

Marriage and family as foundational institutions are becoming increasingly vulnerable

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Primepost, May 11, 2022

How social issues like family disputes with wider ramifications can be resolved without local initiatives in the village. *Sarpanch* irrespective of male and female has an opportunity to set example. Neither the Government, or political leaders or the legal system can be expected to be left with to come up with solution for such social issues. Left unattended for another twenty-five years the status of women would be two step forward and three steps backward.

Sixty years ago, Anthropologists S. C. Dube and M. N. Srinivasan have described and reminded relevance of family as a social institution nurturing the unique of Indian fabric. Of course, they also analysed caste system and trends in the structure of village. After withering away of joint family tradition decades ago, rise and fall of family has not received public attention as if it has shifted to politics, political parties and elections.

It is of course well known that family continues to determine the scope of marriage. Marriage system is what moulds, shapes and sets scope of many traditions and life and living and upbringing of children more specifically. The institution of family and marriage are two sides of same coin. They determine in turn the scope, stature and structure of each other. Individually and together they influence even economic structure and now even politics. The threat the two social institutions are facing today has far more consequence to the extent of threatening the very Indian society, culture, the fabric and social harmony. If these two as foundational institutions decay and decline what else distinguishes India from other countries and cultures?

Frequent Reports these days both in conventional mass media and social media on family relationships, like between parents, brothers, sisters, children, make one wonder what is happening and at this rate what is in store for India next two decades. So also and more pointedly is the very sanctity of wedlock. Is it not under questioning? Formal divorces even among newlyweds, or no sooner after marriage, are on increase. Then of course domestic violence, exploitation of women, etc. These all are on

increase and what is reported must be a fraction of such incidents at any time. Increase in educational levels indicate no difference in this regard. In fact, more recently the number of such legal cases are more among educated. The worst effectees are those with no education or awareness about rights, legal provisions and legal provisions and those with children.

Within a fortnight of stay in my village last month four cases, involving a girl, a wife, returning back to father, came to my notice. The situation is result of divorce or the process is on. Another case involves wife going back to parents ignoring appeals of husband and apprehension about in-laws. Continuing demand of money as dowry from wife is frequent reason for the girl ending up with parents. One case is where the girl was cheated with claims of the man.

Social media now, and film and television earlier, have been accused for triggering a trend of exploiting flame. In between, there are some legislative and administrative Initiatives. But on ground at grass roots they do not seem to be helping the victims. And that is unlikely to happen without local referrals or voluntary guides like senior citizens group as in Vijayawada which organises periodic camps in villages with practicing lawyers guiding parents as well as the victims who lost hopes.

This include those with a child left with parents in a village without telling the intention and taking diverse judgement from the court. I was shocked to see a judgement in one such case. It brings out in no uncertain terms how the law could gang up with a cunning husband. The judgement does not show sensitivity to even basics like the future of the child of one or two-year-old. The judgement ignores elementary questions presumably because the girl is from a village, belongs to a poor family background.

I'm surprised that there are no one in the village even where the *Sarpanchs* is a women to look into such cases languishing in the village in utter poverty or ignorance and lack of any moral support locally. In the earlier decades, I know such victims are first offered minimum help and the ways of resolving would be explored so that such disputes are resolved. Despite proliferation of the government in the village, no one seems concerned about such instances are on Increase. Neither of the officers or even elected ones consider this their worry. They think it is legal matter or it is for the family

to think even when the family itself in disarray. or unaware of options available for relief to the daughter and the child when there is one. Even local political leaders do not seem to realise the larger significance of such problems which obviously tell up on the standing of the village. When both the family and marriage institutions suffer, it tells on the harmony of the village. Also, the village has produced over the years some practicing lawyers even though they reside outside the village. The panchayat should seek their help. In fact, *Sarpanch* or someone should form a WhatsApp group of matrimonial victims.

In 2018, India ranked at 131 out of 153 countries on treatment of women. In 2020, on an average 76 were raped per day, 19 were reported dowry deaths a day and 305 per day on an average experience cruelty of one kind or other mostly from husband or in-laws. This is macro picture. In my village of about 1200 -1500 families, I estimated more than 25 prime age women or just married girls as victims in the last two years. In the newly established library of biographies in the village, I found nearly fifty biographies of women who under such circumstances how they coped, overcome and set examples to women in such odd circumstances. Reading such biographies could even offer a better option as I noticed in one case.

Why marriage registration is not compulsory irrespective of community of man and women. There is certain ambiguity about property rights of girls irrespective of marital status. Rights of wife even after divorce by the husband once after marriage registration are not known. Right of children in the property of the father irrespective of mother's marital status is another issue. Relief of family courts has been uneven; family court should have suo motto powers to initiate proceedings.

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(Dr N Bhaskara Rao is a longstanding analyst of public policy. He has over a dozen books to his credit. His forthcoming book is on "Direction of Villages...")

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