India’s need for a strong authority figure today can be traced to the crumbling of the joint family

What singular change in how we live has affected the sum totality of Indian life more than any other over the past century or more? The answer to this – the end of the joint family system – is almost banal, and unsurprisingly all too familiar to traditionalists and progressives alike.

The joint family system was a thick network of patrilineal (and occasionally, matrilineal) bonds that governed all aspects of an individual’s life – from pre-natal care by aunts and older relatives to endogamous cross marriages among distant cousins to end of life assistance offered up by an archipelago of direct or indirect descendants. By now, however, thanks to contraception, nuclear families, and even State policy – the children of those born under the One Child policy in China fail to understand what an ‘uncle’ or ‘aunt’ means – the density of those affiliations have attenuated. The end of the joint family meant the vanishing of words in our vocabularies that not just delineated relationships, but also allowed individuals to find a place in the hierarchy of social relationships.

Closer home, upon reading M.T. Vasudevan Nair’s Naalukettu (a magisterial novel about the end of old household) – writing that purportedly brought tears to generations that came of age in the 1960s-70s – one is struck by a sense of the absurdity of it all. One might be forgiven for asking why they were fussing about living togetherness, and along the way, suffering, agonising, loving, sharing their small victories and doling out large humiliations to each other?

While traditionalists decry the fraying of social bonds, the decline of social capital and the rise of loneliness, others rightfully see the end of the joint family as a celebratory moment when individuals emerged from communitarian bonds. Women escaped, to a large extent, the tyranny of socially enforced roles and expectations; while men found the freedom to sidestep their roles as a permanent understudies to an older relative. For generations of anthropologists and economists, the rise of the West and the improvement in material life are intrinsically tied to the emergence of the ‘individual’.

**Fragmented ties**

The reasons for the fragmentation are manifold. What is, however, common is that the rise of the conjugal couple freed from familial networks is a move towards the simplification of these networks. Yet, one realises from the works of provocative French sociologist Emmanuel Todd that “the family has evolved from simple to complex and not from complex to simple.” What he means is that the evolving quasi-nuclear family of today was the original arrangement of man as hunter-gatherer; the complex family structures we saw up until recently were linked to the rise of agriculture. Thus, what we see now is a reversion to a pre-historic form of social arrangement.

What followed, however, in the three millennia of agriculture-driven social arrangements was specialisation in labour, lowered status of women, bequeathal mechanisms that included primogeniture, non-egalitarian social and economic arrangements (from caste to feudalism).

**Familial structure**

More profoundly, it also birthed psychological templates about how extended family structures, communities, and ultimately society ought to be organised – these were always hierarchical, often violent, and sometimes deadly in order to signal purity or loyalty.

The familial structure, thus, often unbeknownst to the individual, became the fount of ideological understanding of reality itself. When peasants and farmers get progressively educated, they are exposed to conflicting ideas, and the hierarchies they belonged to previously are destabilised. Inaction due to low-intensity conflicts become the standard response. The natural efforts to resolve this stalemate inevitably leads them to familiar authoritarian structures to expedite collective action.

We have seen this time and again in the past 150 years – this quest for authoritative action is agnostic to Left or Right – starting from the USSR, Germany, Italy, and Japan in the early 20th century, Turkey in the 1930s, China in the mid-1920s, East Asia in the 1960s, the Arab world from 1950s onwards. India too is no different. The long social transition that began visibly in the 60s and 70s is now merely accelerating. As the psychological certainties offered by an agrarian family structure weaken, the lure of a strong authority figure who will cut through the stasis rises. The result is that an India with dreams of reordering the present will find more admirers. A society of sheep who await a wolf to lead us into the future.

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