

**RECONSTRUCTION OF THE INDIAN
HOME IN THE MODERN CONTEXT**

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Dr (Smt) Vanaja Iyengar was invited to deliver the 1984 memorial lecture under Smt. Kameswaramma Kuppuswamy Endowment. She spoke on the important and relevant topic: Reconstruction of the Indian Home in the Modern Context. The paper is valuable in as much as it leads to further introspection and thought.

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RECONSTRUCTION OF THE INDIAN HOME IN THE MODERN CONTEXT

DR. VANAJA IYENGAR

When we talk about the reconstruction of the modern home in the Indian context, I take it that we mean the family and not the architectural design of the home, although that also has a relevance to the topic.

We have to define the words family, home, modern, etc. The word family itself has undergone and is undergoing steady change in meaning — Yesterday's family was almost universally what we today call an extended family with not only the husband, wife, children but also older generation as well as other kith and kin staying in one household or several kin-related units, living on adjoining farms or households for generations, working and surviving together in productive activity.

Today's family, particularly in urban areas and industrial towns means more and more husband, wife, children together in a household separate from others—a nuclear family. As a matter of fact, we are today in a position to trace the history of family life as such on the human front. A broad overview in time and space is possible because we in India can actually see the differences in family set up in the tribal areas, in the rural areas in the artisan or trade plying families and in the urban areas and the metropolitan cities. More than that, we can see what is happening in highly, industrialized capitalist countries like America and Britain and on the other hand in the industrialized socialist countries such as, Soviet Union and East European countries. Barring adjustments for geographic and ethnic differences we see that it is possible to relate changes in family patterns to social changes. It is also possible to assert that although social changes have had a massive impact on the structure of home and family life, the family as an institution has a healthy tenacity to survive with remarkable continuity and adaptability over the centuries.

Coming to the word modernity, modern is not the same as fashionable. To be modern means to be in step with the broad current of historical change. Neither is nuclear family an exclusive product of modernity although modernization processes such as urbanization, industrialization, etc., have contributed to it. As the family is subjected to modernizing processes, things such as family values, norms and concepts undergo changes. This does not mean necessarily that original bonds and relations disappear.

In the rural areas, in the village households family is a unit of production, life is still collective and highly ritualized. Privacy in the urban sense is virtually unknown. As you leave the agricultural families behind, family life becomes more individualized with varying kinds of occupations. For example, the family life among the artisans or the small merchants is more open and somewhat less ritualized. When you come to urban areas nature of work changes further and the family changes from a unit of production to a unit of consumption. Now the individual has an earning power as detached family earning power; this gives more economic independence, individualism and mobility on the one hand and a better standard of living, greater material wellbeing, new interests on the other. Alongside came notions of individual privacy. All this is manifested in the architectural changes in buildings too. I remember, during my childhood most of the buildings in the south (they still exist today) were undifferentiated, with rooms opening directly into each other, room into other room. These are now replaced by houses with the hallway — not only to separate the functions such as kitchen quarters, sleeping quarters, etc., but also to separate people and allow

individual privacy Present day technology also transforms the household. For example, better drainage system, better water facilities use of various gadgets in the kitchen, etc. The quality of life in modern housing in the cities is improving all the time. All these factors can be included in the modernizing process in our homes. But this is not all. In the Indian context modernity should mean something more. I think it is possible to pick out three parameters of modernity in India.

The first is to be Indian, to have a deep sense of Indian ness and to be rid of fragmenting parochialisms of religion, region and caste; and yet to be rooted in the diversity of culture that is an integral part of Indian ness.

Second is to have a scientific temper. This does not necessarily mean that one has to give up religion and certainly not the emotional impulse and penumbra that is also embodied in religion. But it does mean freeing oneself from orthodoxy and superstition. It does mean taking reason, experience and democratic discussion as inherent parts of one's existence, one's way of looking at things, taking decisions and acting.

Third, egalitarianism ; a belief that not only all human beings should have an equal chance to be fully themselves, but also that one must work to one's capacity to ensure that this is the case.

Now if we survey honestly, the Indian homes as they are today, I am afraid we shall have to admit that the overwhelming majority of them do not pass the test. According to the government estimates 48% of our people live below the poverty line. This line itself is never properly defined. More than 60% of our people are totally illiterate. A good 2/3rds. Of our people live in such filth and squalour and need, that to build any kind of home is just impossible. The mere fact that a certain number of people living together on the basis of consanguinity does not make a home.

Those who have for some reason or the other been fortunate enough to cross the poverty line, have, certainly the physical and material equipment to build modern homes, even beautiful modern homes. But then how moderns are their modern homes? Are their outlooks modern? Is their attitude towards-one another in the home modern, let alone towards those who are not in their home? 'How and on what basis do they marry? How do they bring up their children? What values do they inculcate in them? What is merely a superficial outward westernization? "Mummy, Daddy" modernization! My generation had some experience of this during the days of British rule. There were many Indian families which were outwardly imitations of their rulers There was even a name for the men among them — Westernized Oriental Gentlemen or WOG for short.

But on the other hand, even at that time were families like those of Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore, etc., which were thoroughly modern yet unmistakably Indian. But then, at that time the national movement kept things in check and acted as a powerful restraining influence in preventing the emergence of an ersatz culture: As a matter of fact, it is a thing to be proud of that India is among those few countries which accepted a great deal from the west because it was at that time more advanced than we were but which remained stubbornly itself. That restraint has gone now. And those who have not to face the assault of poverty, are, in the main, conquered by the craze for the "foreign", while remaining sunk in the mire of orthodoxy. We have to come to terms with ourselves and with the challenge of modernizing our society and our country. It is a daunting task. But we have much to build upon. Noble spirits have left us guidelines and the examples of their lives. Jawaharlal, for example, and Mahatma Gandhi. I mention all these to put the Indian home in its context. Building a home,

above all, means building a family. In this matter, I will consider three aspects separately for purposes of analysis and take them together when we consider the problem in its entirety.

The first aspect is that of the family vis-à-vis the world. This includes their outlook, their understanding, their value system; how they look at the world, explain situations and events. But there is more. The pace and the demands of modern life both in work and in leisure open up new possibilities for the development of personality. But in turn, these also place new strains on the family. Building a family takes time, patience and care. All of these are heavily taxed by the pressures of modern living. Besides, the trend towards a nuclear family is based not so much on choice as on the compulsions of shifts in job location and opportunities, including geographical shifts. So there is no older generation or unoccupied relatives to take part of the strain; especially in the matter of sheer physical care of the children, cooking of meals, clearing and tidying up.

It is absolutely essential, therefore, that those who care for their families should also develop a community outlook or a communitarian approach. Since the modern family cannot fall back any longer upon its own resources, it has to see that social infrastructures are developed. Creches, shops, medical clinics, neighbourhood schools, banks, community recreation centres, eating places, even police-stations, all these have to be sufficiently near at hand. The modern family will live in metropolises, towns, etc. But the neighbourhood (the new 'village' or micro town) will play an increasingly important role in its life.

If anything is conspicuously lacking in our country, even at the level where affluence makes modernity possible, it is this tack of community services and communitarian spirit. It is here that we ape the worst aspects of the alienated loneliness of western life. We do not seem to realize that one of the sharpest manifestations of the crisis of western society is precisely the virtual breakdown of the family. According to the 1982 statistics, of the 83.5 million households in existence in America, more than 1 in 5 consisted of -one person living alone. The number of people who live in families headed by one man or woman without spouse has risen from 21.7 million in 1970 to 35 million today largely because of the rising divorce rate and the increasing incidence of out of wedlock births. 1 out of 8 children live in a single parent home. It is not a question of material, physical facilities lacking. It is just that communitarian spirit is lacking. Obviously a few new stages have to be inducted into family life cycle in order to keep it together.

Now take the Soviet Union where the community services are certainly not lacking. More marriages are ending in divorce than in happy family life in the Soviet Union. Soviet sociologists have revealed that the divorce rate has increased by 300 per cent since 1965. About 125 million marriages take place every year in the Soviet Union. The sociologists have found to their surprise that economic problems such as unemployment, housing or upbringing of children and their education are rarely the cause of divorce in the country. With no unemployment, and as many as 930 women out of having 1000 permanent jobs with equal wages as men and guaranteed care for children of single mothers, Soviet women do not hesitate to walk out of their marriages. Surveys have shown that in almost half of the Soviet families now, the wives earn as much as or even higher than their husbands. But unfortunately, only one out of three husbands share housework equally with their wives. While it is generally appreciated that the man or the woman may 'dominate' in happy marriages, 'disaster' takes place if husband or wife or both feel the need to 'dominate' the sociologists have observed.

The second aspect of the problem of constructing a modern family is the relation between its founders — the husband and the wife. It is part of a more general problem of the

need for a new relationship between the sexes. There, is male chauvinism in India as elsewhere. Actually it is worse in India because it is actually male domination pure and simple. It has its roots in the economic dependence of the woman and this is reinforced by the tremendous weight of orthodoxy, conservatism and social inertia. For a woman, being a wife and mother often sets severe limits on what she could do with her life and many women today are no longer willing to accept these limits.

This inequality between man and woman was always evil. It cramped and confined the woman and it perverted and distorted the man. Both were less than human. But the relation held had certain durability and was also some kind of a social division of labour. This has broken down. The woman need not be and is often not economically dependent. It is not only domestic slavery, the household she has to run, but also a job outside she has to keep. This is a tremendous physical and mental strain. The job takes the woman to the world and she becomes aware and confident of her potentialities. This is when inequality becomes impossible to bear and possible to end. But either because of orthodoxy or a false sense of values or sheer selfishness the husband finds this very difficult to accept. And this leads to the civil war within the home. This civil war cannot be won by either party. The male chauvinists are more to blame. Men and women need each other, they both need the family and of course, the family needs the husband and wife. There is an obvious difference between the sexes. But this difference need not and should not mean the same thing as inequality. It is futile to expect that the man will just take over the “duties” of the woman in the household.

Do any one of us know a man who enjoys house work, loves looking after children and feels happy staying at home while his achievement oriented wife goes out to work? We have, at the most, arrived at the level of emancipation and equality where the man says; “I don’t mind if you go out to work and supplement our income as long as you run the house, cook the meals, look after the kids and be a good wife besides”! So the women have to juggle the three roles of wife, mother and career with varying degrees of success. This is a tremendous physical and mental strain. The opportunity to work is very important. Men have this opportunity available to- them as a matter of course. Women need it just as much. Both for their self-knowledge as well as their contribution to society. On the other hand child bearing and child rearing are equally important too. Women need both. They cannot abandon either career or motherhood. The question is how to combine the two. The problem has to be solved individually, family wise and community wise. There are no guidelines to go by and there can be no instant solutions. Women need understanding. They need supporting husbands and sympathetic employers. They need community facilities I mentioned earlier.

But all this requires not only the conscious effort for equality but also the recognition that building a family is necessary and joyous and to be taken with the utmost seriousness. Here again we find that private morality merges with social need in a tense but fruitful, dynamic relationship.

The third aspect of family building is the need to bridge the gap of the generations. And the main responsibility devolves upon the generation in the middle — the husband and the wife. For example, what should be done with the older people, the parents? Even if they prefer to be by themselves, they surely need attention? And if they are not able to be by themselves, they surely need attention? And if they are not able to be by themselves then what is to be done? Homes for the aged can be a total nightmare work is for the sensitive as 36 Chowringhee Lane has so wonderfully demonstrated. Obviously, these can be improved qualitatively and this has to be done. But should parents be cast off and treated this way?

Does this help to build a better humanity? Will not this be the fate of the middle generation also in the coming years? Is it not our duty to give dignity and honour to those for whom life has begun to edge out? Of course the elders should co-operate too.

As for the children, the real problem does not emerge so long as they are children i.e., so long as they remain objects to be loved and cared for. It arises, above all, in that transitional period when the object is being transformed into a subject, when help is needed for the emergence of an independent personality, when the umbilical cord is finally cut. This is not only an abstract problem of the differences between generations. It is a problem of the times — when things move at tempestuous speed. Resilience is a human quality and so is the capacity to absorb the new. But this is not unequally distributed over the years. Routine and the need to carry on are also extraordinarily powerful forces. Hence, it is inevitable that a certain measure of conflict will arise between generation, between the adaptation of routine and the new as the basis of a different routine.

The question is often asked these days, is parental authority declining? It is true that in the old days parents had more authority. Even today in the rural areas, parents, elders do command authority and children accept absolutes even on moral and ethical issues. This traditional authority, re-enforced by absolutes has weakened today in our middle class and urban society.

On the other hand it is a fact that parents are more concerned about giving the right education and opportunities to their children and therefore there is more conscious and continuous concern towards their development. In the old days the home was mainly where children were taught values. Today there is conflict between extra familial influences and parental values. Since the norms of society may be at variance with norms of the family, children may develop schizophrenic attitudes and values. Today most middle class families in our cities are subjected to such problems from their children. Habits like smoking, drugs, alcohol! Not to mention, TV/Film type violence are something the present day parent is confronted with. How much freedom should be given to children? Is it possible to put any restraints on them? What kind of discipline can be enforced? All these become burning issues. Some parents take it philosophically and leave the children to work out their own fate. Others over react. When parents sacrifice much for their children they naturally expect more from them too. Too much authority can be self-defeating just as too much freedom without self-discipline can boomerang.

To know, one must suffer the law of things. The only freedom in the end is the freedom of necessity. But this does not mean passively accepting generations must fall apart or fall upon one another. It means that one has to exercise wisdom and tact. The young v will rebel and so they should. But it should be against what holds up advance and not against all that is. Change must also embrace continuity. In any case, it is the generation in actual control that must know how to advise and guide. And it is important for society that this is done in the family. This again requires the conviction that the family is essential and also that the family needs the community. Strengthening the family is to foster a broader sense of social responsibility.

I would like to end on a quotation from Smt. Kameswaramma “One of the prime duties of a woman outside the home is her obligation towards her less fortunate sisters; it is this that is at the bottom of the women’s movement in India”.