only gradually into South Asia, and it never displaced Hinduism as majority religion. Over time, however, and particularly when some regional empires were established by Islamic conquerors, a larger Islamic minority developed during the postclassical centuries and beyond. Interactions between Muslims and Hindus, though often tense, could have significant impact on family life, particularly in the northern part of the subcontinent. Some Hindus reportedly objected to some Muslim family practices, for example veiling, and the severity of Muslim costumes for women was not widely adopted even by Islamic families, which continued to prefer more colorful clothing. However, because both Islam and Hinduism were patriarchal at base, while also relying heavily on patrilineal extended families some overlap and sharing proved possible. This occurred over an extensive period of time, but began in the postclassical period.

Property One exchange affected many Muslim families: an increasing adoption of the Hindu practice of passing control of the family dowry over to the husband. Both religions featured arranged marriage and provision of dowry by the family of the bride, but obviously Islam had created important protections for wives in the process. These now tended to erode, with the result that many Islamic men in South Asia became – and remain today – as fiercely protective of their claims over dowry as their Hindu counterparts.

Purdah At least as important was the gradual assimilation of Islamic habits of women’s seclusion into the patterns of many upper-class Hindu families. Here was a dramatic, if very gradual, change resulting from the impact of Islam. The practice of what was called purdah is clear enough: Upper-class homes established a separate room or section for adult women in the family, elaborately decked out so that their activities would be concealed. Women were restricted from venturing outside the home and wore face coverings for any gathering or excursion. While Hindu women did not accept the veil, they draped scarves over parts of their faces to achieve a similar effect. There is real dispute about when and why purdah developed. Some scholars find origins in traditional Hinduism, well before the arrival of Islam. Almost certainly however Islam’s arrival extended the process. Some contend it expanded at that point to protect respectable Hindu women from seizure by Muslim conquerors (at least, such was the fear), and there is evidence that Muslim rulers urged it on their women to prevent interaction with Hindus. These factors highlight the rise of the Delhi sultanate, a major regional invader state, in the 13th century as the key turning point, prompting mutual defensiveness. On the other hand, social status considerations entered in quickly, and the practice became a sign of female respectability and upper-class standing for Hindus and Muslims alike in the northern part of the subcontinent. It was on this basis that the practice would gain ground further in the Mughal period, beginning in the 165h century (even though some Mughal rulers, with Muslim concern for women in mind, actually opposed it.

Differences Hindu and Muslim families by no means aligned entirely. Hindus did not in the main accept polygamy nor did regional Hindu rulers accumulate large groups of concubines, as occurred in the Middle East. Muslims did not accept special Hindu practices like sati (developed only in some Hindu areas in any event), because it deeply offended the notion of spiritual equality between men and women. The two religions developed separate systems for those children who went to school, though religious sponsorship was involved in both cases. Specific family rituals varied, and on the whole Muslims did not adopt the Hindu preference for particularly elaborate weddings. Nevertheless, Hindu-Muslim interactions (despite mutual suspicion) engendered some real syncretism when it came to family life, and particularly to gender arrangements – with the changes largely to women’s detriment.

Study questions

1. What are the major issues in interpreting the development of Purdah?

2. What facilitated some Hindu-Muslim agreement on family practices in India from the postclassical period onward?
3. What key differences remained between the two religious sectors, on family patterns?
4. Some authorities argue that, today, families in the Middle East and South Asia are having more trouble adjusting to changes in gender relations than their counterparts in East Asia, despite the fact that East Asia, too, has a deeply patriarchal tradition. Do earlier differences in family structure between the two regions support this argument?

Further reading

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Bal Ram Nanda, ed., *Indian Women: from Purdah to modernity* (Stosius/Advent Books, 1990)

20th Century

General South Asia participated in many of the basic family trends of the contemporary period. Family size declined. To be sure, an Indian government campaign in the 1970s to promote vasectomies failed to catch on, and Muslim birth rates remained higher than Hindu (a source of real concern in the Hindu-Nationalist mood of the 21st century). The region also saw a slower decline in child labor than was common globally. But family size did drop; infant mortality figures improved; education began to replace work for more children. While child marriage was still common, rates here also declined. The age of parents at the birth of a first child rose steadily as part of the process of change. Overall, traditions retained a greater role in South Asia than in East Asia, partly because the percentage of population in the countryside remained higher, but there was a clear patterns of adjustment to new conditions.

Variety Regional and religious variety create important differences in family patterns within South Asia. Indian law leaves a good bit of family regulation up to individual groups. Matrilineal traditions remain in a few regions. In many cases, intermarriage is frowned up; this is an important part of Hindu-Muslim tensions in India. In the 21st century Hindu nationalists began warning of a so-called marriage jihad, claiming that Muslim men were wooing Hindu women in order to convert them. Education is another variable. While schooling has gained ground, a large rural minority remains largely untouched; on the other hand, in many urban families attention to the school performance of children, including the use of shaming to promote greater achievement, has become an important parental function.

Gender Considerable tension has surrounded gender family issues in South Asia. Violence against girls appearing in public or seeking to attend school was high; many motives were involved, but a desire to seclude women was among them. The custom of purdah declined, but it clearly still left a mark. Honor killings of daughters or sisters accused of misbehavior remained an issue. Violent disputes over the adequacy of bridal dowries was another sign of friction. Protest against male violence became an important feminist rallying cry by the early 21st century, with some success in courts of law. Finally, as In China, South Asian families retained a preference for boys. By the 1980s, when ultrasound procedures allowed determination of the sex of an embryo, ensuing abortions disproportionately targeted girls. The result, again as in China, was an excess of males surviving to maturity, leading to concerns about finding partners plus efforts to recruit spouses from Southeast Asia. Indian law provides some protection for the property of women in the family, but confirms patriarchal power overall.

Extended family and marriage The most striking feature of modern South Asian family structure was the preservation of extended family ties and the deep respect for older parents. Urbanization did create more nuclear families; no single pattern prevailed. But an overwhelming majority of South Asians expressed a preference for arranged marriage (2/3, in early 21st-century polls). Interviews among upper-caste Indians showed a huge desire to please the adult father, as the most important factor in marriage selection -- plus the preservation of a marriage even when little affection developed between husband and wife. India featured one of the lowest divorce rates in the world, at under 1% of all marriages. Some Indian feminists argued that arranged marriage spared women from the competition for sexual attractiveness and artificial good looks that plagued their sisters in the West. India also retained the tradition of elaborate, multi-day wedding ceremonies, a high point in family ritual. Many of these family patterns continued to involve South Asians even when they emigrated to other areas.

Study questions

1. Why did arranged marriage remain particularly popular in South Asia?
2. How might traditions of purdah continue to affect gender relations in the family and community?
3. What standard modern family trends developed in South Asia during the contemporary period?

Further reading

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David Mandelbaum, "The Family in India," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 4 (1948)*

Bai Ram Singh, *Indian Family System: the concept, practices and current relevance* (DK Prinworld, 2011)