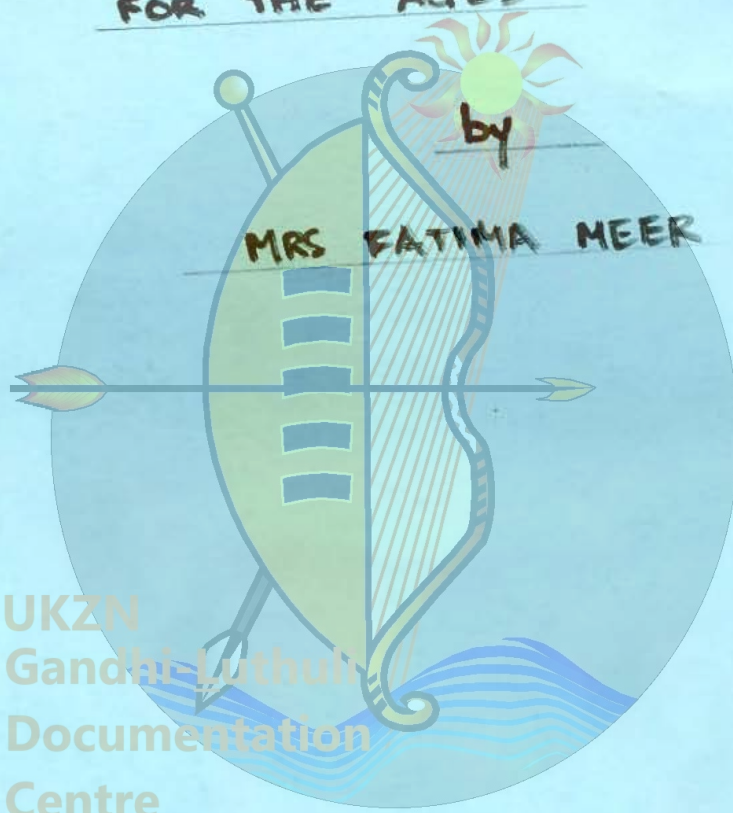


THE CHANGING PATTERN OF INDIAN
FAMILY LIFE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

FOR THE AGED



ARYAN BENEVOLENT HOME

1970

THE CHANGING PATTERN OF INDIAN FAMILY LIFE
AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AGED

Address to the 49th Annual General Meeting of the Aryan Benevolent Home by Mrs. Fatima Meer, M.A. June, 1970

South African Indian life, beginning towards the latter half of the nineteenth century on the basis of the indentured male worker, had become strongly family centred at the beginning of the twentieth century, despite the small ratio of women (the law had stipulated a minimum proportion of 25% in each labour consignment) the complete failure of planters to provide family quarters, the absence of, until 1874, regulations recognizing and controlling Indian marriages and the right of family members not to be separated from each other when being allotted to employers, and the hostile attitude adopted by many employers towards the women and children of their one rand per month labourers.

The extended or joint family, both by choice and economic necessity, became the established pattern of family life, and though this pattern is giving way to the nuclear model, its incidence is still high, various sample surveys made between 1946 and 1968 in and near Durban, setting the position to be between 30 to 50 per cent.

While practically all newly married couples expect to and do spend an apprenticeship in the parental family, it is becoming increasingly apparent that most hive off at some socially convenient and economically possible point and establish their own homes. The implication of the Group Areas Act and enforced resettlement in small and relatively expansive flats and council houses, has accelerated this process.

The cohesion of the traditional Indian family, three generations deep and composed of a number of nuclear units, depends on its early demarcated system of status and role in which each member understands and appreciates his own position in the power hierarchy and relates himself accordingly to other members. Thus members address each other through formal stereotype ascriptive terms like ana (brother) and aka (sister), rather than through first names which when applied are usually reserved for the youngest members.

The authority of the elders is imperative to the continued unit of an extended family and thus age has always enjoyed high prestige. The old are recognised as a vital source of knowledge and culture and their guidance is sought in practically all matters ranging from the economic to the health.

The extent to which traditional patterns are still operative in South African Indian society is observed in the accounts of family structures and relations described in 1969 by 80 preliminary year medical students drawn from all constituent language and religious groups (51% hindu, 39% muslim and 10% christian) and from all three Provinces. The emergent picture is that of a strongly father-centered, patriarchal family in which relations particularly father and children tend to be highly structured and formal. Socialization is authoritarian and repressive rather than equalitarian and participatory, wrong being punished in simple direct forms like a timely thrashing and right being taken for granted and receiving unemotional, silent approval or commemorated through material reward when reflected in some exceptional feat, like doing well in an exam. Communication between parents and children, again particularly between father and children is

restrained and limited to special business, the father addressing children in order to rebuke and restrict, the children approaching father to table needs. The family is recognised as the repository of group values, expressed and enacted through the adult and it is the responsibility of the growing children to internalise and re-establish them.

This, however, is the pattern described in families where the ages of parents ranged between 45 and 60 years and in which children continued to be economically dependent on them. The picture may change drastically when the behaviour of families with younger children and families with poorer parents is analysed. Such families may well reveal trends towards equalitarianism initiated by parents, in the first case and by gainfully employed children, in the second.

It seems inevitable that the traditional structure and relationship pattern within the Indian family will be replaced by the urban nuclear model. The transition has already been made, successfully and without much observable teething problems in some professional and semi-professional families. The position in poorer groups, however, appears to be critical where it seems that the old pattern collapses even before a new one emerges. Exploited by modern advertising techniques, cheap reading material, and the cinema, they are prone to blundering into situations of conflict and ending up in conditions of pathetic frustration.

A change in family structure invariably results in changes in family functions and attitudes and in relations of members to each other. The undermining of the extended family has the most debilitating effect on its aged members. Formerly the recipients of reverence and respect, they begin to be seen as social and economic liabilities. Their knowledge and example, previously valued and followed, becomes suspect and they are regarded as obstacles to self-expression and progress. Whereas in the traditional Indian situation before, the individual saw his prime duty to his parents, no matter how humble their status, or how disabled their condition (one is reminded here of the myth of Shrawan Kumar who devoted himself to carrying his blind and crippled parents in two baskets suspended on a pole across his shoulders), in the new, they begin to be viewed as a nuisance and there is a desire to be rid of them, to relegate them to their own separate quarters. No studies exist to give an authoritative account of the extent and nature of changes in attitudes to the old in current South African Indian life, but the increasing demand on the facilities offered by the only institution for Indian aged, the Aryan Benevolent Home, gives some indication. All existing accommodation for just over a 100 (and there are 5,000 Indian recipients of pensions in Durban alone) have been taken up and there is a waiting list. In the meanwhile, the Organization threatened with ejection from its present premises in Cato Manor under the Group Areas Act, has not even succeeded in purchasing an appropriate piece of land to plan its new institution. It is clear that as the structure and within it, the patterned relations of the Indian family changes, the need for special homes for the aged will increase.

The needs of the aging members of Indian society are beginning to conform to the needs of the aged in urban societies the world over.

Peter Townsend^{*} writing about the family life of old people and basing his observations on a random sample survey of

* Peter Townsend: The Family Life of Old People (Penguin)

Pensioners

pensioners in the metropolitan borough of Bethnal Green, London, found that most aged people chose to live alone because they wished to be independent, because they feared that to live with children was to invite conflict with the child's spouse, because they believed that both their and their children's interest were best served when they lived near them, than with them. Only 24% of those with surviving married children chose to live with one of them, preferably a daughter. The incidence of living with children depended on the structure of the family. The tendency was higher in the case of the widowed and when there was an only child or when there was an unmarried child. Townsend found that isolation did not in itself breed loneliness, and that some in the centre of large families complained of loneliness and others in extreme isolation said that they were never lonely. All in all, 79% of the unisolated and 60% of the isolated declared that they were not lonely. Conversely 3% of the unisolated and 10% of the isolated admitted to loneliness.

The problems which the aged face, flow mainly from their physical incapacity. The incomes of many old people drop even before retirement is reached, due to their failing health necessitating the taking on of lighter jobs. But a considerable proportion of the problems of the aged is contrived and socially imposed.

Society fixes an age of retirement equally applicable to all without taking into consideration individual differences. Only 15% of those studied in Bethnal Green had chosen to retire. Society often sets too small a material value on the work contribution of the aged so that even when physically able the aged are impoverished. In Bethnal Green, the incomes of the aged on retirement had fallen by 68%.

These facts suggest that in planning for the aged, one has to consider on the one hand the desire of the aged to preserve their independence and through it their dignity, and on the other, the fact of their material impoverishment. The position at the Aryan Benevolent Home indicates that today the problem of the aged among Indians is not simply a problem of sheltering the discarded beggar but of providing well deserved and elevating accommodation for retiring patriarchs and matriarchs, married or widowed, who wish to continue their relations with society in customary dignity. Many inmates are there, not because their relatives will not have them, but because they prefer the independence. They have the same right to this independence as the able-bodied adults and everything possible must be done to ensure them this right.

The aged presently accommodated by the Aryan Benevolent Home are classified into three groups, the hospitalized, the convalescents and the pensioners. Only 48 (14 men and 34 women) of the total number of 122, are able bodied aged. Those in the hospital section are in extreme conditions of paralysis or psychoses and a proportion of the of the so-called convalescents too appear to have lost interest in life. In fact some of those in such impaired conditions are not even old, so that the Home appears to be running a sort of hospital rather than a place for the aged.

This indiscriminate classifying together of pensioners and the mentally and physically incapacitated is an unhappy state of affairs. It must have a detrimental effect on the pensioners and serve to remind them constantly of their fragile hold on life when they should be helped to spend their last years with courage.

The claims of able-bodied Indian pensioners to an independent existence are going to increase. The influence of western, or more correctly, urban values, are much too strong and cannot be forestall. We have to come to terms with the change in attitudes they evoke no matter how nostalgically or romantically we dwell on the past. Even when the tradition of the extended family was strong, the position of the aged grandmother, whose headship had been taken over by her daughter-in-law, commanding in turn her own daughter-in-law, was not a happy one. The highest suicide rate in Durban between 1940-1960 in terms of all age, race, and sex groups, was that of Indian women of 70 years and over who had a rate of 63.8 per 100,000. The average for Durban as a whole was 13.78, and for Indians 17.7.

The last decade has revealed a new rate of change in the Indian community such factors as the increasing entry of women into gainful employment and the extension of university and technical education, suggest that the rate will be accelerated in the next decades. Our task is to visualize the future as effectively as we can and to prepare to meet it with the best techniques and resolutions at our command,



UKZN
Gandhi-Luthuli
Documentation
Centre