



DISCUSSANT RESPONSE

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to Anil Sooklal's

**THE EROSION OF TRADITIONAL VALUES: THE BREAKDOWN OF THE JOINT-FAMILY
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HINDU COMMUNITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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RESPONSE TO DR A SOOKLAL'S PAPER

THE EROSION OF TRADITIONAL VALUES: THE BREAKDOWN OF THE JOINT FAMILY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HINDU COMMUNITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

The paper focuses specifically on the Hindu community in South Africa, in particular it examines the breakdown of the joint-family institution and the effect this process has for the community as a whole. The emigration of Hindus to South Africa formed part of a larger process of migrant labour from India to several countries during the mid nineteenth century. The first large scale immigration of Indians into South Africa occurred in 1860. Distinct from the indentured labourers was a second smaller stream of immigrants termed "passenger Indians", who entered the country under the ordinary immigration laws, and at their own expense. The majority came specifically to trade or serve in commerce.

The major proportion of the Indian population in South Africa is constituted by the Hindus, totalling about sixty percent. Moslems, Christians, Buddhists and a small Parsee community make up the remaining forty percent. The Hindus respond to a common religious call namely, Hinduism. In language they branch out into four groups i.e. Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and Telugu. Furthermore, the linguistic groups are distinctly defined in matters of detail in worship, religious rites, social customs, food and dress although there is considerable overlapping (Nowbath 1960:17).

The early Hindus in South Africa brought with them their culture and civilization, their religious beliefs and rituals, traditional practices and customs, music and art, language and dressing, fasts and festivals.

During the period of indenture, by virtue of the conditions of the contract and the controls that were exercised over the Hindu community it was not always possible for them to observe many of their customs and religious practices as they did in their native villages in India. However, they adhered to as many of their former ways of life as it was possible in their new environment.

The study of Hindu religious practices and community life provide researchers with an opportunity to examine the question of religious change. What happens to a tradition and its institutions when it moves to a new geographical and social location? How has Hinduism adapted in its meeting with the South African way of life? Has it remained unchanged? Has it been engulfed by other ways of being? Has it developed new forms? In terms of the antiquity of its traditions Hinduism in South Africa is a relatively new phenomenon. Nevertheless in considering some aspects of its institutional expression in South Africa we are able to examine the process by which it determines its future in a new context (Knott 1983:1).

Any religious culture in a foreign context can be expected to experience certain difficulties. The paper postulates the hypothesis that the institutional forms of Hinduism of which the joint family system is an integral component has come under severe pressure due to a variety of reasons, viz. social, political, economic and cultural. It is important to re-iterate that by the erosion of the joint family system one of the major institutional forms by which Hindus used to identify themselves has been considerably weakened.

The paper rightly postulates that the institution of the family as it finds expression in South African society is based in effect on the religio-philosophical tenets of Hinduism. An examination of Hindu Cosmological principles viz. the Concept of God, Brahman, the Self, Atman, Freedom or Liberation, Moksha and the world, Brahmanda is expounded in order to locate the concept of family in its proper frame of reference. This implies that every facet of the life of the individual is permeated by the divine, i.e. Brahman. The family unit is seen as a religious unit that facilitates spiritual evolution. Hindu theology emphasises the God-centred family as an ideal example of the ideal family. It provides the forum to give expression to the four primary aims of life, the Purusharthas, viz. Dharma, right action, Artha, wealth, Kama, enjoyment, and Moksha, self-realization. The Hindu family ethos is a holistic one in which every dimension of the profane viz. social, economic, political and cultural is clothed with the sacred. The family is the base and the behavioural extension of the fundamental belief system of Hinduism. It functions as an integral paradigm for realising the true purpose of life, viz. the realization of the unity of the individual self, Atman with the Cosmic Self, Brahman (Singh 1989:76).

The importance of family is exemplified by the fact that, in Hinduism, society is divided into four Ashramas, stages of an individual's life. The second stage encompasses the life of a householder, i.e. married life. Marriage is one of the most serious and sacred events in the life of a Hindu. This institution is further sanctified since the gods themselves are portrayed as being married. In the Shiva Purana, Lord Shiva's marriage to Parvathi is enunciated, likewise in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana the marriage of Lord Rama to Sita is based on the Vedic prototype.

In South Africa the joint family unit, traditionally formed an important institutional form through which religio-philosophical ideas were transmitted. The structural unit of the joint family system as it functions in South African Hindu society is based on the patrilineal extended family, the Kutumba. The parametres of the joint family system as it exists today is fluid, however, it is based on the Vedic ideal of the joint family unit. As indicated in the paper the joint family is a highly structured kinship entity consisting of members all of whom owe allegiance to a distinct family image.

While sociologist (Gore 1965; Patel and Shah, 1969) suggest that marked regional and sub-regional differences in family structure exist in India, traditionally a Kutumba in South Africa would include a male head, his wife, unmarried children, unmarried brothers and sisters, younger married brothers, married sons and brother's married sons with their wives and children.

This structure is reflected in a classificatory kinship system characteristic of societies with developed kin responsibilities. The Kutumba is not an aggregation of independant and equal family units but of graded sub-units interacting through bonds of patrilineal descent and of marriage.

In South Africa several inter-related factors mitigated against the continued existence of the traditional joint family in the Hindu community. The complex and unique socio-political and economic milieu of South African society has undermined the fabric of the Kutumba. In addition to these external factors brought to bear upon the joint family a parallel internal development, namely, the preference amongst the younger generation Hindu for the nuclear or sub-nuclear household poses an additional challenge to the continued existence of the Kutumba.

The complex political climate which the Hindus encountered in South Africa since their arrival in the country was further compounded by a series of successive legislative measures which have tended to harass the Indian community. As early as 1891, legislation prohibiting Indians from entering or living in the Orange Free State, was passed. In 1896, the Franchise Act disenfranchised Indians (Oosthuizen and Hofmeyr 1979:176). The above laws in addition to these referred to by Sooklal was seen as a process of socio-political attrition which when set in motion was designed to strip the Indians of their political rights, their freedom of movement, domicile and trading opportunities. The prevailing uncertainty regarding their status militated against the development of a sense of community in the larger South African society. In terms of the harsh realities of the socio-political conditions the Hindu joint family fostered a sense of community identity and belonging. The extended family located the individual in a paradigm of allegiance, thus providing an insular factor against the external hardships.

The joint family assumed the position of an important locus which placed Hindus within the context of a worshipping community. Hence it not only fortified the Hindu against the unjust socio-political realities but perhaps more importantly it became a forum for group identity. It provided a filial model through which Hindus could discuss and mutually reinforce their religious-cultural commitment. The importance of the joint family as a touchstone for religious identity is seen because of the absence in Hinduism in South Africa of regular congregational worship.

As noted in the paper the joint family was severely weakened by the Group Areas Act. The displacement of the Indians by this Act had a devastating effect on the family unit which effected the

Hindu community most adversely. The disintegration of the joint family effected the traditional instructional process which were cherished and perpetuated via the oral medium from generation to generation. Without viable alternatives to replace this institutional unit a vacuum developed in the religio-cultural domain of the Hindu community. The values, norms, customs, rituals, traditions and religio-philosophical ideas which were safeguarded and perpetuated via this unit were impeded.

In addition to the above-mentioned processes Sooklal cites the forces of westernisation and secularization as major factors which contributed to the break-downs of the joint family. Further, the younger generation Hindus having constant exposure to western family organisation seems to prefer the nuclear or sub-nuclear family unit. Thus structural changes have occurred within the joint family. In terms of such changes the family is undergoing the process of nucleation which means that households are undergoing transformation and emerging into what is known as the nuclear family system. This proposition maintains that while in the past large family systems were popular the impact of westernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation has been limiting the size of the family (Gupta 1976:xxx).

The traditional joint family in South African Hindu society has been considerably weakened, as noted in the paper, however, it is imperative to note that the various factors that have mitigated against its continued existence, has not resulted in the complete disintegration of this structured kinship unit. Although through the process of individualism and nucleation, the joint family has been restructured in terms of the nuclear and sub-nuclear family units, the traditional instructional process though weakened, still continues to function in the sphere of performative behaviour.

While the closely structured Kutumba does not exist in the nuclear family they share in a common spatial proximity and further family orientated decisions still, in most cases, must receive the approval of the Kutumba.

Since religious, cultural and traditional values and institutions associated with it, such as the joint family is subject to the passage of time, religious leaders and believers are forced to respond to ever lengthening perspectives, in particular the transmission of religion from one culture whether geographically or chronologically means that new cultural elements are introduced to the tradition and new demands are made upon it (Pye 1979:17). The vacuum created by the weakening of the joint family is today being addressed by institutionalised Hindu organisations. The neo-Hindu organisations have provided a locus for religious identity. Its many institutional forums as indicated in the paper serves to fulfill the role traditionally provided by the joint family unit.

Finally it is pertinent to note that the liberal democratic process that South African society is currently undergoing augurs well for the politically oppressed masses, including the Hindu South African, who are deprived of a nationalistic sense of identity and belonging in a country that is their natural home. Hopefully the democratisation of South Africa will orientate the Hindu into living the Rig Vedic doctrine "Vasudeva Kutumbakam", the whole world belongs to one family.

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