

# Changing Families in India and Social Work Responses

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## Abstract

The family-based Social Work has been at the forefront of Social Work interventions for individuals and groups. The institutions of marriage and family undergo tremendous changes during the last century. Amidst all sort of changes, the families continue to be a major source of fighting vulnerabilities and hence it is the focal point of intervention in Social Work and welfare programmes. The challenges and the needs of the families change across the globe and in India also the demands on professional support change. This paper highlights the trends in the marriage and family system in India and thereby points to the new Social Work approaches and strategies required in comparison to the professional services available in other global Social Work settings. This also highlighted some of the strategies adopted in the Australian context that fits with the professional approaches.

**Keywords:** Working with Families, Changing Approaches to Family Social Work, New Focuses of Family-Based Social Work, Dealing with Separation, Single Parenting, Divorce and Violence

## Introduction

Families are ever-changing and professionals of contemporary society assert that the families are not what they were and 'sometimes tinged with regret for a more wholesome past' (Allan, G., Crow, G. & Hawker, S., 2011. P. 1). The family system in India also changes, and the divide between the changes and the interventions are getting wider and how to mend the gap is a matter of attention to the professionals. There are many models, which are very effective in meeting the needs of changing families. In spite of drastic changes in the family system,

Indian families still believe in maintaining togetherness and emotional bonding between the kith and kin and attempts have been made by the organisations and professionals to improve the bonding between the members of the family (S. P. Rajeev, 2014; Chadha (2012). Though India has the lowest divorce rate in the world with only 1 in 100 marriages, the latest reports and studies display an increasing trends of divorce and separation in India, (Singh, J. P., 2012 & Ellis, D., Stuckless, N. & Smith, C., 2014). The professional social workers adopt mainly an effective and positive relationship building among the members of the changing families S. P. Rajeev, 2014). But the rapid changes in the roles and functions of the family can never be overlooked in professional interventions. There are many studies that indicate the growing concerns of divorce, separation, single parenting in India in recent years and they call for the effective and integral perspectives of professional social work intervention. Though it is a difficult task in a heterogeneous country like India, it is high time to think of a strong family policy. Such a policy, in general, must give sufficient space for professional intervention to the families in need. A strong family policy would accelerate the professional efforts to support the families in distress, initiating intensive researches in family interventions and implementation of plans effectively. In many developed countries, social workers implement many family empowerment intervention programmes considering family as the foundation to building an effective community. The changes in contemporary Indian families and some of the effective adaptable intervention methods are discussed here.

Family is the most important primary group of any society and in India, marriage and family are considered two pillars of social order. Marriage and family work as the 'bulwark' against social vulnerability (Jamwal S. N.,

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2009). This basic social unit undergoes many changes and the changes are evident in all the associated institutions and elements like, marriage, parenting, family roles and relationships. For example, the institution of marriage is shattered in most of the western societies and the parental control over the mate selection is decreasing in many other countries like India, China, Turkey and Japan (Abela, A. & Walker, J., 2014). The family system in India continues to be the most significant aspect in the fabric of society, even in the midst of rapid socio, cultural and political changes in the society. The family system contributes to the stability of culture and society in India. There are many changes in the familial structures and systems in rural and urban India. The trends in the urban cities seem to be more supportive to more couples in a household and in a rural area it seems to be declining (Ghosh R. A., 2013 & Census India, 2011). These trends are to cope with the changing work lifestyles, patterns of social life and upbringing of the children and many other actors. Families perform many roles, including that of socialising the individuals and integrating them with the community. People relocate in connection with their occupation, education of children, health reasons and for many other reasons.

The domestic violence issues are alarmingly high in India and it is noticed that 'about once every five minutes an incident of domestic violence is reported in India, under its legal definition of "cruelty by husband or his relatives" and 309,546 cases have been reported in 2013 (BBC, website. 2014). Family issues leading to suicide is also high in India. Referring to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Ignatius Pereira (2013) explains that there are 15 suicides an hour or 371 suicides a day had taken place in India in 2012. On average 84 suicides out of 371, a day is due to family problems and socio-economic reasons cause men to commit suicide and whereas it is emotional issues that mainly made women commit suicide. The percentage of suicides by married men was 71.6% and married women 67.9%. One out of six suicides is by a housewife (NCRB. 2013). Kerala, the most literate state in the country, ranks third with a suicide rate of 12/ day (average) (Ignatius Pereira. 2013). In India, 40% of women have experienced violence by an intimate partner (J. P. Singh, 2011). In the joint family system, familial issues did not deviate to extreme physical violence of death. With the disintegration of such an

elaborative support system, people, especially women in the families, lost an emotional setting, with caring and emotional support. No substitutes have been found so far, but the vulnerability increases day by day.

The changes in modern society have posed new challenges to families. According to Jamwal S. N., 2009, the challenges are like growing instability, lack of communication, changing the attitude towards sex, changing roles of couples, and tensions of the fast life. These challenges have distorted the family values and created tensions and breakdowns in the family system. The following figures show the evidence of broken families throughout India. 'In 1995, 2055 couples filed for divorce in Mumbai, in 2004, the number went up to 3400 in that city alone. In the eight matrimonial district courts of Delhi, an average of 25 divorce petitions was filed every day in 2004. In Bangalore, the number increased threefold from 653 in 1988 to 1861 in 2002. In Kolkata, the number had gone up from 1633 in 1966 to 2388 in 2003. Seventy per cent of these figures represent divorces in the age-group of 25-35. In Kolkata, divorce cases have gone up nearly 200 per cent in the last few years' (Shefalee V. & Anjali D. 2005. P. 66). In some of the districts like Hyderabad and Ranga Reddy, the number of divorce petitions registered rose to 1000 in 2014 (Durgam K. Jeevan. 2014). The higher divorce rates in the cities are the indicators to the fact that the institution of marriage is in trouble or it is not able to maintain the high expectation of people. '...people are no longer willing to put up with the kinds of dissatisfactions and empty-shell marriages that the previous generations tolerated. The high rate of remarriages means that people are sacrificing their marriages because of unsatisfactory relationships' (J. P. Singh, 2012. P. 7).

Though some of the literature cite some reasons like women empowerment, lack of family values, poor bonding between partners, adjustment problems, increasing cultural divides between families, all agree to the notion that the cases of interparental conflicts are on a rise in India. Domestic violence and interparental conflicts leave children at risk and vulnerable to psychosocial problems. F. B. Van Rooij, W. A. van der Schuur, M. Steketee, J. Mak and T. Pels (2015) referring to DeBoard-Lucas and Grych 2011; Holt et al., 2008; Kitzmann et al., 2003; Wolfe et al., 2003 substantiate that children exposed to interparental violence are more vulnerable to psychosocial adjustment problems and they also exhibit academic problems. It

is also drawn from their observation and studies that exposure to interparental violence is associated with higher levels of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of children. The same authors (2010) explicitly pinpoint that the interparental violence causes to the emotional unavailability of mothers to their children and degenerate positive family functioning, which is the crucial protective factor in the development of children.

## The Aftermath of Separation/Divorces in Indian Families

*'Desertions and separations/divorces are increasing in India today. Yet, not much attention has been paid to the manner in which deserted and separated women live, often with their children, and what their rights and entitlements are in/from the marital home. Very few legal or sociological studies exist on the economic status of divorced and separated women in India. However, some studies describe the condition of separated/deserted women as even worse than that of a widow'* (Singh, 2013. P. 22).

It is very well evident from the above findings that the conditions of women and children after separation or divorce are considerably degenerative. The legal supports or assistance envisaged for women end up in mere negotiation even in criminal cases. Sometimes the women cells and state women commissions are compelled to meet around a table to agree upon some of the negotiated terms for a settlement (Singh, 2013). Financial burdens being one of the pulling factors for women in the rest of the life to excel become isolated from the society and community in most of the cases. K. Sing further explains that even working women tend to take their career advancement and progress less significantly and thus miss out the opportunities for growth in their prospective areas. The psychological backlogs are untouched and overlooked in the life of the majority of women and children. Such initiatives are yet to kick start from the professionals and professional groups. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHSS), USA, in their publication for general information (2011), describes the intensity of losing in connection with separation and divorce as emotional, social, physical and financial. This is because they lose the person with whom they have planned to live with and share the psychosocial, financial and physical proximity.

Apart from the ailing response to immediate loss of social network, community link, property aloofness the general emotional response to separation and divorce are; denial/ numbness/sense of detachment, sadness, anger, anxiety, inability to concentrate, guilt, hopelessness, confusion, helplessness, longing and preoccupation (DHSS, 2011). The changes in identity, family structure, relationship, community circle, finance and priorities are not easy going matters, they need scientific help and professional assistance to meet and make oneself adapting to.

One of the most significant changes in the total family system is the increased number of divorces and single-parent families. The posing questions to the professionals are how do kids or children adjust to the changing families? What are the areas they are at risk? Social workers who work with children and families are definitely in the forefront to answer these questions. In most of the cases, children are disposed to high risks. The issues of single-parent families have been under serious discussions even before 2000. Swisher, (2000), has seen single-parent families as harmful, and they create problems in the life of women and children. The women as single or solo parents face emotional, social, financial and security problems (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). The environment around them becomes very hostile and it is challenging for women to cope with these issues. The children in the single-parent families, on the other hand, are reported to have a feeling of loneliness, withdrawal, fear, anger, social and emotional problems, distress, conflict, anxiety and less cohesion (Singh & Kiran, 2014 & Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009). They also increase the insecurity feelings in children. The research studies also suggest that the family structure does play a role in the juvenile delinquency and children from single-parent families are at risk category. The challenges in the single-parent families also cause increased rates of juvenile crime, depression and eating disorders, teen suicide, and abuse (Singh & Kiran 2014). Some of the emotional problems of single mothers include the feeling of a feeling of rootlessness and lack of identity. Many of them also lack the confidence to bounce back to normal life (Kotwal & Prabhakar, 2009).

The elderly and children in the families become victims of all sort of violence and inconsistencies in India. This is very crucial as families are the fundamental support systems of the aged and the children. The number of aged people increases as the life expectancy of both

men and women increases (Ponnuswami, 2011). The problems of the elderly may extend from a lack of support system to homelessness and absolute poverty. In the broken families, the rights of the elderly are neglected, and emotional distress are very high. Children are also vulnerable to physical, emotional and social disabilities. The children in the broken families are sometimes not claimed by any of the parents and school dropouts, absenteeism, child labour, street wandering, indulging in crimes; psychosocial problems are high compared to other children (Singh, 2012).

The professional service in India for the family wellbeing is another matter of discussion. One major line of attention lies in the birth control and population mechanisms, whereas many NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) coordinate much of their voluntary efforts in maintaining family bonding and building healthy relationships in the families. Among the many legislative frameworks to support women and children, the protection of women from domestic violence act of 2005 has an edge in its implementation. The act mentions the possibility of making use of professional service to sort out the issues in the family (GOI- DV act, 2005). The possibility of Social Work intervention is much imperative and essential in its implementation, but that needs to be legally established in the service providing system so that the service provided can never be confined or focussed to filing DIRs (Domestic Incident Reports). J. P. Singh (2012) identified that many people approach the counsellors and social work professional to receive guidance and support in dealing with family issues. Gender wise classification shows that the women seek such support more than men, but the family issues and violence cannot be limited or confined to females alone; It is roughly estimated that annually more than 58000 educated women misuse the legal provisions against their husbands and more than 52000 married men commit suicide due to verbal, financial, legal, emotional and relationship cheating by their wives (Panickar, 2016). Still, the number of women who suffer the violence and abuse is far more than on the reverse side. This highlights the need for comprehensive approaches in professional services to help the families in need.

The census data of the Government of India, the single-member household, i.e. without the spouse amounts to 11% of the total households (Census Government of India 2001). This being a global phenomenon, the developed

nations in the world have taken professional approaches to creating resilient families with positive relationships. One of the reasons cited as the reason for such enormous efforts of the organisations and governmental agencies are to ensure the strong foundation to community building and wellbeing (Australian family day theme, 2015). Nation-Building is associated with good family building. Efforts have been taken by the Governmental agencies and Non Governmental Organizations to extend proper professional assistance to families in managing conflicts, taking care of parental issues, coping with adversities, building positive relationships, taking care of the elderly in the families and preparing adults into family life. Family counselling centres along with the Service Providing Centres (SPCs) (DV act –Govt. of India, 2005), strive to settle the issues between the partners and protecting women from the domestic violence. But most of the related issues are left unattended many of the times. Such growing incidents call for a more systematic and scientific approach from the social workers to deal with the issues of reuniting, dealing with traumas of violence, especially in women and children, dealing with separation and divorce in many cases. Some of the effective strategies in the state of Queensland, Australia, highlight the importance of education to men, women and children (Government of Queensland, 2010). One of the IEC materials developed by the Queensland Government, which is targeted at educating men, keeps the title like; ‘Every man must open his eyes’. It throws some imperative and vital questions to men such as; ‘Have you or someone you know been violent or abusive, have you made a loved one or someone in your care afraid, have you seen the impact your abuse or violence has on your children, and Do you want to change. The scientific approach to handle their behaviour is proposed to be available at the other side of a telephone call. The attempts made by those systems to tackle domestic violence are integral and it takes men and women in confidence. They also evince the effective strategies the social workers have to choose to build healthy families in the changing world. Such education programmes are necessary to deal with problems more intensively. It adds more value to the social work service in families to effectively address domestic violence and its related concerns and vulnerabilities.

The increasing number of separation in the families put forward challenging responsibilities to the social workers to deal effectively with separation. Though the

separation is basically between couples, there are many others who are vulnerable to emotional, physical, social and financial abuses. The women, children and the aged are mostly susceptible to further abuses. In contemporary society, the social workers focus on strengthening family relationships, helping families stay together and assisting families through separation to manage the vulnerabilities effectively (family relationships online, 2012). In cases of separation, people require helps to recoup their potentials to lead a normal life as much as possible. The research studies show that in this effort they need support to be replaced, legal formalities and procedures, finding money to be in their own feet, re-partnering, sharing the parental roles with the new partner, being a stepparent, accommodating children with the new environment, for children being in association with and amicable to new partners, being a grant parent of a totally new child and managing the adjustment problems (Child support agency - CSA Australia, 2005). The expectations of both partners may be different and this would intensify the tension even in the stepfamilies or newly formed families. One of the examples cited in the educational video of the child support agency (2005) is the expectation of a child on the stepfather to consider her as his daughter, but for the man he does not know how to relate to them. The video also suggests that re-partnering has a different effect on the each member of the family. Referring to different researches the CSA - Australia, explains that the re-parenting usually takes between two to five years.

Building positive relationships in the family is another strategy deal with most of the posing problems of the families. This can meet the emotional, physical and social needs of the members in the family. Some of the tips in dealing with relationship problems in the family are; convince the members that even greater relationships have ups and downs. 'The trick is to generate more ups and be better with the downs' it is the key ingredient of good relationships (Common Wealth of Australia, 2007. 1.01). Other tips the same research output gives to the family members include; realistic expectations, communicating well-listening not pretend to be listening, being well suited to each other, enjoy together, showing affection and taking care of each other, valuing each other's differences, understanding that feelings include love and affection, respecting the partner's opinion and at the end always remembering that even if there are incompatibilities don't break off the relationships, it can

be worked out effectively using own support system or with eh support of professionals.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, the Indian family system undergoes radical changes, the issues found only in highly industrialised societies are found common in our urban as well as rural areas. On the other hand, the lack of professional supports to cope with the adversities push the vulnerable categories of people to the behind the scenes, and they suffer in silence. Domestic violence, separation, divorce, single-parent families, increased number of elderly people and parental conflicts are the key issue that needs scientific approaches. There are some scientific examples discussed in this paper to cite how those problems are handled by Social Workers. The focus of intervention starts with building positive relationships in the families and it progresses through handling separation, divorce, emotional adjustments, responding to the needs of the children and elderly in the family. This may demand a different approach from the professionals to meet the contemporary challenges but without compromising the basic values of the Indian family system.

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