

THE CONCEPT OF FAMILIAL DUTY IN INDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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In India the concept of duty to the extended family has various implications for social work practice. Sometimes, a sense of duty to the family interferes with personal happiness especially in a home where a mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law conflict exists. This article analyses how social workers handle such situations in their practice and how they balance the idea of individual freedom and worth in relation to familial duty.

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The concept of familial duty in India stems from the larger, philosophical concept of *dharma* (duty) and is a basic value in Hindu society. It has its roots in the Hindu epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Hindu scriptures point out that freedom can be obtained only through the bonds of discipline and surrender of personal inclinations. In fact, the *Bhagavadgita* (Song of the Lord) is a defence of the social order where each person has his allotted duty to perform without self interest (*Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, 1967:2). The *Dharma Sutras* and *Dharma Shastras* or manuals on *dharma*, contain rites and rules of conduct. Their principal contents address the duties of people at various stages of life or *ashramas* - studenthood, householdership, retirement and asceticism, and details like dietary regulations, forms of hospitality, rules for women and wives, daily obligations, and so on. (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1989: 596-7). Therefore, *dharma* is often perceived as a code of conduct, a guideline, a perspective of looking at life situations, its responsibilities and obligations. It has been described by Radhakrishnan (1961) as a way of righteousness.

In common usage, *dharma* may denote the established practice of any caste or community (*Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 1925 :702). In every day life, *dharma* is synonymous with role obligations which different family members (a son, a daughter, a daughter-in-law and parents) have to perform, sometimes in spite of their personal happiness for the sake of others family members, the kin, the community and the country. In fact, the concept of duty to the family and the role obligations of men and women pervades Indian tradition to other religious groups as well. Notions of duty are part of the larger Indian cultural ethos. These are incorporated into the Indian value system and, in the past, duty has been seen as a source of strength, sacrifice, accommodation, adjustment and compassion.

However, in modern times, with the advent of urbanization and the loss of community living and social support networks, the concept of duty seems to have lost some of its sanctified effect. The economic stresses of life, the emergence of a spirit of individualism born out of western educational roots and of competition in professional spheres, the birth of the nuclear family in urban cities, have led to duty being seen as a burden leading to conflict and unhappiness in certain ways (Sreenivasan, n.d.). However, this does not mean that the average, urban Indian has disregarded his ties with the concept of duty in life. On the other hand, the concept seems to still have a hold on the Indian mind and character. Rather, what seems to have emerged is introspection, perhaps conflict and

working models of trying to maintain individual happiness at the cost of notions of duty. For some individuals, there may be no conflict, no internal turmoil and the performance of duty deals with happiness and satisfaction. For others, the case may not be so clear cut.

G. R. Bannerjee (1972) believes that of the many broad Socio-cultural influences on human beings in society, duty is one concept which definitely seems to affect the Indian mind and character. She uses the concept of duty to distinguish between Western societies and Eastern societies. She believes that Western society is far more individualistic, whereas, role-definitions in India require a person to be 'duty' oriented towards their family, community and only last of all, to themselves. Notions of duty in Eastern tradition differ from the rights or demands for personal freedom and societal benefits in Western society. In any society, these are moral questions and concern with the 'oughts' of living - the duties and responsibilities, the sense of fairness and justice and the obligations that define how we treat others, and the way we determine how we, in turn, ought to be treated. A moral sense, then, involves not only our individual actions but our relationship with others (Goldstein, n.d.).

These moral issues, the sense of duty and responsibility, have various implications for social work practice. The concept of duty, of being interdependent with the family and, perhaps, the extended family and the community, might contrast strongly with the American spirit of individualism especially in relation to family structures. Eastern clients generally accept their interdependent roles in the family and in society. How far they pursue individual freedom and expression to the exclusion of family needs/wishes is not clear. There is no doubt that family support systems are very strong in India. If one were to lay aside the idea that there may be familial conflicts and tensions, the idea of comfort and solace from such bonds gets highlighted. To quote Aptekar (1967: 27).

The extended family which is to be found in a number of Asian cultures, is a form of social organization that must be understood in terms of values. A source of security, more time honored than any social security system, it is an area for self expression, for the realization of personal loyalties and sometimes even for alliance against outsiders.

A variance of an interdependency on the family, in turn, could lead to a sense of dependency among people. This could be one possible explanation for therapists branding Eastern clients as being far more dependent than Western clients, in a therapeutic relationship (Rosemary Dinnage, 1981; S. Kakar, 1982; G.R. Bannerjee, 1972). The Easterner does not consider it ignoble to seek the advice of more experienced and educated people and the Eastern therapist does not consider dependency to be a problem (J.S. Neki, 1973; G. Mathew, 1981). In fact, Bannerjee believes that in keeping with cultural values, it is the social worker's role to arouse in the client a sense of duty towards the betterment of society: "His (client's) conformity to group norms should be with proper understanding of his role as a human being and relationship to his group and duty towards the group" (G. R. Bannerjee, 1972:8).

Often, such values may lead to a conflict - what we desire for ourselves may be in conflict with what others expect from us, especially in a society which places such a high premium on what 'others' expect from an individual.

Gilligan (1983), talks of the morality of obligation and caring for others versus individuation and personal freedom and these often stand in dialectical tension with one another. Sometimes, inspite of G. R. Bannerjee's views (that a social worker's treatment should include compliance of familial duties), there could be serious dilemmas a social worker would face in attempting to bridge the gaps between role obligations to the family versus the personal freedom and independence of the client.

These are some of the research questions that we are concerned with in this article. How do Indian clients deal with a conflict between familial duty and personal happiness? How do Indian caseworkers handle such issues? How does the worker solve the issue of the client's individuality and his self-determination versus traditional role expectations and demands?

Methods

Data for the article stemmed from a larger study on the influence of culture on casework practice in India. The study was qualitative and exploratory in nature and intended to generate descriptive accounts of how students and practitioners (both are referred to as social workers unless a distinction is made between the two) viewed Socio-cultural influences on their practice. Two instruments were used. The first was a close ended questionnaire on basic demographic information on the social workers, their families, their agencies (or field placements) and the kinds of clients they had to deal with. The second instrument was an open-ended questionnaire and it used some case-studies to gain workers responses to culture specific issues in practice (for example, the role of fate, of traditional healing methods and on the concept of duty.) The case-studies were adapted from actual case examples in G.R. Bannerjee's book *Papers on Social Work* (1972).

Twenty-six professional social workers (the majority were Hindu but there were Muslims, Christians and Zoroastrians also), took part in the study in Bombay, India. There were twelve students and fourteen practitioners. The students were randomly selected from lists of Master's degree students who had casework/counselling experience with adult clients and were in their final semester at two reputable schools of social work in Bombay. The practitioners were selected arbitrarily from the directory *Help* in Bombay, which lists agencies offering various social services. We selected only those practitioners with a Master's degree in social work and whose duties included offering counselling to adult clients.

The case study that was used to gain the worker's responses on the concept of duty, dealt with a mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law conflict. The mother, her son and her daughter-in-law lived together. The son was the bread-winner of the family. The daughter-in-law sought professional help from a psychiatrist for the conflicts with the mother-in-law. The psychiatrist asked to see the mother-in-law. The latter refused to come to meet him. The psychiatrist then suggested that a nuclear home be set up to avoid further conflict. The husband/son was upset by this suggestion and did not think that this was fair to his mother. Though he loved his wife, he expected her to compromise as she was the younger person.

Findings

Each and every social worker thought that the case represented a common problem. We could not distinguish responses based on the different religious groups in our sample. What was uncommon, according to workers, was that fact that the daughter-

in-law visited a psychiatrist. Generally, professional help is not sought, especially with regard to family problems and conflicts. The workers believed that it is not a common practice to visit social workers, much less psychiatrists. Such problems are usually solved within the extended family system with aunts, uncles, and in-laws trying to work out solutions by offering their advice to the parties involved.

As for the emotional aspects of there being a conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, that was and all too common problem. The workers' reactions ranged from believing that the case was all too common, to a feeling that it was just "a part of life" and "no big deal". Some workers had negative attitudes towards the traditional attitudes presented in the case. They cited a variety of causes that accounted for the traditionalism - the authoritative set-up of the Indian family system and the domination of younger people by older people. Other workers took a more neutral stance to the case. They maintained that such conflicts were just part of life and occurred in society irrespective of class or educational differences. Other workers felt that though the case was typical, it was slightly biased against the mother-in-law and also that it was stereotypical.

Duty Versus Personal Happiness : It became evident that the concept of duty is not unconscious and assumed naturally, but is something which often interferes with individual happiness. Eighteen out of twenty-six workers felt that the average Indian is preoccupied with a sense of duty towards his family and that this concept of duty often interferes with personal happiness. Reactions were just tame, accepting passive agreements to the statement that duty interfered with personal happiness. These reactions contrasted strikingly with number of other reactions steeped in bitterness, anger and sorrow. Some made it a case of men versus women, with the greatest burden falling on women; others did not distinguish between the sexes, but felt that role expectations within the family made the Indian very duty conscious at the expense of personal happiness. Yet others believed that it was the nature of duty, and the manner in which it was expected or demanded by the family that would determine whether it eroded an individual's happiness or not. It was difficult to isolate trends between students and employees. Nobody mentioned class and educational differences as influencing traditional attitudes.

The most common stance was that women seemed to shoulder the major share of this burden; that they were often mere doormats and that husbands were selfish; yet, nobody mentioned seeking a divorce or breaking up the family to quote one such worker:

Yes, it (concept of duty) is always there. The mother or the wife has to do everything - looking after kids, the ration, food, the cooking, etc. If there's a school meeting it's mostly the mother who attends. She looks after the mother-in-law and if she gets a good mother-in-law, she's lucky. The burden of the family falls on the wife.... Rarely have I seen the husband help. I have seen very few cases where the husband also cooks. Maybe, one in a hundred cases is like this.

Some other workers did not make the issue a battle of the sexes, but something which the average Indian, in contrast to a Westerner, had to accept, to take naturally, in spite of making personal sacrifices.

On the other hand, a group of eight workers disagreed with the majority in that they did not think that the concept of duty interfered with personal happiness. With the exception

of only two students, the rest of these were older practitioners. In fact, in our study, all of our students were younger than the practitioners. Most of the students were in their thirties. The claim by the practitioners, here, was that duty did not lead to happiness. The manner in which one perceived the idea of duty and one's acceptance of it, rather, generated a sense of fulfillment and happiness at the idea of performing one's duty.

The Husband's Attitude : In the case-study, the husband expected his wife to do the compromising, as she was the younger person. Reactions to his attitude varied markedly. It was here that some of the most interesting differences between the workers became evident. The younger generation of workers, mainly the students, proved to be hot-headed, anti-male chauvinistic and quick to defend "the poor girl" (the daughter-in-law). They branded the husband as being "intensive" and "a pig". The older workers (the practitioners), used more subdued terminology, were more tolerant and willing to compromise than the younger workers. Earlier, some of these same practitioners had not considered being dutiful as being burdensome. Being married or not did not seem to alter this generational difference between workers. Overall, three equal categories of attitudes emerged. The first category, expressed mainly by younger students, sided with the daughter-in-law, empathized with her and felt sorry for her plight. The next category was dominated by older, married employees who pitied the husband, felt sorry for him being torn between the two and believed that the daughter-in-law should learn to compromise. The last category, including both young students and workers refused to take sides, wanted to remain objective and learn more about the case before jumping to conclusion.

Peace in the Family Versus Individual Happiness :The dilemmas and dichotomies that arise in the attempt to understand the Indian character are taken a step further here. An Indian often acknowledges that a sense of duty does interfere with personal happiness. Likewise, a number of young students, sided with the daughter-in-law and felt sorry for her. However, when it came to a question of maintaining peace and harmony in the family, at the cost of individual happiness, and living in a nuclear home, keeping the family together won out in the majority of cases! Fifteen out of the social workers supported the virtues of keeping the family (*i.e.* the husband, the wife and the mother-in-law) together. Only four workers advocated the choice of individual happiness over maintaining peace in the family and all four of these were young students. Another group of seven workers were more cautious in their approach - they suggested trying to keep the family together, but if that did not work, felt that alternative steps (like setting up a nuclear home or trying to redeem the marriage) might have to be endorsed. Nobody mentioned breaking up the marriage.

There were a number of reasons cited for the importance of maintaining peace in the family. Some of these stemmed from the nobler motives in man - the idea of duty (*dharma*) towards elders (parents and parents-in-law) and cultural expectations. Yet, other motives stemmed from the more mundane and harsher realities of everyday life - the sense of guilt, the economics of maintaining two separate homes and the impracticality of finding suitable accommodation in Bombay. Sometimes, nobler motives were meshed with practical ones, For example:

If you ask them (the couple) to form a nuclear family, later (on) the son and maybe, even the daughter-in-law will end up feeling very guilty and the husband might blame his wife for having to leave his mother. If we can only sort these things out... Try to

understand each individual because the family is most important....In addition, it's not economically feasible. We don't have old age homes, But, it's not right to ignore our duty, either.

The Role of the Social Worker in Handling the Case : The vast majority of workers (twenty-four out of twenty-six) believed that they would work towards a compromise, since there was no urgent need to break up the extended family. Compromise seemed to be the keynote of their approach - the desire to work with the husband, the daughter-in-law, and the mother-in-law, individually and together. The attempt was to suggest ways and alternatives, for instance like convincing the son to talk to his mother; the idea of getting the young couple to go out and do more 'fun' things together to kill the boredom and monotony of housework; the idea of paying home-visits to talk to the mother-in-law; role playing the RET (Rational Emotive Therapy) sessions with the family; the ability to compromise, to overlook, to understand and to ignore personality differences, and so on. In all this medley, it emerged that social workers did not attempt to put the onus of changing or compromising onto the daughter-in-law. The essential idea was to generate change in all three personalities. Perhaps, a systems approach (Bertalanffy, c. 1981) seems highly applicable to the Indian family. It is interesting to note that not a single social worker mentioned the word 'divorce'.

Typical responses were:

Identify the problem areas. List down what bugs one about the other. Sometimes it might be so petty that it will make you think that it may not be so bad... Find her (the daughter-in-law) other avenues of providing happiness - hobbies, work, etc. Then work through her to the others....

Or, I would go and see the mother-in-law privately. Persuade her to come to a joint family meeting. First meet them (all) individually, then the husband and the wife as a unit, because if they (the couple) reach a better understanding, then maybe they could deal with it (the problem) jointly.....

In contrast with this consensus on compromise, only two workers held the belief that, perhaps, a separation was required and that the mother-in-law should live away from the young couple, who had their own life to lead. However, their opinions were not clear-cut and seemed shrouded in ambivalence. At one moment, they advocated a nuclear home for the young couple and, at another, felt that the situation could 'be worked out' so that all three could live together. Of the two workers, one was a student and the other a practitioner.

Discussion

This article analyses the concept of duty in the family and the role expectations and demands of men and women in Indian culture. This, in turn, has implications for social casework.

The concept of duty looms large in the Indian mind, even though there is the acknowledgement that this is often at the expense of some amount of personal happiness. Living in an extended family (here a husband, his wife and mother) is not all smooth sailing. It is often the young who have to make more adjustments than the old, women

more than men and younger women more than older women. The acceptance of duty is seen either calmly, or with resignation, or with anger and, surprisingly, even with pleasure at the idea of fulfilling one's duty. Only if the demand for duty is "too much" and "its degree unrealistic" does it become irksome.

A social caseworker, coming from the same culture, though influenced by a different educational pattern (set in Western tradition), advocated a modern, pragmatic approach to solving the problem, where all parties participated in the process. The methods and the techniques used, *i.e.* of attempting to offer individual counselling to each family member, and then trying to bring them together for family counselling/therapy could represent a universal, common approach in social work practice. What seemed different was that it was directed at the traditional elements in society. The worker's attention, for the most part, was directed at maintaining the traditional, extended family together. She did not advocate setting up a modern, nuclear home, neither did she mention divorce, nor did she seem enthralled by Western independence. All she sought was to attempt a compromise, so that the different family members could live together in harmony and thereby perform their duties.

In spite of Kipling (East is East and West is West, and ne'er the 'twain shall meet), a curious blend of east-west patterns emerged. The Indian caseworker, like Schon's practitioner (1983), seemed to translate the theory that she had learned (based on Western models) to suit the moment-to-moment nature of practice. What might be considered as a systems approach to practice (Bertalanffy, c. 1981), or typical of family therapy in the Western world, was used sensibly and discreetly for handling an Indian family conflict. The worker advocated using various counselling approaches with different sorts of clients, depending on where they came from (different communities or ideologies). Hers was a pragmatic stand, aimed at the traditional family. There seemed to be no difference between what the worker might have advocated for herself versus what she advocated for the client. However, we found a generation gap between younger students and older practitioners. The younger generation of students were more hot-headed, anti male-chauvinistic and feministic as far as decrying old fashioned role expectations. They wanted to have a fair share in running their homes and in being considered equal by their husbands and mothers-in-law. The older group of practitioners, who also advocated change at all three levels (the husband the wife and his mother) were more subdued in their approach, more willing to 'bend'.

However, young students and older employees alike, seemed to share an overall faith in maintaining the extended family together at the cost of sacrificing some amount of personal happiness. The key element was to attempt a compromise, and to fulfil one's duty. Very often, the options were limited due to the reasons mentioned before, like the fear of social disapproval, paucity of homes for the elderly, financial constraints involved in supporting two homes and the impossible task of finding suitable accommodation in Bombay. Thus, though the concept of duty was all too prevalent in the workers' minds, it did not necessarily triumph on noble values alone. In such circumstances, compromise was the keynote to survival. Even the professional social worker acknowledged and advocated such a stance.

Her role, therefore, was to promote and propagate compromise. This was, perhaps, her duty (G. R. Bannerjee, 1972). She had to help clients to see the pros and cons of the situation, talk to family members, make lists of what hurt them, try to work those out

teach clients to ignore petty differences.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of the study are limited, because the study design included only caseworkers dealing with adult clients from Bombay city. Other social workers were not included. Further, clients were not interviewed, so that their perspective on familial duty is not available. It is possible that workers and clients living in smaller towns and more rural areas would be more conservative in their attitudes towards familial duty and role obligations. India is a vast country, with cultural diversities ranging between tribes, communities and castes. Urbanization, modernization and education have had their input on generating cultural pluralism in society. Therefore, it would be important to study how familial conflicts are handled in other areas versus the larger, more urbanized cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi. A larger study, including both social workers and their clients (with controls for level of education, community/caste affiliations and, perhaps, income), from a number of cities and towns, would provide a stronger and more generalizable sample. The study design and questions could be replicated with American social workers, to come up with an international perspective on how the same issues are handled in another society.

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Social workers promote social justice and the emergence of the desired changes. They are very sensitive and careful towards cultural and ethnic differences and are against any discrimination. Traditionally, the values that are basic for social work are very important for its practice. These values distinguish social workers from the other professional groups. Values have several important attributes and perform several important functions: they are generalized, emotionally charged conceptions of what is desirable; historically created and. Therefore, social worker play prominent roles in administrative and practice positions in correctional setting with all the law enforcing agencies to prevent this kind of social problem in the society and also to work on rehabilitation and to provide and secure social justice. Keywords: Correctional setting; Social work; Criminal justice system; Roles of social workers; Social worker's intervention cycle. Introduction. Field work programme provides opportunities to the social work students/learners to apply his/her theoretical knowledge skilled in the classroom appropriately in different pract... perspective in social work: Implications for culturally competent practice with American Muslims, *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 36:1-2, 48-72, DOI: 10.1080/15426432.2017.1311245. To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2017.1311245>. Western concept of the nuclear family to include extended family members who actively influence family decisions and dynamics (Carolan, Bagherinia, Juhari, Himelright, & Mouton-Sanders, 2000; Smith, 2007). Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that facilitates social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>.