



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 underwent tremendous changes during the last century. Amidst all sort of changes, the families continue to be a significant source of fighting vulnerabilities, and hence it is the focal point of intervention in social work and social welfare. The needs and challenges faced by families vary across the globe. In India also, the demands on professional support vary. 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 paper also highlights some of the strategies adopted in the Australian context that fits with the professional approaches.

Keywords: Family social work, new focuses of family-based social work, separation, single parenting, divorce and violence



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1. 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 underwent changes. The gap between the changes and the interventions are getting wider. Bridging this gap has to be the focus of social work responses.

There are many models, which are very useful in meeting the needs of changing families. Despite drastic changes in the family system, Indian families still believe in maintaining togetherness and emotional bonding between the kith and kin. Therefore, strengthening the bond among family members are being initiated by organizations and professionals (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 trend 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). However, the rapid changes in the roles and functions of the family can never be overlooked in professional interventions.

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Concerns of divorce, separation and single parenting in India are on the rise in recent years. This scenario calls for the practical and integral professional social work interventions. Though it is a difficult task in a heterogeneous country like India, it is high time to think of a firm 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 research in family interventions and implementation of programs efficiently. In developed countries, social workers implement family empowerment programs considering family as the foundation for a healthy community.

2. The changes in contemporary Indian families and social work response models.

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., 2009). This essential 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 during rapid socio, cultural and political changes. The family system contributes to the stability of culture and society in India. The trends in the urban areas seem to be supportive to more couples in a household and on the contrary, in rural areas, 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 the upbringing of children. Families perform many roles, including that of socializing individuals and integrating them with the community.

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 are 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 an 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: growing instability, lack of communication, changing the attitude towards sex, changing roles of couples, and tensions of high-paced life. These challenges have distorted the family values and created tensions and breakdowns in the family system. '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 percent of these figures represent divorces in the age-group of 25-35. In Kolkata, divorce cases have gone up nearly 200 percent in the last few years' (Shefalee V. and 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 of the fact that the institution of marriage is in trouble or it is not able to maintain the high expectations 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 remarriage means that people are sacrificing their marriages because of unsatisfactory relationships' (Singh, J. P., 2012. p.7).

Though some of the literature cites some reasons like women empowerment, lack of family values, weak bonding between partners, adjustment problems, increasing cultural divides between families, all agree to the notion that the cases of interparental conflicts are on the rise in India. Domestic violence and interparental conflicts leave children at risk and vulnerable to psychosocial problems. 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 (as cited in Van Rooij, F. B., W. A. Van der Schuur, M. Steketee, J. Mak & T. Pels, 2015) . 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 results in emotional unavailability of mothers to their children and degenerate positive family functioning, which is the crucial protective factor in the development of children.

2. The aftermath of separation/ divorces in Indian families

'Desertions and separations/divorces are increasing in India today. Not much attention has been paid to how deserted and separated women live, often with their children. In addition to that, the rights and entitlements women must-have in the marital home has to be explored. 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 little 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 their life to excel and end up isolated from the society and community in most of the cases. Singh (2013) 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 matters of less priority. Those matters need scientific help and professional assistance to meet and make oneself adapting to the changes.

One of the most significant changes in the total family system is the increased number of divorces and single-parent families. Professionals are posed with questions such as: How do children adjust to the changing families? What are the areas they are at risk? Social workers who work with children and families are definitely at 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 severe 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 the 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 rootlessness and lack of identity. At the same time, 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 sorts of violence and inconsistencies in India. This is very crucial as families are the central 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 the lack of a support system to homelessness and absolute poverty. In the broken families, the rights of the

elderly are neglected, and emotional distress is 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 primary 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 women seek such support more than men. However, 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 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 organizations, 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. However, 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 on 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, many others are vulnerable to emotional, physical, social and financial abuses. The women, children and the aged are most susceptible to further abuses. In contemporary society, 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 the 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. An example cited in the educational video by 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 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 to deal with most of posing problems of the families. This can meet the emotional, physical and social needs of the members in the family. One of the helpful methods to deal with relationship problems in the family is convincing the members that even more excellent 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). In addition to that, the Common Wealth of Australia (2007) also suggests that families must have realistic expectations, communicate well, listen, enjoy together, show affection, and take care of each other. It also suggests valuing each other's differences, understanding the feelings, and respecting the partner's opinion. As a result, even if there are incompatibilities, it can be managed effectively using own support system or with the support of professionals (CommonWealth of Australia, 2007).

Conclusion

In conclusion, Indian family system undergoes radical changes. The issues found only in highly industrialized societies are found common in urban as well as rural areas of India. However, lack of professional support to cope with the adversities push the vulnerable sections of people to the margins, and they suffer in silence. Domestic violence, separation, divorce, single-parent families, increased number of elderly people and parental conflicts are the factors that worsen the sufferings and those factors need to be addressed scientifically and professionally. The focus of intervention starts with building positive relationships in the families. Then, it has to be progressed through handling separation, divorce, emotional adjustments, responding to the needs of the children and elderly in the family. This may demand an approach that meet the contemporary challenges without compromising the fundamental values of the family system in India.

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