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Challenges Facing the Family in India

The Indian society is characterized by considerable cultural contrasts at regional or sub-regional level and also at the caste and community levels within the same region. Since India is a vast country with long chequered history, there has always been plurality of family types with varied local problems. However, it should not deter us from considering the subject at the macro level recognizing the fact full well that— it is hazardous to offer a generalized view of the nature and problems of the Indian family. Evidence abounds that there has been substantial rise in the level of both male and female education, degree of urbanization, per capita income, expectancy of life at birth, diversification in occupation and profession, opening of new means of livelihood, modernization and population redistribution during the last five-six decades. At the same time there has also been simultaneously marked rise in the incidence of separation and divorce, conflict between parents and sons and also between siblings, dowry, freedom of marital choice, dissolution of joint or extended family, child labour and prostitution in cities and decline in intergenerational solidarity within the family. Continuing massive poverty, illiteracy, bad governance of state and rapid rise in the total population are possibly the most potential contributors to persistence and intensification of problems of family in varying forms and degree.

For long the Indian society was characterized by preponderance of joint and extended family, but the nuclear family, same as elsewhere, is now the predominant feature of the Indian society. According to the current census of India (2001) reports, of all the households nuclear family constitutes 70 percent and single member or more than one member households without spouse (or eroded families) 11 percent. The extended and joint family or households together claim merely 20 percent of all households. This is the overall picture about the entire country, whereas in the case of urban areas the proportion of nuclear family is somewhat higher still. The available data from the National Family and Health Survey-1 of 1992-93 (henceforth NFHS) suggest that joint family does not make up more than five percent of all families in urban areas (Singh, 2004:137). With further industrial development and rural to urban migration, nuclearization of families and rise in the divorce rate and the proportion of single member household are likely to increase steadily on the line of the industrial West. The transition of family from joint or extended type to nuclear type has led to waning of some old problems and emergence of new ones. Now let us briefly dwell on the major problems that the contemporary Indian family is confronting. The problems of modern family are largely different from the traditional family system of joint or extended type.

Child marriage and polygamy

Marriage, especially among Hindus, has been a universal institution propped by the system of religious belief. It is viewed as a sacrament, and not as a contract. Besides being universal it is also an inevitable institution. Hindu marriage is a life-long commitment of one wife and one husband, and is the strongest social bond that takes place between a man and a woman. The matter of concern is not that the universality or inevitability of the intuition has got religious overtone, but the practice of pre-puberty marriage has been coming through the ages. It is indeed an archetypal institution of India. The young girls lived with their parents only till they reached puberty. Early marriage led to the problem of high fertility and also early widowhood because of high incidence of death rate. True, child marriages have been prevalent in many cultures throughout the human history, but they have gradually diminished with the rise in the level of urbanization, spread of secular education and modernization. Both the British Government and the subsequent governments of free India have taken several legislative measures to eliminate a practice which was potentially detrimental to the life and health of a girl child, yet the child marriages are still widely practised in different parts of the country.

According to the 2001 census, out of 593 districts in the country there are 190 districts where the singulate mean age at marriage of females is less than 18 years, which is legally the lowest prescribed age at marriage for females in India. Of all the marriages child marriage accounted for 6.5 percent in urban areas and 21 percent in rural areas at the 2001 Census of India. While the median age at marriage for both Hindus and Muslims is 16.7 years which is lower than all other communities by two-three years (NFHS-3, 2005-06: 165). The National Family Health Survey-3 (2005-06: 165) has also recorded that "more than one quarter (27 percent) of the Indian women age 20-49 married before age 15; over half (58 percent) married before the legal minimum marriage age of 18, and three quarters (74 percent) married before reaching the age 20." The persistence of child marriages implies that laws prohibiting such marriages are not so effective. The state machinery is not so efficient or successful in tackling such a serious social evil through legislative means. The law provides certain positive initiatives for the intervention of courts to prevent child marriages through stay orders. According to the 'National Plan of Action for Children 2005' (published by the Department of Women and Child Development, Government of India), a goal has been set to eliminate child marriage completely by 2010. A new law banning child marriage was passed in December, 2006. It is hard to speculate for sure as to what extent such a piece of legislation would be really effective in tackling the problem of child marriage. Traditions do not die so soon, especially in a society where illiteracy is quite widespread. Since more than one third of the total population of India is still illiterate, the chances of success are remote.

Most potent reasons behind the perpetuation of child marriage is the fact that virginity is considered to be the most essential consideration for marriage. In conservative Hindu societies, any form of premarital sexual intercourse is still frowned upon and is considered an act destined to bring great dishonour and disrespect to the family. It is practically impossible for a known non-virgin girl to find a partner from a traditional family, though there is no legal statute that explicitly requires virginity as a requirement for marriage. Hindus, especially of rural India, still strongly believe in the practice of endogamous marriages arranged by parents and other close kinsmen.

In addition to the practice of child marriages polygamy, polygyny in particular, has also been one of salient features of the Indian society. The polygamous males often derive support from age-old scriptures and mythological stories. Those who have no son from the first wife tend

to practise such marriages. The preference for son has been so strong because in a patrilineal society the son alone can continue the line of the family. Adopted son is no substitute. But the practice of polygamy, especially among Hindus, is on gradual disappearance with some exception of scheduled castes. Singh (1997: 7) has reported that out of 471 '265 of the scheduled castes (35.2 percent) allow polygyny'. However, it does not mean that all of them essentially practise polygyny. Under the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act, 1955 and its further amendment in 1976 polygamy has been declared void in law. The scheduled tribes are somewhat different from others with respect to polygamous marriages. While monogamy is the predominant form of marriage among them, there are a large number of tribes practising sororal polygyny and non-sororal polygyny (Singh 1997: 8). Currently polygyny is more frequent among Muslims than Hindus. Under the Muslim personal laws a male can have three living wives at a time. With the rise in the level of literacy the incidence of polygyny has, however, declined even among the Muslims. This trend is likely to persist in future.

Dowry and its dragnets

Dowry has become the most essential consideration for marriage of girls in recent years.[1] Initially it was prevalent in North India only, but in course of time it has gained social legitimacy all over the country cutting across boundaries of caste, community and region. Dowry has become such an essential consideration for marriage that rarely any marriage can take place without it. It may be regarded as a functional imperative for family formation in contemporary India. In a very rare case the demand for dowry is really eschewed. Marriage negotiations tend to break down if there is no consensus between the bride's and bridegroom's families regarding the mode or amount of payment of dowry.

The menace of dowry has become so severe over the years that the Government of India had to enact the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961, which was further amended in1986. The Dowry Prohibition Act applies not merely to Hindus but to all communities like— Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and others. Giving, taking and demanding dowry is a criminal offence under the Dowry Protection Act and the Indian Penal Code. Where any person is prosecuted for taking or abetting the taking of any dowry or the demanding of dowry, the burden of proving that he has not committed an offence shall rest on him. The giving, taking or even abetting to give or take dowry amounts to an offence punishable with imprisonment for not less than 5 years and with fine which shall not be less than Rs.15,000/- or the amount of value of the dowry, which even is more. Despite such stringent laws dowry is being increasingly practised throughout the country. It has assumed such an alarming proportion that the number of cases of bride-burning and bride-torture, both mental and physical, in law courts is rising, and the media are agog with ever-increasing number of such instances. Dowry has posed the most potent economic threat before the Indian family. The incidence of crime and corruption in public gets encouragement from the practice of dowry. Dowries often force parents to go into debt, and the amount that families must pay has been increasing over the years.

When the dowry amount is not considered sufficient or the expected demands are not easily met, the bride is often harassed, abused and tortured. The dissatisfied husband takes recourse to violence to show his displeasure with the marriage in order to extract additional transfers from the wife's family by threatening her with separation if new demands are not complied with. The woman, as a bride, is subjected to humiliation and brutal behaviour, because she is the softest and the surest means of extracting maximum amount of money or wealth from her parents to enhance one's economic position in society. Since the bride is helpless in her new home and physically so powerless that she cannot retaliate against the coercive tactics or actions of others (Singh 2005:

212-213).

The disturbing fact about dowry related violence is that it is not confined to any particular group, social stratum, geographical region or even religion. Rather, it is regarded as a universal phenomenon, cutting across all sorts of boundaries. The most disturbing aspect of it is that it is on continuous rise in the country. It has been often reported that like clockwork every 12th hour a dowry related death claimed to have taken the lives of over 20,000 women across the country between 1990 and 1993. It has also been reported that at least three girls are burnt for dowry related demands every day in the State of Karnataka. This may be taken as a matter of grave concern, since the incidence of dowry death is one of the typical problems of the Indian society (Singh, 2005: 199-220). It is not a matter of surprise that those who have got sons or greater number of sons than daughters tend to have developed vested interests in the perpetuation of such an evil practice.

Dissolution of marriage and remarriage of divorced and widowed
The dissolution of marriage has been quite uncommon and rare in India for a long time. In case of any crisis or threat to stability of marriage, caste, community, kinsmen, tended to have played a dominant say. Despite all these there has been a significant change in the views and attitude towards sanctity of marriage in the recent past, especially in cities. Marriage is no longer held to be a 'divine match' or a 'sacred union'. Now it is more like a transfer of a female from one family to another, or from one kinship group to another. The marriage is no longer sanctified as it was believed to be in the past, and is viewed only as a bonding and nurturing life-long relationship and friendship (Singh 2008: 100). Anyway, Indian marriages are still largely resilient and lasting, whereas in many developed countries they seem to break up for seemingly trivial reasons. Only one out of 100 marriages ends up in divorce here. These days divorce rates in urban India are, however, slowly mounting. Rising individualism, resulting from modern industrial development, causes break-down in the traditional institutions of marriage and family.

The Indian family is faced with a new kind of social and psychological constraints. The women, however, tend to be more concerned about their marriage than men and in case of a problem they are expected to go for counselling. They are expected to take the lead to resolve conflicts and when they give up the effort, the marriage is generally all over. Let me quote my own observation made elsewhere in some other context, "Remarriage of divorced or separated women are quite difficult. Morality relating to sex is so highly valued that every male wants to marry a virgin girl only. In the past Hindus demanded pre-nuptial chastity on the part of both, but now it is by and large limited to female only. In fact, both boys and girls try to know secretly about each other's pre-marital sex life. Virginity is regarded as the girls' greatest virtue and symbol of respectability. To the surprise of many, a married woman is described as a 'second-hand-stuff'— an expression covertly pejorative of women. Under the circumstances remarriage of women is so difficult that annulment of marriage is a very hard choice or option" (Singh 2008, 101-102).

For long Hindus believed that widows once married were incapable of contracting a second valid marriage, and the offspring of such widows by any second marriage were held to be illegitimate and incapable of inheriting property. The Government of India legalised and encouraged through legislative measures like the Widow Remarriage Act, yet the problem of young widows in India has not vanished. Currently widows account for nine percent of the female population and only 40 percent of them are over 50 years of age. This suggests that despite laws 60 percent of widows do not contract second marriage for one reason or the other. Dreze (1990) has contended that

the overall incidence of widow remarriage is as low as 1 in 5 or 6. Chen (2000) has reported that only few widows remarry in India. Within her sample of 562 widows, she has argued that the widow remarriage rate is about nine percent. The census data, however, have revealed that widow remarriage rate has been on the gradual rise, especially in towns and cities. Anyway, the problem of remarriage of widows continues to be serious one. When women are not treated as equal to men, such a marital pattern is not really unusual.

**Son preference and female foeticide**

The sex ratio of India's population, unlike most societies in the world, has been appreciably tilted in favour of males since long, which is clearly apparent from the available census data from 1871-72 onward. Census data have revealed that there had been a continual rise in the masculinity ratios for the whole of the twentieth century with some minor fluctuations (see Figure-1). Recognizing the fact that sex ratio is one of the important indicators of equity between sexes in society, low status of women, as reflected in poor care for female children and sex selective abortion, female infanticide and higher incidence of female mortality (Miller, 1981; Singh 2009). The fact is hardly disputed that unfavourable masculinity ratios are due to excessive female mortality during pregnancy, infancy and childhood and maternity. The women in Hindu culture have been placed at a very high pedestal in traditional scriptures, but in practice they seem to be quite marginalized in a real life situation. The recent National Family Health Survey-3 (2005-2006: 183) has recorded a higher rate of mortality for females (58) than males (56). Female children are often said to be subjected to discriminatory practices in matters of preventive and curative health care, more particularly in economically weaker sections of society. Such discrimination has led to an unexpectedly higher rate of mortality of female infants and children in major parts of the country.

Figure 1
Sex ratio (m/f) in India, 1901-2001
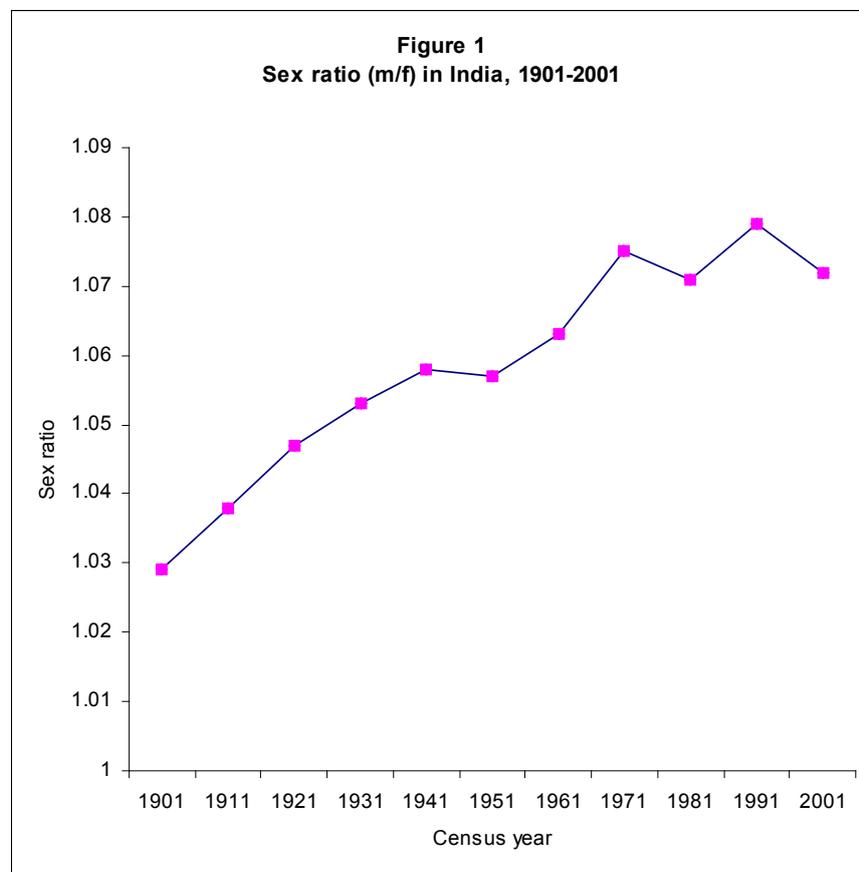
Source: Census of India (2001: 90).

Disregard for females obviously implies special regard or preference for males in society. In several studies it has been reiterated that Indian society tends to have a stronger preference for sons than daughters (Miller, 1981; Caldwell *et al.,* 1982; Singh 2009). The patterns of sex preference, however, vary appreciably across the country or regions due to variations in culture, socio-economic condition, local conditions or historical circumstances (see Figure-2). Families in India attach a very special value to sons because sons usually live with their parents after marriage and contribute to the family income. Sons provide vital support to the elderly or parents in case of illness, who often have no other source of sustenance or survival in their old age. Besides offering economic and social supports to the ageing parents, sons not only help their parents in improving their social image but also their ancestral line through their special attainments in life. Many parents try to realize unfulfilled ambitions of their life through their sons. This is a kind of familial mechanism of attaining a new social identity under the lately emerging scenario. As daughters tend to move away at marriage and transfer their allegiance to their husbands' families, parents can expect little financial or emotional support from daughters after they leave their natal home (Singh, 2001: 229-248). Daughters mean an additional disadvantage to parents— the obligation of paying her prospective husband's family a huge dowry. The rising practice of dowry and high costs of wedding have greatly undermined the value of daughters in Indian society in recent years (Singh, 2005: 199-220).

Figure 2
Son preference in India based on National Family Health Survey-3
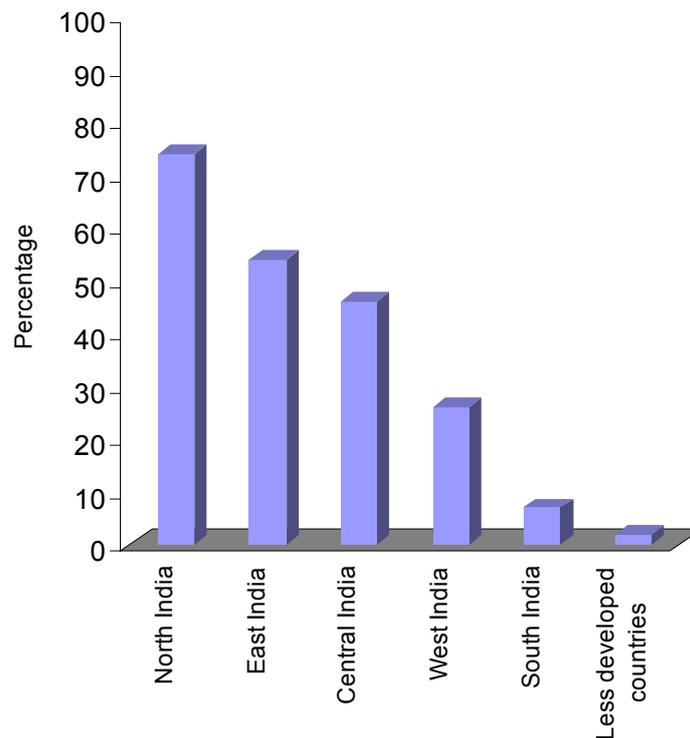
The financial liability of having a daughter prompts educated women with poor economic means to abort their pregnancies, if they are carrying a daughter. With the introduction of new technology such as amniocentesis and ultra sonograph for the detection of sex of the foetus, the practice of sex selective abortion, especially in northern and western regions of the country, has got further boost. Though the Government of India has passed laws prohibiting sex-selective

abortion, it has not been possible to control the practices effectively, as laws are poorly enforced in India. Inheritance practices that favour sons, better old age security from men than women and expensive marriage practices all contribute to the devaluation of female children. There is a whole range of variations in gender discrimination depending on education of parents, income, occupation, caste, religion, family size, birth order by sex, level of modernization, etc. (Singh 2009).

Gender inequality
On the one hand, Hindus boast of worshipping women as goddesses and their scriptures certainly bear enough testimony to the fact that women have always been worshiped here as goddesses, but, on the other hand, there is also ample evidence of killing women through the practice of female infanticide in the country since long (Miller 1981). As pointed out before, with the introduction of new technology such as amniocentesis and ultra sonograph for the detection of sex of the foetus, the practice of sex selective abortion or female foeticide is steadily becoming a serious problem, especially in urban areas. This is a clear case of gender inequality within the family. Inequality between men and women can take many different forms. The issue of gender inequality is one which has been publicly reverberating through the society for decades. The problem of inequality in employment being one of the most pressing issues today. Several legal reforms have taken place since Independence, including law relating to equal share of daughters to property, yet gender equality with respect to succession or right to property remains illusive.

Females of all ages are subjected to gender based discrimination. Discrimination against women starts the day she is born. There are numerous laws against gender discrimination and protection of women from the domestic violence, but the laws hardly operate in letters and spirit. There is a massive and clinching evidence of gender bias in different walks of life. With respect to the degree of prevalence of gender bias, India ranks 10th out of 128 countries of the world. The sense of insecurity, humiliation and helplessness always keep a woman mum. Our whole socialization process is such that for any unsuccessful marriage, which results in such violence or divorce, it is always the woman, who is held responsible. Cultural beliefs and traditions that discriminate against women may be officially discredited, but they continue to flourish at the grassroots levels. Family relations in India are governed by personal laws. The three major religious communities are– Hindu, Muslim and Christian each have their separate personal laws. They, as said before, are governed by their respective personal laws in matters of marriage, divorce, succession, adoption, guardianship and maintenance. In the laws of all the communities, women have fewer rights than that of men in corresponding situations. It is really distressing that women of the minority communities, especially among Muslims, in India continue to have unequal legal rights and even the women of the majority community have yet to gain complete formal equality in all aspects of family life. This is basically the problem of gender inequality.

Patriarchy and domestic violence
Violence within family settings is primarily a male activity. The prime targets are women and children. The women have been victims of humiliation and torture for as long as we have written records of the Indian society. Despite several legislative measures adopted in favour of women during the last 150 years, continuing spread of modern education and women's gradual economic independence, countless women have continued to be victims of discrimination and violence in the country (Singh 2002: 168). Domestic violence is a kind of assertion for the dominance of values of patriarchy. Women are subjected to violence to concede the superiority of men in society.
There are data showing that in India 33.5 percent of women age 15-49 have experienced violence.

Data have also shown that 85 percent of ever-married women who have received violence since the age 15 have experienced it from their current husbands (NHFS,2005-06: 498-500). These stark figures underline the fact that, although the home and community are places where women provide care for others, they are also places where millions of women experience coercion and abuse. A study of five districts of the State of Uttar Pradesh has revealed that 30 percent of currently married men acknowledge physically abusing their wives. Similarly, the multi-sectoral survey done by the International Clinical Epidemiologists Network (INCLEN) has reported that two out of every five married women reported being hit, kicked, beaten or slapped by their husbands. About 50 percent of the women experiencing physical violence also reported physical abuse during pregnancy (UNC 1997).

With the rise in the level of education, recognition of the notion of gender equality and legislative measures against domestic violence, there is some sign of abatement in gender related violence. Differentials in prevalence of violence by women's education are quite sizeable. The proportion of women experiencing violence declines steadily with education (NHFS-3, 2005-06: 498). Cases of domestic violence, like wife-battering and forced incest with the women of the household, are so personal and delicate that they are seldom reported to the police or law courts. Modernization has created dilemmas for family life. Under the new socio-economic urban milieu there has been a tremendous increase in the family violence.

With a view to tackling increasing violence in the family, the Government of India introduced a very useful Domestic Violence Act in 2005. This legislation is well placed in the Indian context and social scenario, clearly reflective of the mindset of the Indian men. The Act deals with various forms of abuse that were either not addressed earlier, or that were addressed in ways not as broad as done here. The Act is a very vital piece of legislation from the feminist point of view. Domestic violence is one among several factors that hinder women in their progress, and this Act seeks to protect them from this evil.

The Domestic Violence Act (2005) is an extremely progressive one not only because it recognizes women who are in a live-in-relationships but also extends protection to other women in the household, including sister and mother thus the Act includes relations of consanguinity, marriage, or through relationships in the nature of marriage, adoption, or joint family thus, 'domestic relationships' are not restricted to the marital context alone. In addition to physical violence of beating, slapping, hitting, kicking and pushing, the Act also covers sexual violence like forced intercourse, forcing his wife or mate to look at pornography or any other obscene pictures or material and child sexual abuse. Another good thing about the Act is the fact that it deals with domestic violence regardless of the religion of the parties, as many a time wrongs are perpetrated (ab)using the protection afforded by personal laws. It is thus secular in outlook in protecting women's rights. The new law also addresses sexual abuse of children and forcing girls to marry against their wishes. This certainly proves that the new Act has been formed keeping the current relationship culture in India and the irregularities in the previous domestic violence laws in mind. It is, however, too early to predict the usefulness of this legislation to its target beneficiaries and the society as a whole.

Large family size economic hardships
Available data on reproductive behaviour of the Indian people from differing sources have shown that there has been steady and appreciable decline in fertility during the last three-four decades, yet fertility rate of India continues to be quite high from the standard of not merely developed countries but from other standards too. The NFHS-3 (2005-06) data have recorded that the current TFR of India is 2.66, varying from 1.79 for the State of Goa to 4.00 for the State of Bihar. Hence,

the rate of population growth at the national level and more particularly of all the Hindi speaking North Indian states, which claim a major share of country's population, is quite fast because of a relatively quicker rate of decline in mortality than fertility rate. Continuing rapid rise in population has generated serious kinds of problems for the people relating to health, hygiene, education and general well-being both for the family as well as for the state. Rising pressure of population has encouraged crimes and corruption in public life too. In rural areas, the large family size has caused agrarian violence and extremism, further subdivisions of homesteads and land holdings among the siblings, leading to family feud and litigations in courts of law in many cases. With the rise in the family size the interests of elderly and female members have generally received some setback, particularly in the case of families where poverty was already at hand.

Yet another area of still greater concern is that people who have needed bigger reduction in fertility rate for their uplift have unfortunately recorded the highest level of fertility. Certain marginalised castes and communities such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes along with Muslims have always recorded a higher level of fertility than the national average of 2.66. For instance, scheduled tribes have recorded TFR of 3.12 as against 3.09 for Muslims and 2.92 for scheduled castes according to the NFHS-3 (2005-06: 78-84). As poverty and high fertility provide sustenance to each other, it is a matter of genuine concern for poorer families of such segments of society. The underprivileged families are embroiled in vicious circles of poverty and high fertility regime and a matter of still greater distress is that it is very difficult for them to get out of such an impasse. This not only causes threat to peace and prosperity of family generally but also creates hurdles in the process of development with equity, since they together comprise over one-third of the total population of the country. It is recognized that the transition from higher to lower fertility is indispensable for giving impetus to the process of gender equity within the institution of family. Sustained lower fertility in any society has always led to fundamental changes in the nature of women's lives and the general well-being of the family as a whole. The cost of irresponsible parenthood may loom very small at the familial level but definitely quite large at the national level.

Problems of too many children and child labour
Children (persons aged 0-14), who comprise a little over 30 percent of the total population of the country according to the 2001 Census of India, are increasingly becoming more vulnerable despite more proactive role of the state because of rising vulnerability of the institution of family. The manifestations of these violations are very varied, ranging from child labour and child trafficking to commercial sexual exploitation and many other forms of violence and abuse. With an estimated 12.6 million children engaged in hazardous occupations (2001 Census), for instance, India has the largest number of child labourers under the age of 14 in the world. Although poverty is often cited as the cause underlying child labour, other factors such as discrimination, social exclusion, as well as the lack of quality education or existing parents' attitudes and perceptions about child labour and the role and value of education need also to be considered.

The problems of children are so serious that thousands of children roam the streets of all the major cities around the country and receive neither education, proper food, clothing, or a bed to sleep in at night. Why are these children roaming and begging in the streets? What should be done and who is willing to do something to help these poor children? A mind and heart that cares, awareness presentations through multi-media, contributions, talking and sharing information among friends, education, self-help initiatives and good old fashion kindness are all that is needed to get these kids off the streets. Vagabond children number in millions in urban India who, in a true sense, neither belong to any family nor do they form any household.

While systematic data and information on child protection issues are still not always available, evidence suggests that children in need of special protection belong to communities suffering disadvantages and social exclusion such as scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, and the poor. It has been estimated that 46 percent children from scheduled tribes and 38 percent from scheduled castes are out of school. The lack of available services as well as the gaps persisting in law enforcement and in rehabilitation schemes also constitute a major cause of concern. The children of poor families, especially those of artists, craftsmen, and other professions are trained by their parents and elders of the family in their vocations such as weaving, tanning, sweeping, dyeing, hairdressing, painting, carpentry and agriculture. A vast number of children grow up lending a helping hand to elders in their home-industries. The practice of intergenerational transfer of traditional callings more or less is still continuing because of massive unemployment. Such kids who lack formal schooling, but working and specializing in some craft or their traditional callings help them build a career for their survival.

The demands of city life are such that both wife and husband tend to remain outside their home for work even at the cost of interests of their children. Working couples are unable to give proper care and affection to their children. Obviously, latchkey children of working couples are strangers to the sense of security enjoyed by their own parents. The system of surrogate mothers or the Montessori and Kindergarten systems of schooling has proved to be a very poor substitute for family as an agent of socialization. With the diminished role of family as an agent of socialization juvenile delinquency is on the increase. Because of rapid rise in population and consequent shortage of employment opportunities, children are put under great stress and stain to score high marks at schools to be able to meet the ever-increasing challenges of fiercely competitive world of education and employment.

Despite significant decline in fertility or lesser burden of children on the family, there is no improvement in the quality of care of children especially in rural areas. There hardly exists any pre-school or community centre in villages. There also does not exist even a basic facility of play ground for children. The older children have to mind the younger children at home and sometimes they are also expected to lend helping hands to their parents in the household chores as and when required. The poor children learn the expected roles of life of their own with the passage of time, while the well-off peasantry send their children to private schools (also called public schools in the Western world) in towns and cities for better schooling.

The problem of child labour is quite conspicuous to the naked eyes in India.[2] Its prevalence is clearly evident in the form of high workforce participation rate among children, which is higher than that of any other developing country. Poverty is the prime reason behind child labour in India. Unfortunately enough, whatever the meagre income they are able to generate is absorbed by their families. Child labour is extensive with children under the age of fourteen working in carpet making factories, glass blowing units and making fireworks with bare little hands. There are at least 44 million child labourers in the age group of 5-14. More than 80 percent of them in India are employed in the agricultural and non-formal sectors and many are bonded labourers, too. Most of them are either illiterate or dropped out of school after two or three years (Saini, 1994: 2; ILO, 1996: 7).

The exploitation of little children for labour is an accepted practice and perceived by many as a necessity to alleviate poverty. Carpet weaving industries, for instance, pay very low wages to child labourers and make them work for longer hours in unhygienic conditions. Children

working in such units are mainly migrant workers, who are shunted here by their families to earn some money and send it back to them. Their families' dependence on their income forces them to endure the onerous work conditions in the carpet factories. The situation of child labourers in India is desperate. Children work for eight hours at a stretch with only a small break for meals. The meals are also frugal and the children are ill nourished. Most of the migrant children who cannot go home, sleep at their work place, which is very bad for their health and development. About 70 percent of India's population still resides in rural areas and are very poor. Children in rural families who are ailing with poverty perceive their children as an income generating resource to supplement the family income. Parents sacrifice their children's education to the growing needs of their younger siblings in such families and view them as bread-winners for the entire family.

Children are also compelled to work as bonded labourers. They are trapped to grow in a hostage like situation for years. The importance of formal education is also not realized, as the child can be absorbed in economically beneficial activities at a young age. Moreover there is no access to proper education in the remote areas of rural India for most people, which leaves the children with no choice. There are thousands of bonded child labourers in India. They are also mostly the children of parents who belong to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Young children are sold to employers by their parents to pay back small loans that they have borrowed. Such children are made to work for many hours a day over several years. Often, child labour is considered to be a 'necessary evil' in poor countries such as India for the maintenance of the family. In that context, some consider it virtuous to give a job to a child. In fact, some academics and activists campaign not for the reduction of child labour but only for a reduction in the exploitation of children.

Bonded labour or slave labour is one of the worst forms of labour not only for children but also for adults. In India, bonded labour has been declared illegal since 1976 when the Parliament enacted the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act. However, the practice is still widespread. Children or adults are bonded in order to pay off debts that they or other members of their families have incurred. They toil all their lives and endure physical attacks that often amount to torture. The government has tried to take some steps to alleviate the problem of child labour in recent years by invoking a law that makes the employment of children below 14 illegal, except in family owned enterprises. However, this law is rarely adhered to due to practical difficulties. Factories usually find loopholes and circumvent the law by declaring that the child labourer is a distant family member. Also in villages there is no law implementing mechanism, and any punitive actions for commercial enterprises violating these laws is almost non- existent.

Increasing population of elderly
The family has started facing a new kind of problem of ageing which has resulted from a relatively faster pace of demographic transition. The incredible increase in life expectancy may be a big triumph of the 20th century, but it has posed one of the toughest problems before the 21st century India. Census reports have recorded that the Indian population approximately tripled during the last 50 years, but the number of elderly people had in fact increased more than fourfold. Based on the continuation of the trend, the United Nations has predicted in one of its reports that the Indian population would again grow by 50 percent by the middle of this century, whereas the elderly population is likely to have another fourfold increase in its size (UN, 2008).

It is estimated that during the next five decades the size of total population would grow by about 50 percent, while the number of older people would increase fourfold. The proportion of older people in the population would grow at a higher pace than the other groups. It is estimated that

the elderly people (60+) would constitute 20 percent of the total population which would be quite huge in terms of absolute number— 316 million (Table-1). The Indian policymakers must take a critical note of the rising trends of incoming age wave of older people and the declining trend of the proportion of younger people. Such developments would cause strain on the resources, following increase in more inactive people.

It is apparent from Table 1 that the Indian population would be gradually swinging to a greyer one by the next few decades. It is estimated that the median age of the population would increase gradually from 25 years in 2010 to 31.7 years in 2030 and, finally, to 38.4 years in 2050. Hence, every three working Indians may have to take care of one elderly person by 2050 as compared to about eight working persons at present. It has been estimated that an Indian of age 63 today is likely to survive about a decade more in 2050.

Table 1: Projected Age Composition of India's Population in Million, 2010-2050
(Medium variant)

Age groups	Year				
	2010	2020	2030	2040	2050
0-14	374 (30.8)	364 (26.7)	338 (22.8)	309 (19.7)	294 (18.2)
15-59	749 (61.6)	868 (63.5)	962 (64.8)	1011 (64.7)	1004 (62.2)
≥60	92 (7.4)	135 (9.8)	185 (12.4)	245 (15.6)	316 (19.6)
Total population	1,215	1,367	1,485	1,565	1,614

Median age (Yrs.)	25.0	28.1	31.7	35.3	38.4
Dependency ratio-Total	56	49	45	44	47
Dependency ratio-Child	48	40	33	28	27
Dependency ratio-Old	8	9	12	15	20
Life expectancy at birth	64.0	67.0	70.0	72.0	73.0

Figures in parentheses refer to percentages.

Source: UN, 2008, World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision, Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, http://esa.un.org/unpp.

Longer life expectancy and incremental dependency ratio will possibly strain the family and the state support system for the older people. Increase in individuals' age is usually followed by increased prevalence of chronic diseases and disability and hence the elderly population is taken as a big burden for the family, community and ultimately the entire nation.

In the past the joint family system not only provided a suitable umbrella to manage personal risks, such as risks of premature death and excessive longevity, but also laid down the norms of intergenerational relationships as well as the role of each member. The elderly played a significant

role in decision making regarding household matters, while the younger people were entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring well-being of their ageing parents. But these days in smaller families, they are gradually marginalized in the decision-making process. Hence, the family that traditionally took care of the elderly or sick, widows and orphans is beginning to rely on society as a whole. As the number of old persons is rising and the social environment is changing, the proportion of the destitute among them may also be increasing (National Human Development Report, 2001).

It is clearly evident from the NFHS-2 data that over 80 percent of the elderly people live with their sons, daughters or other kinsmen. An elderly person living alone does not constitute more than five percent, while the elderly couples living independently of any young person in the household is not more than 10 percent of the total households at any ages between 60 and 80 years. However, this scenario may not last very long because a similar set of data derived from the NFHS has recorded slightly lower percentages for elderly people living alone or independently of others in a household. As a consequence of the breakdown of traditional joint and extended families the elderly people are being steadily marginalized in society generally. Moreover, due to some habits and unhealthy lifestyles, the elderly people tend to suffer from tuberculosis, asthma, cancer, cardiovascular problems, etc., apart from the other gerontological problems. But the healthcare facilities for the aged people are not satisfactory.

It is high time that the Indian policy makers assess the impact of the forthcoming age wave. The process of pension sector reforms should be accelerated, suitable steps should be undertaken to build the required healthcare facilities and a suitable social security system should also be designed. If change is not effected, the family support system as well as the state-sponsored facilities may crash in the near future, thereby jeopardizing the well-being of elderly people. It may cause the emergence of a gigantic number of penniless, sick and elderly people in the streets and public places, as it has been observed in the Project Old Age Social and Income Security (OASIS) Report (Ahluwalia, 2001; Bhattacharya, 2002).

To sum up, the rise in number of single member household, break-down of the traditional joint family system, increase in cases of divorce, attrition of traditional family values, increase in number of working mothers and single parents in cities, rise in domestic violence and practices of dowry, neglect of children and elderly, and poor regard for family laws are enough indications of the danger that the family and ultimately the society are progressively facing in India. Now the family needs greater state support in the areas of child care, social services, income assistance and health services than ever before. In any case, because of rising individualism, competitiveness and openness in society and ever-increasing aspirations for higher attainments in life coupled with greater autonomy of individuals in society, an ideal family life may be a distant dream.

<u>Notes</u>
1. The practice of dowry has become the archetypal institution of modern Indian society. Being an important precondition, the process of dowry-giving or taking commonly precedes the actual ceremonization of marriage, and in some cases dowry and its problems also continue in one form or another beyond the actual event of the ceremony. To be capable of offering or meeting a big amount of dowry to marry one's daughter or sister, or to be eligible to ask for a hefty dowry for the sake of marrying one's son or brother is a matter of social pride. These days dowry is taken as an important indicator of the social honour of family in the community. The dowry has become a status symbol in view of the rising economic prosperity of the people (Singh, 2005: 199-220).

2.   Child labour is not child work. Child work can be beneficial and can enhance a child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development without interfering with schooling, recreation and rest. Helping parents in their household activities and business after school in their free time also contributes positively to the development of the child. When such work is truly part of the socialization process and a means of transmitting skills from parents to child, it is not child labour.

Child labour is the opposite of child work. Child labour hampers the normal physical, intellectual, emotional and moral development of a child. Children who are in the growing process can permanently distort or disable their bodies when they carry heavy loads or are forced to adopt unnatural positions at work for long hours. Children are less resistant to diseases and suffer more readily from chemical hazards and radiation than adults. UNICEF classifies the hazards of child labour into three categories, namely (i) physical; (ii) cognitive; and (iii) emotional, social and moral.

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