

FAMILY LIFE OF INDIANS IN TORONTO

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THE TRADITIONAL INDIAN FAMILY

This is a generalized study of the typical Indian family. From the outset, one must realize the magnitude of problems faced when one attempts to define the term "typical". Diversity (economic, social, caste, geographical and cultural differences) proves to be a major impediment in the way of our results. Myriad other factors have been taken for granted and have not been overtly dealt with. Education and literacy, and the nature of the residence, are some of the factors enumerated which hinder piecing together a composite picture of a typically Indian family. To help solve this problem, I have "constructed" a 'traditionally' Indian family. However, one must bear in mind that certain traditions and conventions have fallen into disuse, or have been replaced or modified as a reaction to the fast-changing times, and in an attempt to conform and adjust harmoniously to them. The internal and external factors which cause such changes are not of immediate concern to us. What is germane are the changes that are reflected in the family system.

THE INDIAN FAMILY

The traditional Indian family belongs to the sociological genre of the joint family system. In this type of familial organization, the man, his wife and their children, the man's brothers, their wives and children are all part of a unit which lives under one roof, eats food cooked at a single hearth, holds property in common and participates in common family worship. They are related to each other either consanguineously or affinally. These conventions are, of course, subject to modifications, if need be.

This family operates on a patriarchal pivot with the eldest male member commanding management of financial affairs and intense respect from his younger. The female members are involved in and help solve domestic affairs.

Religious beliefs are vociferously upheld and practised. Formal ceremonies and rituals compose one of the family's major social and cultural activities. Weddings and other such events are celebrated with great pomp and gusto.

There is a very sharp dichotomy in the nature of duties assigned to members of the two different sexes. The female members of the family unit have a somewhat cloistered and repressed life. Contacts with members of the other sex are not encouraged, if not frowned upon. Their marriages are usually engineered by their parents or by near relatives. The

bridegroom is chosen with special care and regard to his social and caste status. A lot of attention is paid to the value of his character and an attractive dowry. The girls are usually wedded when they reach their middle teens. The practices of child-marriage and the dowry system are presently outlawed. The wife, in traditional families, is considered inferior to her spouse -- hers is "not to question why, but hers to do and die". Women are not spurred to higher education, and it is a rare case when they do pursue academia after marriage. Their main occupation is with domestic chores.

The male members of the family are the potential bread-winners. They are the more educated branch of the family, and are usually expected to fill their father's post if not surpass them, in money-making capacities and holdings. Such ambitious expectations are often trying on the person in question.

The authority of this mosaic often depends on circumstances. If the wife dies, then her eldest sister-in-law or daughter takes over the household reins. If the male head dies then the eldest male member of the remaining family succeeds him.

The child is considered an invaluable asset in the family. It is usually brought up by the mother or, in her absence,

by another female. Values of a rigid nature are fostered upon it. Ascetism, chastity, religious values, obedience to elders are positively catalyzed.

The joint family system has a texture that is closely knit and exudes a very personal atmosphere. Strong and close emotional ties germinate in this gregarious atmosphere. However, living in close proximity with relatives of whom one may not be particularly fond, can be a harrowing experience. This system supplies a generative and democratic plinth, whereupon comfort and condolences are extended, if need be. High expectations of emulating luminaries of the family may lead to mental frustration. Also, exaggerated dependence on such a unit can destroy the person's ability to manage his own affairs independently.

It must be borne in mind that in keeping with the changing times and the steep acceleration in urbanization traditions have changed. The role of women, for instance, has been drastically modified. Higher education, better prospects for higher offices, switching to modern apparel, an increase in the frequency of contacts with the other sex, pursuing independent careers, "love-marriages" are examples of radical revisions of traditional concepts and conventions. Not to be taken lightly either is the matter of gradual disintegration of the joint family and, consequently, the

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ensuing increase in the spawning of smaller nuclear family units. The traditional family is undergoing a series of as-of-yet incomplete transitions to a more modern and economical system of family relationships. The gradations have been propelled by several external and internal factors whose nature is not germane to our discussion.

FAMILIES OF INDIAN ORIGIN IN METRO TORONTO AND VICINITY

This report on the Indian community in Toronto will encompass many aspects of family life. General information regarding education, occupation, language, income will be touched on, while topics intrinsic to family life, such as living conditions and lifestyle, eating habits, relationships, religious beliefs, dress habits, social and cultural activities, school life and adjustment will be discussed at greater length.

The preliminary fieldwork for this report involved interviews with fourteen (14) families from various parts of India and from various linguistic and religious backgrounds. The sample obtained using the criteria of place of origin and religion portrays vast differences in education, occupation, and income. Education ranges from post-graduate doctoral studies to high school; occupation from a resource scientist to a clerk; and joint annual family income from the

\$10,000-\$15,000 range to the above \$30,000 range (see Tables 1, 2 and 3).

LIVING CONDITIONS AND LIFESTYLE

Living conditions are suited to the size of the family and range from 2-bedroom apartments to 5-bedroom detached houses with large front and back lawns. Family B, for example, has a 3-bedroom detached suburban home with a 2-car garage on a corner lot. Besides the usual chesterfield, love seat and footstool, the living room had an Indian rug, a stuffed African elephant foot in the form of a stool, East African wood carvings and a large fireplace. In general, the homes were furnished and equipped like any average middle class Canadian home.

With regard to lifestyle, most families own at least one car which is considered a necessity. Both husband and wife work in order to maintain their lifestyle. Only about 33% of the wives in the sample were housewives; they did not work outside either because they belonged to affluent families or because they had obligations such as child raising.

EATING HABITS

Eating habits vary according to the work schedules of the family members. In India, most families have breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner. Here in Canada, meal timings appear to have changed drastically. For example, in Family F, only

one full meal is prepared during weekdays, which is dinner. Breakfast and lunch are snacks from the refrigerator. During weekends, however, two or three full meals are prepared and they are usually something special.

Although some Indians have adhered to their original meal timings, a significant percentage in the sample changed to breakfast and dinner with two snacks in between. This is especially the case where mothers are also employed outside the home. In fact, often children prepare their own meals at all times of the day.

Only one of the Hindu families was strictly vegetarian and so was the Jain family. The other Hindu families were non-vegetarians and ate meat, including beef. The vegetarian families mentioned that vegetarian foods took a long time to prepare. This was true also of other kinds of Indian food, and for this reason many families had switched over to easy-to-prepare foods. It is noteworthy that the mothers in the vegetarian families were housewives and thus, presumably, had time to prepare a vegetarian meal.

The two Muslim families in the sample refrained from eating pork and drinking liquor. The time factor in preparing foods was present here as well. The Muslim husband of Family G complained that his wife rarely made "parathas" (flat wheat cakes) and Indian sweets because the preparations were time

consuming.

Some of the food preferences mentioned by Family F were pork or beef "vindaloo", "jungli pilau", "chow-chow" (a Burmese preparation), coconut rice with "koftas" (meat balls), specially prepared tomatoes stuffed with minced meat, crabs (lobsters), Chinese food and lasagna. The younger children mentioned hamburgers and milkshakes, fish and chips and fried chicken etc. Other foods include rice, beans, curry etc. Other families indicated similar preferences.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Religious activities have lessened considerably in the case of the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Jain families. This is probably due to lack of adequate or easily accessible places of worship. For this reason some of these families are members of Indian organizations which provide an opportunity for participating in religious and other social activities.

Some of these families do not belong to any particular organization but they attempt to adhere to the basic principles of their religion. Sometimes, the parents in some of these families are split on religious questions--one parent, for example, being a Hindu and the other having no religion. In these cases, festivals, prayers etc. become more and more infrequent. However, religious books such as the Bhagavad Gita for the Hindu and the Quran for the Muslim

were present on most family bookshelves.

It is only the Christian Indians, most of whom are Catholics, who have adhered to most of their religious practices. But, here again, some aspects of their religion have been dropped. All of them go to the nearest Catholic church every Sunday--or sometimes on Friday evenings so that weekends are free. However, morning and evening prayers and prayers before meals have been given up. The same is true for Mass on birthdays, the Rosary, Benediction etc. Novenas and pilgrimages are sometimes made to churches in Quebec for the granting of a wish. These serve also as a good excuse for camping, picnicking etc. Family A is especially religious in that the parents say a prayer before undertaking a journey and the family sometimes prays together.

It should be mentioned that in Family F, a Catholic family, the eldest son rebelled against some of the dogmas of his religion and now has his own set of values. The same is true also of some of the Hindu and Muslim children who now profess no religion.

RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships within the family have also changed considerably. With the wife supplementing the family income and the high level of education among the urban families, the sense of equality between husband and wife is widespread.

Feminism is quite popular amongst India's urban females and it is not surprising that in Toronto where most Indian families have an urban background this trend continues.

Relationships between the parents and children--father/son, father/daughter, mother/son, mother/daughter--have deteriorated considerably in some cases. The father of family H, for example, feels that he has lost a certain control over his children. There is no homework that he can supervise; education and the instilling of values is left up to the 'Blue Parent' and the school system. The parents are also apprehensive of some of the mannerisms and behaviour patterns that the younger children have picked up from their school environment.

There is no doubt that this geographical shift into different surroundings has created immense problems. In the case of family E, the mother's loyalties and nostalgia towards India and the father's rejection of his former country most certainly creates difficulties. The mother cannot quite comprehend the individualism displayed by her sons which embraces an aspect of Western culture--the T-shirt and jeans look--but which also rejects completely anything to do with her former country.

In family F, on the other hand, the son after being rejected by a section of Canadian society has rejected it in

turn and has taken an active interest in India and things Indian. The parents who are anti-Indian frequently rub the son the wrong way. He objects vehemently to any myth or stereotype about India.

There are other families in which differences occur, but individuality is stressed and filial love dominates. These conflicts will continue since children live in the parental home and form nuclear families of their own only after they marry. Since marriage usually comes after education, there is ample time for these differences of opinion to emerge.

Besides, education is one of the factors for the gradual erosion of parental authority. The accent of the parents leads to a lack of respect for the parents' views which leads in turn to a rejection of Indian values. The relationship between age and wisdom no longer holds and respect and obedience for one's elders diminishes.

Rebellion and misguided youth is alien to Indian culture and pre-marital sex--with the accompanying dangers of 'fatherless' children, unstable families and divorce--is frowned upon. The Western concept of dating and courting regarded in the light of these dangers is shunned by traditional parents. If the children disagree, conflicts arise again.

DRESS HABITS

Dress habits for the family have also undergone some change.

Depending on which part of India the family originated, dress pertaining to that region was worn. For example, the lungi in south India, the kurta and dhoti in Bengal, the shalwar and kameez by Muslims, etc. The sari was common to all parts of India. Girls did not wear the sari until after a certain age. They wore instead skirts and blouses for school and dresses when they went out. Most of the women in the families that were interviewed discontinued all articles of Indian dress except the sari which is regarded as the Western equivalent of the evening dress. The sari, thus, is used only for special occasions.

Some of the women who did not work outside the home retained the Indian dress. For example, the mother of family C, a housewife, still wore Gujarati dress. This change of dress was traumatic to some but this was compensated for by the lessening of the self-conscious awareness of drastic apparel differences.

The men, except for the Sikhs with their turbans, on the other hand, faced none of these problems. They wore Western style dress when they were in India and did not have to change their mode of dress after migrating.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

The social and cultural life of the Indian families revolves mainly around religion for those who still adhere

their religion. The organizations such as the Canada Hindu Organization, the Malayalee Samajam, the Jain Society, Marathi Bhasik Mandal, etc., which hold religious functions also arrange picnics, get-togethers and variety shows (Indian music and dance), show films and hold language classes in their respective vernaculars. The Bengali Cultural Association, for example, runs Bengali language classes, weekly Bengali radio programs and has organized four multi-cultural functions over the last two years. The Bharathi Kala Manram organizes Karnatic Music concerts and Bharata Natyam performances. Tamil, Telegu and Malayalam language movies are also screened on a regular basis. Kannada Sangha places emphasis on celebrations such as "Ugadi" festival, "Ganesha" puja and Nadahabba. It also proposes to start a library. Marathi Bhasik Mandal, using both local and imported talent, organizes musical evenings, plays and traditional religious festivals such as Ganapati Puja and Diwali. It also organizes picnics, sports meets and some children's classes in Marathi for second generation Canadians.

Indian restaurants and Indian movie theatres such as Paradise, Donlands, Naaz, Veena, Regal, Weston and Parliament are visited occasionally. Indian newspapers, magazines and books are read and Indian language radio and television programs are listened to. In addition, there is close contact between relatives and friends; there are get-togethers at

least weekly.

Places of interest in Toronto, such as the Metro Zoo, Harbourfront, Ontario Place, Centre Island, the Ontario Science Centre, the Royal Ontario Museum and the McLaughlin Planetarium, have been visited. Most of the children have dabbled in typically Western/Canadian activities, such as skating, skiing, ice hockey and baseball. Family F, along with relatives and friends, rent a rink in order to play ice hockey. On ~~summer~~ weekends, a school field is expropriated by family F's friends and relatives for soccer.

SCHOOL LIFE, ADJUSTMENT AND INTERACTION WITH CANADIANS

The last topic that will be discussed will be in the area of school life, adjustment and interaction with Canadians. Most families interviewed felt there is a negative reaction towards India and Indians. This is reflected in the media and in the attitudes of Canadians. The media sometimes pounces on news items that would fit a certain stereotype about India and this perpetuates myths. Errors of omission are grave; India is constantly 'cows, carts and dirt'.

The brunt of this negative attitude is received by the East Indian community in Toronto. Frequently exclamations such as "You speak English very well!" are encountered. The implication behind this is that the East Indians in Toronto are ignorant of English and the person addressed must be an

exception.

The East Indians in Toronto are thus looked down upon. Considering their urban background and their ability to adjust to any new urban environment, this contempt is unjustifiable.

Indian school children also have had difficulties in adjusting to school because of uninformed attitudes. Due to a feeling of rejection and alienation, many children have been hesitant to participate in social activities such as sports, dances and school proms. Some avoided white Canadians, sought friends of the same background and created an island of friendliness, warmth and security.

For those students who are unable to obtain friends of the same background, isolation sets in and interaction is reduced to a minimum. Some of the good students thrive on this isolation and comfort themselves with a high level of academic achievement. Others are frustrated and depressed, which in turn affects their personal and family lives in an adverse way.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this exercise in outlining the many aspects of family life might well be questioned. The answer is very simple. Negative stereotypes regarding family life such as squalid living conditions, poor eating habits, 'smelly' food, squabbles in relationships, 'heathenistic' beliefs, poor

dress habits and a limited social and cultural life, often crumble under objective analysis. Although prejudices can never completely be eliminated, it is hoped that this exercise will prompt a deeper examination of attitudes toward Indian family life in Toronto and our perception in general.

TABLE I

Education of all the Members of Families Interviewed

pre-schoolers	pre-high schoolers	high school	under-graduates	graduates	post-graduates	vocational training	illiterate
6	10	12	11	5	1*	7	2

Total 55

* 1 Ph.D Deceased

Total Number Tabulated = 54

TABLE II

Occupation of Head of the Household and Spouse

clerical	housewife	professional white collar	professional blue collar	student	self employed	unemployed
2	4	8*	5	2	2	ø

* 1 white collar (lawyer/diplomat)
deceased

Total Number tabulated = 23

24 people (12 couples)

Total Sample (12 families)

Compiled by Ahmad Saidullah