



Societal contradictions

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“How do you differentiate between an Indian joint family and extended nuclear family when both family units have the grandparents living with them?” This was the query from the Head of Human Resources of one of my clients to whom we had advised that family living style is among the important criteria to gauge a candidate’s ability to take responsibility at work.

I’d written about India’s heterogeneous family units 3 weeks ago, how it connects to business as multi-social elements and living styles impact business, opening up avenues for purchase and human resource. Let me illustrate with different flavors of family structures.

Joint family: Simi grew up in Nainital, Uttarkhand where tourists flock to between May and August when her family hotel does peak business. Her grandparents, parents and father’s younger brother run the business. After her uncle married, things went topsy-turvy. It was an arranged marriage, her aunt was from a joint family too, but being the only daughter is probably why she was a demanding, spoilt person. Simi’s mother would cook breakfast and lunch from their single kitchen for the 11 member family before going off to her hotel duties. Pouting through the day, her aunt would intermittently keep her word about cooking dinner.

Total unpredictability reigned about household basics as nobody could gauge what would upset her aunt when, or how she would react. On threatening to break up the joint family, the family gave her the money to start a beauty parlour she wanted. She selfishly pocketed the revenue, but that was no issue as the family split was avoided, not because their finances were joint but because “What would we tell the relatives and neighbours?” After Simi’s grandfather died, her aunt created a scene. She announced she’d return to her parents’ home if Simi’s parents did not move out of the house. The aunt got her way.

How did such brawls at home impact the children? Simi says that compared to her friends from nuclear families, she feels more mature. She’s learnt how to keep peace, to steer clear of rocking the boat, uphold family honour, anticipate, be patient, consider consequences before acting, shun pettiness in achieving the bigger objective, and look after the vulnerable who willy-nilly get affected. In short, she understands the value of intangibles, of building and preserving relationships as the bedrock for the future, and not to indelibly destroy hope. If you look at these characteristics in business perspective, they are desirable. The counter argument that joint family children cannot take decisions because elders run the home is negated by this aunt who wants her own way.

Living in a home with his grandparents, parents and his father’s 4 married brothers, Hemant has seen tremendous stress and strain through his 24 years. The elder boy in a joint family feels totally accountable for his younger cousins, especially

the girls. Hemant's girl cousin confides in him. She shows him the miniskirt she wears to a party, then quickly pulls up a loose salwar over it as Hemant responsibly drops her off in his motorbike. He knows he cannot reveal to the elder generation that he's allowing this, but he cannot deny her this lifestyle as he too is doing something the elders will disapprove, he has a girlfriend who's not of the same caste. He knows this will be his monumental problem soon.

Extended joint family: Namita lives with her parents and grandparents in Tamilnadu. Her father is the earning member who's brought his parents to live with his nuclear family, that's why this is an extended nuclear family. Here too, the social values of the older family members have been transferred to the children. Namita and her sister would never go against what they perceive their family would disapprove. There's a visible demarcation between her and her friends from nuclear families. Namita says she's more traditional in her dressing style and approach towards the opposite sex. She'll never appear provocative, nor like her friends, spend on expensive cosmetics and perfumes. Her big worry is the caste factor. She and a boy from her college are in deep love, but social issues are putting a question mark on their happiness. He's of a higher caste joint family, he says he loves her but has no guts to reveal his love to his parents, fearing rejection. Namita believes her father may have guessed the situation although she's not revealed anything yet. He's told her about their looking out for an alliance for her, and that she should not mix with young boys, especially mentioning the boy she loves. Namita's fluid situation is unnerving her, but she says she knows that if her boyfriend has not committed marriage to her, it's a dead end. She's willing to risk everything, but her boyfriend's hesitation tells her that her love will never converge because of caste. She lives in uncertainty of love which may end up in arranged marriage to someone else.

Nuclear family: Anjali's parents had eloped, so her mother is totally banned from entering her maternal home. Subsequently, Anjali says she has no restrictions whatsoever on whom to marry. Ranjana is from a nuclear family too, but she has self-imposed discipline. She will not do what she imagines her parents will not like, but seeing her sisters marry outside their caste, she knows her boundaries are not too tight. Both these nuclear family girls are outgoing and extroverts, oozing confidence. They have chosen high-pressure careers, they burn the midnight oil at work and travel nonchalantly, zooming into different cities.

India's social fibre is so strong that whether you are targeting a consumer or employee, the more you go in-depth to understand the microcosms of this society, the better will you understand the aptitude of your employee for recruitment or the purchase motivation of your consumer. We are all familiar with joint families, but how the young generation is confronting change is the most important aspect to discover.

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