

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

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Abstract

Single parenting is though relatively new emergent phenomena but a universal one. Several factors in modern societies contribute to its existence and spread though we find cultural and regional variation in its occurrence. It does not only represent a kind of evolution in the form and function of the family, it has repercussions for the lone parent as well as the children of such families and also signifies the general changes happening in the societies which contribute to its existence and spread. The present study is based on empirical data from an urban Indian setting and it supplemented with secondary sources. The study intends to explore into the existence and functions of single parenting families in India.

Keywords: Women Headed Households, Familial Pattern, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Education Mobility, Familial Discord, Separation, Cohabitation, Social and Emotional wellbeing of children

The institution of family is a crucial element of Society and has been one of the oldest one too. It is the backbone of stability and security in the society. Radcliffe-Brown proposed that most stateless, "primitive" societies that lack strong centralized institutions are based on an association of corporate-descent groups. Structural functionalism also took on the argument that the basic building block of society is the nuclear family, and that the clan is an outgrowth, not vice versa. Durkheim was concerned with the question of how certain societies maintain internal stability and survive over time. Based on the metaphor above of an organism in which many parts function together to sustain the whole, Durkheim argued that complicated societies are held together by organic solidarity. Within that Durkheimian framework, for functionalists, the family creates well-integrated members of society and adapts and socializes the new members of society to its culture. It provides important ascribed statuses such as social class, ethnicity and identity to the new members. It is responsible for social replacement by reproducing new members, to replace its dying members. Further, the family gives individuals property rights and also affords the assignment and maintenance of kinship order. Families also offer material and emotional security and provides care and support for the individuals who need care (Parsons & Bales 1955, Lee 1982, Jayson 2010).

While Marxist and conflict theorists see family as source of exploitation and dominance (Engels 1972), Symbolic interactionists explore the changing meanings attached to family. They argue that shared activities help to build emotional bonds among family members, and that marriage and family

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

relationships are based on negotiated meanings. The interactionist perspective emphasizes that families reinforce and rejuvenate bonds through symbolic mechanism rituals such as family meals and holidays. In many cultures, a mother is usually the wife in a married couple and often view mothers' duties as raising and looking after their children. Mothers frequently have a very important role in raising offspring, and the title can be given to a non-biological mother that fills this role. This is common in stepmothers (female married to biological father). In most family structures, the mother is both a biological parent and a primary caregiver (Lee 1982).

But the notion, function and structure of family has been changing and many changes have happened in modern societies due to economic and cultural changes. Family, since ages, has been undergoing changes (Murdock 1967, Engels 1972, Morgan 2019). Morgan has explained us how the institution of family has undergone a change from 'consanguine' to 'punaluan' to 'polygamous' to 'monogamous' from the beginning of the human race to the modern societies (Altman & Ginat 1996, Morgan 2019). Family is intricately linked with marriage but the relationship is not straight or simple rather complex. Recent Studies show changes in the forms of marriage and preferences. Similarly forms and structure of family also has been changing. Traditionally broader categorization of family in joint and nuclear does not hold good today. Modernization, Urbanization and Industrialization have had pressures on nuclear family too and it tends to exhibit different forms. We often see deviations from what is normally accepted pattern and structure of the family in society. Single-parent household or a homosexual couple without children are such examples?

While some interpretations such as traditional and religious ones may dispute the validity of such variations as family but many for practical and actual regions may consider these as families too because they serve and function as a familial unit (Jayson 2010). The question of what constitutes a family is a prime area of debate in family sociology, as well as in politics and religion. Social conservatives tend to define the family in terms of structure with each family member filling a certain role (like father, mother, or child). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to define family more in terms of the manner in which members relate to one another than on a strict configuration of status roles. Sociologically family is a socially recognized group which can be joined by blood, marriage, or adoption to form an emotional connection between members and serves as an economic unit of society (Jayson 2010). Thus, single parent families, though may not be fulfilling the traditional criterion of family but exist and are prevalent in almost all societies, urban as well as agrarian.

Present study is based on empirical data collected from 200 single parent families in Jaipur city (India) along with some case studies in 2010-11 through structured schedule and face to face interview conducted for doctoral thesis. The analysis and conclusions of the study are primarily based on that field data but it is also supplemented with recent studies in the field to provide current relevance.

Single-parent families are families with children under age 18 headed by a parent who is widowed or divorced and not remarried, or by a parent who has never married or got separated or unmarried person legally adopted a child or gave birth to a child with the aid of medical/technological

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

advancement or dowry and extra marital affairs. While single parent families are universal and found in all societies however its incidence, extent, causes and how they are socially and culturally perceived vary in western and eastern society. As in western societies, cohabitation and birth of child and separation between cohabiting partners leading to single parent family is one of the major causes of its existence, in societies like India, divorce, death of partner or migration of spouse form the major basis. Keeping this in mind, prior to coming to the Indian experience, it would be appropriate to have an overall view of existence of single parent families in general. Death, divorce, separation, desertion, male migration for employment, and unwed motherhood are some of the reasons for the establishment of such families. According to estimates, between 25 to 33 per cent of all households in the world are de facto headed by women, who, because of marital dissolution, desertion, absence of spouse, or male marginality, are economically responsible for their own and their children's survival (Germaine 1976-77, Bharat 1986 Bhat & Patil 2019).

In developed and economically advanced societies the share of births to unmarried women has risen dramatically over the past half century, from 5% in 1960 to 41% in 2008. In USA, there are notable differences by race: Among black women giving birth in 2008, 72% were unmarried. This compares with 53% of Hispanic women giving birth and 29% of white women. Overall, the share of children raised by a single parent is not as high as the share born to an unwed mother, but it too has risen sharply — to 25% in 2008, up from 9% in 1960. It points out the trend of rising cases of single parent families though there could be several reasons behind such phenomena. A report on social and demographic trend in 2010 showed decline of marriage and rise of new families in United States (PRC 2010). Similar trends are visible in other modernizing and urbanizing societies though may be with varying rates. The PRC survey (2010) found startling generational differences that in 1960, about two-thirds of all twenty-somethings were married and in 2008, it was just 26%. This clearly shows a marked decline in youth's preference for marriage. The survey also revealed that the new generation is much more inclined than their elders to view cohabitation without marriage and other new family forms — such as same sex marriage and interracial marriage — in a positive light. In the same survey, it showed how people's perception family is changing which is guided by the prevalent and emerging practices in family and married life:

“By emphatic margins, the public does not see marriage as the only path to family formation. Fully 86% say a single parent and child constitute a family; nearly as many (80%) say an unmarried couple living together with a child is a family; and 63% say a gay or lesbian couple raising a child is a family. The presence of children clearly matters in these definitions. If a cohabiting couple has no children, a majority of the public says they are not a family. Marriage matters, too. If a childless couple is married, 88% consider them to be a family (PRC 2010).”

Studies show that one out of every two children in the United States will live in a single-parent family at some time before they reach age 18. According the United States Census Bureau, in 2002 about 20 million children lived in a household with only their mother or their father. This is more than one-fourth of all children in the United States. Since 1950, the number of one-parent families has

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

increased substantially. In 1970, about 11 percent of children lived in single-parent families. During the 1970s, divorce became much more common, and the number of families headed by one parent increased rapidly (Amato & Keith 1991). The number peaked in the 1980s and then declined slightly in the 1990s. By 1996, 31 percent of children lived in single-parent families. In 2002, the number was 28 percent. Many other children have lived in single-parent families for a time before their biological parent remarried, when they moved into a two-parent family with one biological parent and one step parent.

The reasons for single-parent families have also changed. Cohabitation contributes to the phenomenon of people getting married for the first time at a later age than was typical in earlier generations (Glezer 1991). Furthermore, marriage will continue to be delayed as more people place education and career ahead of "settling down." In the mid-twentieth century, in USA, most single-parent families came about because of the death of a spouse. In the 1970s and 1980s, most single-parent families were the result of divorce. In the early 2000s, more and more single parents have never married. Many of these single parents live with an adult partner, sometimes even the unmarried father of their child. These families are counted by the Census Bureau as single-parent families, although two adults are present. Still other families are counted as single-parent families if the parents are married, but one is away for an extended period, for example, on military deployment.

The most common type of single-parent family is one that consists of a mother and her biological children. In 2002, 16.5 million or 23 percent of all children were living with their single mother. This group included 48 percent of all African-American children, 16 percent of all non-Hispanic white children, 13 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander children, and 25 percent of children of Hispanic origin. However, these numbers do not give a true picture of household organization, because 11 percent of all children were actually living in homes where their mother was sharing a home with an adult to whom she was not married. This group includes 14 percent of white children, 6 percent of African-American children, 11 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander, and 12 percent of Hispanic children.

Households headed by a single father increased substantially after the early 1980s, reflecting society's changing attitudes about the role of fathers in child rearing. In 1970, only 1 percent of children lived with a single father (Karst 2000). In 2002, about 5 percent of children under age 18 lived with their single fathers. Single fathers, however, are much more likely to be divorced than never married and much more likely than single mothers to be sharing a home with an adult to whom they are not married. For example, 33 percent of Caucasian children lived with fathers who were unmarried but cohabiting with another adult. The rate was 29 percent for African-American children, 30 percent for Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 46 percent for children of Hispanic origin. It is clear that not all single-parent families are the same and that within different ethnic and racial groups, the number and type of single-parent families varies considerably. Adoption by single individuals has also increased in USA. In 1970 only 0.5 to 4 percent of adoptive parents were single. In the 1980s this rate increased from 8 to 34 percent. According the United States Department of

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

Health and Human Services, 33 percent of children adopted from foster care are adopted by single parents.

Single-parent families face special challenges. One of these is economic. In 2002, twice as many single-parent families earned less than \$30,000 per year compared to families with two parents present. At the opposite end of the spectrum, 39 percent of two-parent families earned more than \$75,000 compared to 6 percent of single-mother families and 11 percent of single-father families. Single-parent families are challenged in other ways. Children living with single fathers were the least likely of all children to have health insurance coverage.

Social scientists have found that children growing up in single-parent families are disadvantaged in other ways when compared to two-biological-parent families. Many of these problems are directly related to the poor economic condition of single-parent families, not just to parenting style. These children are at risk for lower levels of educational achievement, twice as likely to drop out of school, more likely to become teen parents, more conflict with their parent(s), less supervised by adults, more likely to become truants, more frequently abuse drugs and alcohol, more high-risk sexual behaviour, more likely to join a gang, twice as likely to go to jail, four times as likely to need help for emotional and behavioural problems, more likely to participate in violent crime, more likely to commit suicide & twice as likely to get divorced in adulthood.

Studies have also found that children who live in a two-parent family where one parent is abusive or has a high level of antisocial behaviour do not do as well as children whose parents divorce if the child then lives in a single-parent family with the nonabusive parent. It is important to remember that every single-parent family is different. Children who are living with a widowed mother will have a home life that is different from children with divorced parents or those whose parents were never married. Children of divorced parents will have a wide range of relationships with their parents and parents' partners depending on custody arrangements and the commitment of the non-custodial parent to maintaining a relationship with the child. Despite the fact that children from single-parent families often face a tougher time economically and emotionally than children from two-biological-parent families, children from single-parent families can grow up doing well in school and maintaining healthy behaviours and relationships. The set of predictable steps and patterns families experience over time is referred to as the family life cycle. One of the first designs of the family life cycle was developed by Paul Glick in 1955. In Glick's original design, he asserted that most people will grow up, establish families, rear and launch their children, experience an "empty nest" period, and come to the end of their lives. This cycle will then continue with each subsequent generation (Glick 1989). With respect to the life cycle of the family, the effect of empty nest on single parent families also has effects but it remains an area less explored.

The single-parent family is not a new phenomenon in India. According to Shalini Bharat (1986) the large-scale changes in the social and economic spheres, over the past few decades, in both the industrialised West and the Third World countries have resulted in the rise of family life styles that differ from the traditional pattern of two-parent families. She also opines that it is very important to

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

be clear about the meaning of the term single-parent family, especially, how it is different from the term female-headed family. Sometimes, the former is discussed under the latter perhaps, on the basis of statistics showing the majority of single parents to be women. In India, the death of a parent is the most likely cause of single-parent family, followed by divorce and separation.

Estimation of single-parent family is a difficult task in India and many other Third

World countries where the census does not report data on the heads of households

by sex, marital status, age, and economic activity (Bharat 1986). She rightly points out that it is difficult to estimate the number of families that are headed by males, and those that are headed by females, and also their marital status, whether they are widow(ers) or divorcees or the never married. Perhaps, this is due to defining heads of households in cultural terms. In most of the patriarchal cultures, as also the Indian culture, the oldest male is considered the head, irrespective of his economic function and age in comparison to the oldest women in the house. Thus, if there is a widow with a son, the son is mentioned as the head, while, in reality, it might be the widow who is earning and supporting the family, taking over the role of the husband. Thus, it becomes difficult to identify one-parent families and ascertain their incidence, more so, because a majority of these are women-headed. The implications of this are manifold, especially for planning and allocation of welfare services.

The number of widowed and divorced or separated, aged 15 to 49 years, form 4.3 per cent of the total ever married population and 3.3 per cent of the total population aged 15 to 49 years. This may not be taken as a very high incidence of single parenthood. Over 80 per cent of these single parents are the widowed (83.21%), and the rest are divorced or separated (17.79%). As seen the world over, a larger proportion is of females (71.85%) whether they belong to the widowed, divorced or separated category, and only about 28.14 per cent of single parents are males. The single-parent families, as percentage of the total number of family units, is calculated to be approximately 8 per cent as a sizeable population among migrant workers leave their families behind. A majority of these might be parts of extended families while a few may be headed by females. The proportion of such female-headed families, resulting from migration, must be added to the percentage of widowed/divorced population to obtain the correct incidence of single-parent families in India.

The report of the YWCA of India (unpublished) on the single-parent family unit covers several aspects of the problems of divorced urban women. The study was done on 200 urban based divorced/separated women in the age group 20 to 48 years from different income groups. The study focused on their social, economic, emotional and practical problems of managing the house, problems related to their children and social pathology among the children. Certain recommendations were also made to facilitate the re-entry of these women into the mainstream of society with the least damage to their personality. It was found that the majority of the women were divorced within the first three years of marriage and for causes often beyond their control, like the impotency of the husband, marriage without the husband's consent and harassment by in-laws. Education seemed to be positively correlated with the women's own decision to divorce/separate. About two-thirds of the

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

women reported being perceived negatively by society and having little or no social life after family disintegration (Strong & DeVault 1992). Over 50 per cent of them were forced to live in poverty or off charity given by the family members. There was a sharp fall in their economic standard as most women were not well educated or trained for any job. Break-up also led to serious emotional consequences manifested in suicidal attempts, hysteria, insomnia, feeling of unworthiness, aggression and restlessness. There was considerable amount of guilt feeling due to suppression of sexual desires. The effect on children was reflected in fear, loneliness, withdrawal.

As per the latest estimate published in Times of India, 4.5% of all Indian households are run by single mothers, says a UN report which draws attention to the significant number of lone parent families in the country. Even as the dominant household form in India continues to be a mix of couples living with their children of any age, followed by extended families, the UN Women report puts the figure of lone mother households in India at 13 million. Another 32 million are estimated to be living in extended households. Released on Tuesday, the global report — “Progress Of The World’s Women 2019-2020”— analyses how diverse family structures are impacting women and their choices. In India, 46.7% of families are couples living with their children, over 31% live in extended families while single-person families account for 12.5%. “In India, the poverty rate of lone mother households are 38% in comparison to 22.6% for dual-parent households,” (Pandit 2019).

The empirical study conducted by the researcher in Jaipur city comprised of respondents 200 heads of single parent families falling between age group of 15-60 year. 81 per cent of the respondents were relatively young as they fell within 15-45 year age group. Individualism and competition resulting into emotional and physical violence in families resulting into divorce were found to be prime causes of single parenting families (RSW 1995). Economic self-dependence and women empowerment, awareness about gender equality and democratic values has aided to this existing form of evolution in the traditional form of families. Table 1 shows that prime reasons behind single parent families were divorce, separation, or death of the spouse. Other reasons were negligible in the society of Jaipur.

Table 1: Causes responsible for Single Parent Families in Jaipur City

Causes behind Single Parent Families	No. of Respondents	Percentage
Separation	65	32.50
Divorce	71	35.50
Death of the spouse	55	27.50
Other	9	04.50
Total	200	100.00

(Source: Personal Fieldwork)

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

The sample also showed that 81.5 percent of respondents were well educated as they were either graduates, post graduates or doctorates. Study found that 86% of these respondents had some form employment and a sizable number of these, about 57% fell in the income range of Rs.15000-35000 while 19.5% of them earned more than 35000/ per month. Evidently, it suggests that some kind of economic stability provided the basis for sustenance of the single parent family largely by women while educational mobility aided to rights awareness, sense of equality and employability so that they could take the responsibility of heading the single parent families.

These single parents were paying multiple roles as they were filling in the role of other absent partner as well and they were managing the breadwinner role for the family. Their educational and economic attainment somewhat gave them strength and support in in shouldering the responsibility. Women though capable to taking care of familial needs did feel the male spouse was needed to take care of some need of the family.

In most of the cases where single parent families were created out of divorce or separation, there was not contact of the child with the estranged partner. Only about 10 percent of the respondents maintained some friendly relation with former life partner for the sake of emotional well being of the children. Most of the lone parents valued self-sacrifice for children. It was found that such parents also had love, respect and friendly relation with their children. Most of these women seemed to be fairly managing the role conflict which they faced due to taking up the role of father in the family. 85 % these families expressed friendly neighbourhood relation, only few faced suspicious and curious treatment from the neighbours. When asked about the rise in the non-preference of marriage among youth these days, the respondents expressed that personal ambition coupled with the understanding that the marriage is an exploitative institution and incidence of failed marriages of relatives are contributing to non-preference among youth.

Table 2: Respondents perception regarding non-preference for marriage among unmarried persons

Reasons	Percent
Personal ambition	39
Marriage as exploitative institution	21
Lack of Match or Choice	19
Failed marriages of relatives	04
Other reasons	15
Total	100

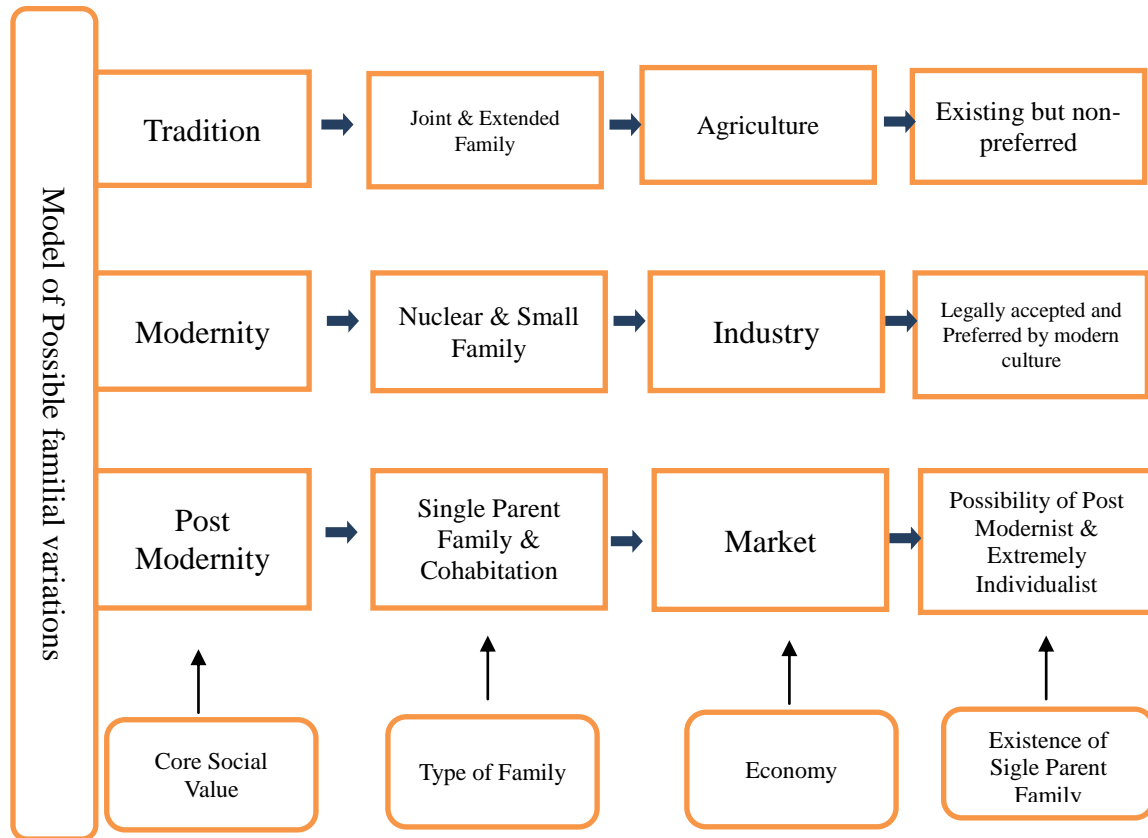
(Source: Personal Fieldwork)

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

All the respondents felt that employment was necessary for secure future. In 36 % of cases, it was seen that single parenting affected familial and office work. About 89% these women did not show preference for a remarriage even if they could find a good prospect or match. However, 44.5 % children remembered the absent parent and only about 11 percent had the chance to meet them. Lone parent had to take up multiple roles and the study showed that occurrence of such families in relatively a traditional society of Jaipur were in many ways were challenging the caste and religion, family, kinship, inheritance and descent arrangements which were prevalent in the society.

The present study and the existing data across societies suggest a possible model for exitance and acceptance for single parent families which can be described through following schema:



Therefore, it can be said the single parent families are universal and commonly prevalent evolution of family. However, occurrence, incidence and cultural acceptance as well as prime causes behind it are different in western and Indian society. It is also evident that correct estimation of single parent

Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

families is somewhat difficult to estimate on the basis of census data India but through estimation it can be said that single parent families exist in India in both rural and urban settings. Also, in gross terms the number of single parent families are very significant and have increased multi fold as compared to previous decades as overall population has been increasing. Whereas outmigration is the prime cause of single parent families in rural India, Divorce, Separation and death of partner are main causes of single parent families in urban settings in India. The single parent families have serious impact on the growth and self-esteem of the children of such families if they do not get proper care and socialization as compared to the children of the families of where both partners are present. Economic security and educational mobility among women headed single parent families are prime catalyst for such familial formation. In urban settings, the prevalence of such families is challenging the traditional notions of family and should not be looked down upon as they are resultant of changing social and economic scenario in the country.

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Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh

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Single Parenting: An Urban Indian Experience

Dr. Parul Singh