

## THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS VALUES IN THE SOUTH INDIAN FAMILY STRUCTURE IN WEST MALAYSIA

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In many societies, religious values play an important role in the formulation of family systems. Often these religious values are inextricably woven into the concept and fabric of family life. In West Malaysia, about 80 per cent of the Indian community is made up of South Indian Tamils, where Hinduism is the predominant religion. The basic aim of this paper is to analytically examine the role of Hindu values in the family structure of this community. In the contemporary context, the relevant religious values often have roots of origin in traditional models. Therefore, this paper will attempt to discuss the influence of religious values on family structure, both in the traditional and contemporary settings. A parallel theme in this paper is the notion that religious values cannot be studied in isolation from other salient values impinging on family life. Hence there must be a unified attempt to analyze religious values, together with the social, economic and political values, which not only co-exist but often influence each other.

### The Methodology

The data for this paper was obtained from historical references, ancient literary and religious writings, and a contemporary study of family structure among the Indian working class in West Malaysia. The historical and religious works are crucial in reconstructing the role of religious values in family life as it originated in ancient India and in providing a historical overview of the position of religious values, leading to the contemporary situation in West Malaysia. The Indian working class which constitutes the major part of the Indian population in West Malaysia is differentiated in terms of the urban and plantation environments. Two studies were conducted, one among the urban Indian working class in 1978 and the other among Indian workers in the plantations in 1981, to obtain data on family values and structure. The fieldwork for both studies was conducted with the use of questionnaires and participant observation techniques. The sample was divided into male and female workers. A total of one hundred respondents were selected for the urban context and sixty were selected from the plantation environment.

### Some Basic Concepts

Before an attempt is made to discuss the role of religious values in Indian family structure, the two basic concepts of 'religion' and 'values' must be clarified. The concept of 'religion' has been exposed to much interpretation and discussion. It is indeed a difficult concept to define. Nevertheless H.M. Johnson has come up with a fairly explicit definition.

"A religion is a more or less coherent system of beliefs and practices concerning a supernatural order of beings, forces, places or other entities: a system that for its adherents has implications for their behaviour and welfare: implications that the adherents in varying degrees and ways take seriously in their private and collective life". (Johnson, 1960: 392).

The concept of 'value' is an equally difficult one to define. However, C. Kluckhohn has come up with an explanation that is compatible with that of the concept of 'religion'.

"A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action" (Kluckhohn, 1951: 395).

It must be stated here that these two definitions of 'religion' and 'value' have been selected to facilitate a sociological analysis, rather than one which might incline more towards a theological or psychological perspective.

### The Traditional Perspective

In traditional India, family structure is closely tied to religious values. As in all other traditional societies, religion legitimises the family structure. First written evidences of models of family life are found in Hindu texts and early literary works. In these works there is a given set of values, which are related to the family. As such, the evolution of the Indian family structure has its roots in Hindu religion. One basic factor here is that, unlike in Christianity or Islam where there is one major religious text, Hindu principles are embodied in a variety of texts. Furthermore in India, there is a northern and southern religious tradition. However a core set of basic religious values influencing family life in general, can be identified. An important point to note at this juncture is that, as in all religions, Hinduism too embodies a set of internal values and a set of ritualistic practices. These comprise the inner and external elements of Hinduism. The rituals are often subject to change and modification but the core values are held to be eternal by believers. It is crucial to understand this difference, so as to avoid needless arguments on the variances in ritualistic practices of the Hindus.

Hinduism emphasizes that man's ultimate aim in life is to achieve spiritual liberation or *moksha*. However since not all individuals are ripe for this liberation in a single birth, a set of duties or *dharma* is prescribed to aid the average man in his march towards God. The very notion of family life is prescribed as one such

duty in the Hindu philosophy of stages or *āśramas*. According to this principle, an individual, particularly a man, must pass through four stages of life, namely:—

- (i) *The Stage of Celibacy* — This stage marks that of the bachelor who has to practise celibacy and undergo rigorous academic and spiritual training.
- (ii) *The Householder Stage* — The bachelor now has to enter the stage of family life. He has to marry and perform his duties towards his wife and children.
- (iii) *The Hermit Stage* — In this stage, the householder retires with his wife to a forest or some such place to live as a hermit. This usually takes place after the children have grown up and settled in a life of their own. This stage marks a life of prayer and meditation.
- (iv) *The Ascetic Stage* — This is the final stage of the ascetic who renounces all worldly ties and goes in search of spiritual liberation.

Thus family life and its duties are a legitimate part of an individual's life. Each stage of life has a set of accompanying duties which must be executed to the best of an individual's ability. The institution of the *āśramas* was based mainly on the principles of renunciation or selflessness, not self indulgence. Even in the stage of the householder, enjoyment was subject to duty and service. While this conception of stages has often been accused of being a northern-based principle, the concept of duty itself is a more generally accepted value of Hinduism. A quote from the writings of Saint Tiruvalluvar who resided in South India around 2–3AD, would suffice to elaborate the existence of this principle even in South India.

“The one who leads an ideal household life upon this earth, should well be deemed indeed as one of heavenly gods of worth”. (Balasubramaniam, 1962. *Tirukkural*. Ch. 5. couplet 50).

In traditional times, religion influenced not only the concept of family life but every intricate aspect connected to it. There were values for all roles and corresponding duties within the family. The basic conception of family life in ancient India was based on the joint family system with strong patriarchal overtones. The joint family consists of a few generations of male members and their dependents living under one roof. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, there is evidence that Rāma and his brothers lived jointly right down to the time of their death. In this context, Rāma being the eldest brother was the head of the family. This is a supportive family structure with built in elements of welfare considerations. Basic values of caring for kin members, the aged and widows were an integral part of

the family unit. Men were the authoritative heads of households and their main duties were providing and caring for all the family members. The first and foremost duty of a wife was to serve her husband. She had to respect and obey her husband in all situations. At all times, the wife had to practise chastity and be loyal to her husband. The position of a wife in traditional India can best be summed up in the following verse.

“Indeed if but a wife could serve and worship her own spouse,  
She will be honoured greatly in the heaven, the angel’s house”  
(Balasubramaniam, 1962. *Tirukkural*. Ch. 6. couplet 58).

Within such a religious framework, children were an essential part of family life. In this respect, sons were considered a greater blessing because they had a crucial role to play in the family. Sons inherited the family property and had control in the family. Furthermore a son has a key role to play in the funeral rites at the time of his father’s death. Finally it is through him that the family name is carried. Next to the parents, the eldest son commands the greatest respect and obedience from other members of the family. Generally children were taught to respect and hold their parents in the highest of esteem.

“The mother and the father  
Are the first gods  
That children know”. (*Koṇṇrai Vēntan*, verse 1, In White 1975:29).

Correspondingly the parents too had a responsibility towards their children, where there were specific duties to be performed. The socialization of children was linked to religious values. Children were taught to pray and love God above all else. Alongside this, they learnt the values of cooperation, unselfishness, sympathy, gratitude, regard for elders and self sacrifice. Such religious values within the family emphasize the patterns of worship, cooperation, sacrifice and above all a sense of duty. For every individual in the traditional family structure, there was the need to curb individual aims for family needs. In all this, there was a built-in call for reciprocity with regard to these religious values and practises from all family members.

The traditional Indian family structure was organized and sustained with the basic value of ‘duty’, enmeshed in hierarchical frameworks. The role structure in this context has a stratification of its own. Each individual within the traditional family structure is urged to perform his duty and implicitly accept the authority of the individual in the higher position. In the traditional family structure religious values sanction the position of men to be higher than that of women and the position of elders to be higher than younger family members. Sex and age

are the two major factors used to create the power structure within the traditional family structure. The concept of authority which is deeply embedded in familial functions and roles, becomes an inalienable part of the inner order of the family. In the traditional family structure the morality of duty which is sanctioned by religion gives weight to authority.

In traditional India, religious values were not segregated from other structures in society. Religious values were all pervasive and interlinked to other structures in society. The familial structure was interlinked to the economic and political structures. The main economic mode was subsistence agriculture. As such productivity was linked to attaining the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. The excess produce, if any, was often used for ceremonials, marriages and other such functions. There was therefore no element of strong competition or material accumulation. The one negative element could be attributed to hoarding in order to acquire material status in society. However, generally family members worked on the land jointly to reap mutual benefits. They lived in joint families to prevent the division of property, which was a male right. So women were placed under the authority of men in the family and wives came to live in the households of their husbands. Women had to practise chastity at all times to maintain the legitimacy of patriarchalism. Hence economic and familial structures are enmeshed together.

The familial and economic structures were in turn linked to the political structure. Politically the king was considered the head of state. A number of positive qualities such as benevolence, justice and reciprocity were attributed to the king. The authority of the king was legitimized by religion, whereby the king was seen as a 'divine ruler', chosen by God. Whether this was acceptable or not, the strategy utilized to obtain loyalty was fairly effective. However, the nature of this political authority in a traditional society is diffused.

"Such is the tendency of monarchial power to become submerged in the whole ethos of patriarchalism that the power of the king seems to its subjects as but little different from that exercised by fathers over sons. . ." (Nisbet, 1966:108).

It becomes evident that the family, economy and polity were inextricably connected. The religious values in the family could be practised because there was minimal conflict with the economic and political values in traditional India.

### **The Contemporary Perspective**

In the contemporary scene in Malaysia, the role of religion in family life is still fairly strong among the Indian community both in the plantation and urban sectors. This is evidenced by a number of features in Indian family life. Over 98 per cent of the respondents in both the urban and plantation sector stressed the im-

portance of marriage and family life; when asked to give an explanation for this, majority of them claimed that this was what religion prescribed for them. They even went a step further to emphasize that monogamous marriage is still a value which is desired and encouraged. It was found that marriage, while being an important value was especially crucial to women. Majority of the respondents held the view that while men could remain single, it was indeed an unfortunate situation for a woman to be in. This is closely tied to the belief that a woman must always have a male protector and guide. In the early stage of her life she is protected by her father, then her brothers and finally she is entrusted to the care of her husband. Closely connected to this is the notion that only through performing her duties as a wife, a woman can achieve spiritual liberation. Thus an unmarried woman is assumed to be unfulfilled, both socially and spiritually. In contemporary Malaysia, it is this same anxiety that forces Indian parents to arrange the marriages of their children, especially their daughters. In both the urban and plantation contexts, majority of parents still arrange the marriages of their daughters.

Once the family unit is set up, a number of expectations are called into play. In a majority of these families in Malaysia, the husband is still expected to be the authoritative head of the household. Women are expected to play a more submissive role in the family, even though in numerous cases they are also fully employed in the economic sectors of society. The male-female hierarchichal role differentiation is often tied to the religious value of duty within the household. As a result, women still have to sacrifice a large part of their individuality to familial role expectations and duties. However this is one major area where conflict is evident between religious values governing role structure in the family and some new values generated in contemporary society.

In the field of child socialization too, a number of religious values are found to be influencing emerging structures. Most parents expressed a preference for the first born child to be a boy. This, they claim, is in accordance with the belief among Indians that the first born child should be a boy. This belief which is closely tied up with Hindu values was supported in another study carried out in India by Kapadia (Kapadia, 1966:219). The crucial role of male children in the funeral rites, particularly of fathers is a factor which influences the preference for male children.

In the general socialization of children, some social distance is maintained especially between the fathers and their children. This is due to the fact that the father is seen as the authoritative head of the family. Thus children are taught the key values of obedience and submission to parents and elders. The respect for authority is instilled at a very young age and this discourages the ability to critically assess any form of authority in adult life.

In these families, the majority of parents tended to stress that the most important goal in life for their children is to live a 'good life'. This notion of a 'good

life', encompasses a number of moral imperatives. These were outlined as follows: one must not steal, one must not tell lies, one must respect elders, one must work hard and generally be of good character. Embedded in these are the broader values of duty, honesty, cooperation and self-sacrifice. Such a goal centres around the character development of individuals, rather than on tangible achievements. The influence of Hindu values in the pursuit of such a goal is undeniable. Hinduism propogates the development of a strong moral character as a prerequisite to spiritual progress. Compatible with such a conception are a corresponding set of duties, where, for example, it is the children's duty to support their parents in old age; it is more important in life to think first of the wellbeing of your family rather than yourself; that women should serve men and that children should always respect their parent's wishes. All these are held together by the belief that God determines everything in life, as such, one must accept and perform his duties well.

In the Indian families in contemporary Malaysia, family worship and temple-going is still practised. Many homes have an altar or place for worship, where every family member is encouraged to pray daily. In most families too, an auspicious day is set aside in the week for a visit to the temple. The womenfolk are the ones who play a greater role in these religious affairs and many of them undertake fasts for the benefit of their families. In addition to this, a number of religious customs are still held in high esteem by the members of the Indian community. Marriages, funerals, birth of children and 'coming-of-age' ceremonies are often marked with religious rituals and significance. Major religious festivals and auspicious days are still observed by the majority of Indians in Malaysia.

Thus it becomes clear that certain core values of religion are still being perpetuated in the Indian family structure. The influence of these values is felt fairly keenly in family life, where, for example, kinship ties are still strong even though the practice of joint family living has given way to extended and nuclear families. However, a number of discrepancies and conflicts are emerging in the practise of religious values in family life, mainly as a result of changes in the economic and political structures when compared with traditional times. Many of these changes in society conflict directly with certain basic religious values.

One classic factor is the change from a subsistence type economy to one where the concept of capital predominates. This mode of production utilizes labour power to create more capital. In contemporary Malaysia, this economic mode operates both in the plantation and industrial sectors. This type of economic structure is hardly conducive to a state of cooperation and peaceful co-existence. Capital accumulation becomes the primary concern, where the corresponding values are competition and materialism, which in turn conflict with basic religious values such as cooperation and self sacrifice. A more concrete example would be that this type of an economic structure encourages the emergence of smaller-

sized-families. The very notion of joint family living is reduced to more conjugal based conceptions of family living. Majority of the Indian families in Malaysia today live in nuclear and extended families.

Another feature of the contemporary economic structure is that it has facilitated higher educational and occupational opportunities for women. This entry of women into the job market has created expectations and broadened traditional horizons. As a result there has been some disruption in the traditional role of women, as prescribed by religious values. There is often conflict between a wage-earner's role and that of the traditional wife and mother. Moreover, the acceptance of male authority in absolute terms within the household is indeed weakening as a result of these changes. There has been much controversy regarding the concept of authority in Indian families. Many have argued that authority and the ensuing power structure in Indian families, as prescribed by religious values, are indeed detrimental to the socio-economic development of Indians in contemporary Malaysia. Values, related to authority and sanctioned by religion, encourage the development of certain negative personality types. For example, children will develop personalities that are only conducive to the working-class environment. Trained to be submissive, they will lack independence confidence and other leadership qualities. Such a state of affairs is, indeed, detrimental to achievement motivation particularly in the economic sphere. Generally this could lead to apathetic sentiments in other areas of life like politics. The participation of women in various sectors of society too is hindered, as a result of such values of authority in the family. Thus there is conflict between such religious values and the notion of development in contemporary society.

Politically too, there have been certain major changes in the lives of the Indian community when compared with the traditional context. The majority of Indians who migrated to Malaya found themselves in a multiethnic, working-class environment. The British administration at that time did little to integrate the ethnic groups. The Indians and other migrants were brought in mainly for the economic function of providing cheap labour. Thus politically it would be a threat to the British if these groups were to integrate. As a result the 'divide and rule' policy was utilized to create much competition and distrust among ethnic groups. Even after independence in 1957, the government political policies have had to contend with such elements of competition and suspicion. Unlike traditional times, such a political structure is totally isolated from the religious structure of the Indians in Malaysia. In more general terms, such a political structure is hardly conducive to promoting the basic religious values for their own sake. Renewed religious values and activities among Indians in contemporary Malaysia can often be traced to the need for identity and belonging. These often border on the revival of certain ritualistic practises in Hinduism. A true religious revival should be linked to the belief in the core principles of Hinduism for its own sake.



Thus in the contemporary situation, it can be stated that while certain core values of Hinduism still influence family life, a number of other factors are weakening the overall influence of these basic religious values in family life. The economic and political spheres often pose other values and priorities which contradict and create discrepancies in the practice of these religious values. In conclusion, it can be maintained that, while religious values still influence Indian family life, their significance and relevance must be carefully examined in the light of new economic and political structures.

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