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Family Norms and Images in Transition

Contemporary Negotiations of Reproductive Labor, Love and Relationships in India

Nomos

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Introduction: Family Norms and Images in Transition. Contemporary Negotiations of Reproductive Labor, Love and Relationships in India

Fritzi-Marie Titzmann & Nadja-Christina Schneider

The family occupies a pivotal space in the reality and imagination of societies and individuals. Within the Indian context, the family holds a peculiar ideological symbolism in the form of a strong nexus of so-called family values and nationalism. Ever since attempts from the 19th century onwards to withstand challenges of colonial dominance and a subsequent erasure of indigenous culture and 'tradition', the private space of the home and family has symbolized a refuge of – however defined – 'Indianness' and an emerging national identity. While gendered norms and images change with political circumstances, the family remains a strong and highly contested symbol of national identity. The debate over meaning, acceptable family forms and role models is shaped by, and shapes, social, political, and technological changes. In contemporary India, the politics of post-liberalisation set the conditions for the envisioning, re-assessment, and propagation of family norms, in particular concerning representations of desirable and non-desirable relationships and the roles ascribed to men and women within the family and greater society respectively. Particularly with the rise of political Hinduism, the inherent tensions and contradictions between cultural-nationalist notions of the 'Indian family' and the multiple lived realities and ways of 'doing' family or kinship became more apparent. As is well known, a conservative, religiously defined and hierarchically structured family ideal is an integral component of the Hindutva ideology. Nonetheless, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government (since 2014), India witnessed amendments to existing laws and enactment of new laws that provide support to women, such as the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017 or the initiative *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* [Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter]. The political cooptation by the Hindu Right of discourses about 'gender justice' and 'female empowerment' has been mentioned and critiqued in feminist research but has hardly been a research objective itself.

Being largely dominated by a patriarchal lineage and family system, Indian society is witnessing changes as becomes evident in the increasing participation of women in the work force, the rise of a global youth culture that shapes the experience of new intimacies and media-related narratives of love and companionship. Technological innovation and increasing digitization do not only render new opportunities to forge relationships but also radically alter existing notions of parenthood, kinship and family. Assisted reproductive technologies, such as sperm donation, in-vitro fertilization or gestational surrogacy, allow for family formations of various kinds and with heterogenous actors, as becomes evident with newly coined terms like co-parenting, split parenthood or multi-parenthood. All over the world, the question what makes a family is currently being renegotiated and challenged by changing media representations, legal conceptualizations as well as social discourses and practices.

While 'alternative family models' can be said to have been a lived reality in India much earlier, it is interesting to note that they are now increasingly visually represented, for instance, in commercial advertising, literature or popular Hindi cinema. Accordingly, images of the family are highly contested on political, legal and media levels and these negotiation processes reveal contradictions, resistances, as well as continuities. In contrast to a substantial body of literature on the role of women within family and society, on marriage, and the construction of the ideal Indian family, other areas in family research are highly under-represented and show urgent research desiderate. All chapters in this volume provide insights into hitherto marginal aspects, but further fields of inquiry from normative and non-normative perspectives should encompass studies on singles and single parents, on disabilities, non-heteronormative families, and perhaps also a stronger focus on contested masculinity and male family members, as well as on ageing and on childhood.

In this volume, we attempt to widen the horizon and look at various shifts, ruptures and continuities in representations of contemporary Indian families from a media perspective. The medialization of family norms and images as well as the nature of romantic relationships constitutes our central approach that connects the different discussions in the chapters. The contributions analyze documentary and feature films, promotional material, such as

television commercials, visual campaigns, and the usage of new media technologies in communication. This volume initiates a dialogue between research on normative national visions of family and parenthood (see Titzmann in this volume) and non-normative families, as represented in documentary images and feature films on assisted reproductive technologies (see both chapters by Schneider in this volume) or in discussing familial conflict in mainstream Hindi cinema (see Bhandari in this volume). Internet-based applications and the recent smartphone revolution have radically altered negotiations of romantic relationships in contemporary India (see Strulik in this volume). By including perspectives on the pre-marriage stage of life, we look at visualizations of familial change ranging from split motherhood, new fatherhood, and dysfunctional families to intergenerational relationships.

In an ever-changing world, the family continues to hold a dual function of simultaneously symbolizing persistence and transformation. While the idea of the family as such will outlast political and social upheavals on global and local levels, the forms and ways of doing family and kinship will be further differentiated, contested and re-altered. Conceptualized as part of a larger discourse on family and social change, this book thus aims at contributing to an understanding of the current – ideological and lived – realities of the Indian family within the complex dynamics of continuity and change.

Chapter 1: Reframing Indian Fatherhood: Manhood, Responsibility and Patriarchal Hegemony

Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

Introduction

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been ruling India since 2014. Ideologically, the BJP belongs to the Hindu right-wing spectrum and hence represents a conservative, religious, and hierarchically structured family ideal. The Modi government's first term (2014-19) already indicated an increasingly repressive political climate that targeted the opposition in general, Human and Women's Rights activists, marginalized groups such as Dalits and Muslims, as well as left intellectual individuals and groups in particular. Right after their coming into power, predictions about the party's governing style differed from politically moderate to expecting a rapid development towards a Hindu chauvinist, anti-minority, authoritarian state. The former aggression was attributed to the purpose of winning the election battle.

When it comes to the question of gender equality and attitudes towards family politics, the BJP's positions are very ambiguous. On the one hand, the place reserved for women within Hindu right-wing ideology is demarcated clearly as inferior and located within the private sphere of home and family. On the other hand, as Poggendorf-Kakar (2003) has pointed out, the female Hindu goddess and the women warriors fighting for a resurrected Hindu nation are equally strong iconic figures. Interestingly, this ambiguity permeates the contemporary discourse on gender and family politics, too. The current BJP government initiated bills and campaigns within its first five years of power (2014-19) that can be interpreted as tools towards a more gender-just image of the Indian family. For instance, the BJP government propagates education and respect for daughters with its campaign *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* [Save the daughter, educate the daughter] (BBBP). It further strengthens an entitlement to paid maternity leave with the *Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act 2017* and has fostered a national midwifery-training program since December 2018 in order to improve Indian women's

birth experiences and lower the maternal mortality rate. In 2015, Modi emphatically endorsed a small grassroots campaign from Haryana and made *#SelfieWithDaughter* first a national, and consequentially an international success. The campaign embodies a remarkable trend of focusing on girls as India's potential future. Apart from strengthening maternal health, the emphasis on positive father-daughter relationships represents a novel trajectory of family ideology.

The government itself explains its interest in taking up such initiatives not with an endorsement of social change as such but grounds its approach in a rhetoric of social and economic progress or development. As stated in the *Annual Report on Family Planning*, a desirable decline in the national birth rate facilitates demographic stabilization, »which in turn spurs the economic and social progress« (MoHFW Annual Report 2017-18: 86). The Hindi term *vikaas* (development) featured prominently in Modi's 2014 election campaign.[1] It is thus questionable whether the intention is one of gender justice or an attempt to define the development of the family in rather hegemonic terms.

This chapter interrogates possible renegotiations of hegemonic and patriarchal gender roles of parenting within the context of this recent reorientation of gender and family politics towards a stronger emphasis on initiatives in terms of gender mainstreaming. It does so by analyzing two notable campaigns that are either directly state-sponsored or officially promoted by members of the BJP government:

1. A multimedia campaign initiated by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) in the context of the Family Planning Program which prioritizes »Mardangi [Hindi: manhood] and the involvement of men« (MoHFW Annual Report 2017-18: 93) among its prime themes.
2. The #SelfieWithDaughter campaign, which was initially a local intervention by an individual but later on endorsed officially by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The following analysis of the campaigns is also an interrogation of contested notions of gender justice in contemporary India, since

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1   One of his election slogans was *sabka saath, sabka vikaas* (literally in Hindi: Everyone's support, everyone's development). Narendra Modi's official website translates the slogan into »Collective efforts, inclusive growth«. See: https://www.narendramodi.in/sabka-saath-sabkavikas-collective-efforts-inclusive-growth-3159 (last accessed October 24, 2019).

#SelfieWithDaughter in particular drew a lot of criticism and thereby generated a heated controversy. This chapter juxtaposes the ideological trope of men as driving progress and development, especially in the context of gender and family relations, with critical arguments that locate the unchanged positioning of women as dependent daughters within the context of patriarchal structures that restrict women's individual subjectivity and agency (Hussain 2015, Phadke 2007).

I argue that the strategies of both, the MoHFW campaign and #SelfieWithDaughter, in similar ways aim at reframing Indian manhood[2] in a positive light by associating it with progress and familial responsibility, which in turn reflect on the image of the Indian nation itself. The current Hindu right wing government projects a certain vision of ideal Indian manhood, which relates to two 'new' role models within the family: the responsible and emancipated husband and the responsible and caring father. Contrary to the 'progressive' impression these campaigns leave at first view, I suggest they do not contribute towards challenging hegemonic masculinity in the Indian context but rather perpetuate patriarchal structures by concealing the existing power relations with superficial aspects of equality and female empowerment.

The following section explores trajectories of 'new' Indian fatherhood that prepare the ground for an analysis of the success and controversies generated by #SelfieWithDaughter. The MoHFW campaign did, to my knowledge, not cause comparable debates but serves as a paradigmatic example of the state's visualization of ideal male (and female) behavior with regard to family planning by highlighting responsibility and an awareness of national visions of health and progressiveness.

Towards 'New' Indian Fatherhood?

Despite a growing popularity of masculinity studies in the South Asian context, substantial research on contemporary fatherhood and images of Indian fathers beyond the discussion of changing 'traditional' gender roles and labor division within the family[3] is sparse. The discussion following the so-

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2   The author is aware of the existence of multiple masculinities, which include queer, homosexual and other marginalized masculinities in South Asia. Nevertheless, this paper focuses on the construction of heterosexual masculinity in the normative discourse of the Indian state.

3   For example, Pernau, Ahmed & Reifeld 2003, Mines & Lamb 2002.