Family-in-transition: A Risk Society Perspective

*Dr. Nisha Yadav
**Yuttika Singh

Abstract

The family structure and its social capital influence the socio-cultural character of the society and are considered as its backbone. The pre and post COVID-19 pandemic family system exhibits contrasting features on the basis of network relations that have emerged from insecurity, fear of unknown and threats that can be observed in the changing domestic world. The shrinking kinship system has led to a fragmentation (Jameson: 1991) of informal relations making pandemic itself the cause of disintegration of families. Social institutions and State are constantly being subjected to modern reflexivity (Beck: 1992) constantly as new kinds of inequalities and differences stand ahead of the social units in the society. The dynamics in need structure, change in division of labour in families, unemployment, unexpected expenses on health care are resulting into a new kind of alienation (Marx: 1844). The formal mode of socialization of children has been replaced by technology especially communication devices affecting their mental posture gravely. The leisure time activities like outdoor games and sports have been substituted by increased screen time. The fear of the death has resulted into a new philosophical discourse affecting the financial decisions of people. On the one hand, the role of State is being examined in the fields of health, education, etc. while on the other hand; families are resorting to alternate institutions for their health and safety. All these changes have led to unfolding of a new hierarchy in the economic structure which is in turn widening the class divide in society. The new normal is becoming a part of the culture system and may compel us to define family with new perspectives. This detailed paper aims to study the risks associated with growing inequalities and insecurities in the post pandemic family system and its imprints on the societal structure.

Keywords: risk society, family system, inequality, social capital, natural risk, manufactured risk, COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Although the family is not as powerful as the Military or the State, it is the most resistant to change and conquest (Goode 1964). Network relations form a vital component of social capital of family system and it helps in maintaining interest of family members. In any culture, it is evident that children also benefit from their parents' social contact. With the varied effects of pandemic on family system we may classify them as pre and post pandemic family system. The contrast which is not only limited to psycho-social wellbeing of individuals may compel the society to create new definitions of family and kinship.

Family works as an instrumental agent for the larger society, exerting social control and pressure on social units. The family is the best judge of a person's behaviour because family members are the ones that see everything the most (Goode 1964). The pandemic itself became a catalyst for family dissolution, challenging preconceived assumptions and preconceptions. Fear of sudden losses spawned new forms of religiosity. Religion was questioned on the one hand, yet many people turned to the divine for survival on the other. New emerging patterns and systems have had a significant impact on families. For example, job or salary loss, unanticipated healthcare costs, price increases, underemployment, or relocation. The dynamics in need structure and also the change in power dynamics in family can be seen as a part of the new normal. It has an effect on culture as well, such as refusing to touch the feet of elders, avoiding huge gatherings during weddings, and so on. With the disintegration of network ties, these shifts and threats make us wonder if sociology itself should be understood with new views.

Risk society

A risk society is one in which people become concerned about future disasters and the way modern society arranges itself in reaction to risks. Humans generate new risks, which leads to a lack of faith in modern institutions. Institutions that serve as a hinge between the individual and society tend to lose their integrative function and deliver the individual directly to society. It is also known as the unintended consequences of modernity's successes. In the second phase of modernity, the innovations developed in the first phase become risks. The first phase is about taking risks, and the second is about becoming cautious, which is known as reflexive modernity.

Humans become subjects of logical knowledge, which is one of the fascinating qualities of late modernity. With the advancement of science, people in society have begun to assign meaning and comprehension to many phenomena. Late modernity, on the other hand, is also associated with risk and catastrophe. The concept of precaution is linked to the concept of risk minimization. It was observed during the pandemic, when individuals began hoarding toiletries, sanitizers, cleaning agents, and other items, and the government repeatedly urged people to keep their surroundings clean and follow the approved regimen.

Beck divides risks into two categories: natural and manufactured risks. For the purposes of this research, we will view "manufactured risks" as a direct result of modernity and development. Manufactured risks have a massive environmental impact, as evidenced by today's society. The media is inundated with information about global warming, genetically modified foods, and the emergence of fatal viruses such as the Corona Virus. There has been a boomerang effect as a result of such hazards, with both offenders and victims eventually becoming victims.

Effects are difficult to detect and forecast in a risk society, but they are evenly dispersed among the population. As a result, it can be concluded that hazards are universal and transcend class boundaries. The role of social class has reduced as technology has advanced. At the outset of the pandemic, it appeared like only the poor and disenfranchised would be impacted the hardest. However, by the time the second wave of the pandemic arrived, it was clear that everyone was being afflicted, regardless of their socioeconomic status. It was observed that no one was spared from the

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Pandemic. Everyone was affected by it, whether emotionally or physically. The irony about risks is that they keep developing and reappearing, so they never fully emerge at once. We move from studying the distribution of goods to analysing the distribution of 'bads' in a risk society.

It is important to highlight that risks are not restricted to technological advancement; they can also be social. The risk society refers to the emergence of a new social setup in the transition to a new era of modernity, in which all old social notions are questioned. It witnesses the breakdown of institutional structures that acted as sole regulators of modern social life, such as State, family, and economy.

Research problem

To understand the impact of pandemic on family system through the sociological lens derived from market relations and State actor interface.

Aim and method of study

The purpose of this article is to compare the pre- and post-pandemic family systems based on the daily experiences of family members. The assessment and analysis are based on the authors' direct involvement in collecting data for the research titled 'Family-in-transition: A Risk Society Perspective'. During data collection, in-depth narrative interviews were conducted, and observations were made. Narrating is a transformational social activity for making sense of a changing reality. Even a tiny sample of narratives produced by a small group of people can provide evidence for comprehending the community's inter-subjective meanings. During the mentioned engagement, the authors documented narratives of seven individuals and documented their experiences of the pandemic on their family. This article highlights the issues families belonging to different income groups and professions faced during the pandemic. The authors also presented a comprehensive examination of secondary literature, such as newspaper articles, government reports and books on family, pandemic, and lockdown.

Research gap

The effects of the pandemic on family with respect to spatial distancing and inequalities have led to a new kind of organization of everyday life which is less discussed. To understand this gap, we present this qualitative study based on narrative-inquiry method from individuals of different age groups and income groups along with analysis of literature.

Review of Literature

Soumyajit Patra (2021) in The COVID-19 Pandemic and a New Sociology of Social Distancing has addressed the question of sociological consequence of the pandemic in everyday discourse. The author has stressed on the emergence of a new kind of fear that is the fear of losing life itself. Social distancing has been regarded as one of the best means to control the spread through non-pharma intervention. The differences in life experiences that arise as a consequence of one's position in the class hierarchy are intended to show statistically the social gap between two classes. The distance in

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question isn't just physical or geographical. It takes on a culturally defined and socially significant significance.

Abhishek Soni (2020) in Covid-19 and its impact on Indian society presented the sociological analysis of social distancing during the Covid-19 outbreak was highlighted by the author, who characterized it as a new sort of untouchability. The study has discussed the impact of Covid-19 on migrant and gig workers who had no savings for emergencies and were compelled to return to rural areas. The author went on to investigate the impact of a 100 percent enrolment ratio at the primary level of school when there is a clear drop in student productivity and learning ability (World Bank Report). Humans have suffered psychological trauma as a result of the resurgence of social discrimination in the form of social alienation and increased domestic violence. The author has expressed his dissatisfaction with the long-overdue adjustments and the manner in which they were implemented. The author has stated his concern about the new changes that have been long overdue, and how they may lead to fragmentation.

Sanjay Bhattacharya (2020) conducted a study on Social impact of COVID-19 and raised the question of "financial toxicity," which affects the lives and livelihoods of families in the event of illness. This was seen during the global epidemic, when the lockdown exacerbated people's financial woes. There was a significant shift in routine, a change in lifestyle, a postponement of expenses, and a loss of leisure activities. People sold stocks, used funds, and mortgaged assets to meet medical bills because they were afraid of losing their jobs. Many people had debts that were significantly more than their household income. All of this resulted in a serious psychosocial crisis with significant mental health consequences such as panic attacks, depression, and so on. The author correctly pointed out that coping mechanisms differed depending on the quality of an individual's social and psychological framework.

Ariel Kalil. et al (2020), in the Chicago-based study titled, Impact of Covid-19 Crisis on Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households emphasized the pandemic's induced consequences on childcare as well as parent-child relationships. The danger of disease and death created a sense of upheaval that could be seen in practically every family. The authors pointed out that income discrepancies could lead to varied levels of pandemic impact on families. Families with lower incomes or parents with less education are more likely to be affected. The study aimed to comprehend family dynamics following the pandemic's economic and societal constraints. Children were socially isolated from their friends and schools, and their daily routines were disrupted abruptly. The authors of this article looked at how stress affects both parents and children throughout the pandemic and lockdown and how it has affected their social conditions.

Man-yee Kan (2020) in 'How pandemic worsened the division of labour between men and women' stated that there is still a gender disparity in domestic tasks, and because of the lockdown, women were more sensitive to workload and could not devote as much time to their well-being. It not only resulted in an increase in unpaid household work, with women working significantly longer hours than men. There is also a large wage disparity, and therefore a disparity in occupational ranks. This

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has had a long-term impact on women's mental health, and their workload has stayed unchanged even after the lockdown was released.

Simeng Gu, et al. (2020) conducted a study on Covid era loneliness and highlighted that in the United States, one out of every five adults has experienced loneliness. The constraints and work-from-home culture that followed the lockdown exacerbated loneliness and many people felt marginalized and abandoned at one point or another. Workers who are lonely are far less productive, dedicated and motivated than those who are not and that are why loneliness affects political and economic areas of society too.

In a letter written by members of **The British Association of Social Workers (2020)** to the Prime Minister it was highlighted that Covid 19 pandemic is one of the biggest health crisis of the generation. The association has asked the Government to provide additional support to the youth. The various authors requested the State to take immediate and necessary steps to reduce the effect of pandemic on mental health of children and young adults. According to researches, many children became victims of abuse or domestic violence during the lockdown which could have long term mental health consequences. They also called for alternatives to access mental health support as school and other educational institutions were shut down. They urged the Government to prioritize mental health and deliver the best to the youth by providing sufficient infrastructure and funds. Some of the suggestions offered by them are:

- Launching a national level awareness campaign
- Delivering wellbeing support packages in education institutions
- Emergency funding to set up additional mental health care support, etc.

Family, Pandemic and risk

These shifts have affected all kinds of families regardless of their income or type before the pandemic had evolved. The incidents and cases of domestic violence reached its peak during the pandemic and many children and young adults became irritated with the environment at home, as they had no option to go outside.

Ravi, a daily wage worker says,

Initially, we bonded as a small family of four because we were going through the same thing at the same time. Simultaneously, no relatives or neighbors were keen to support us even with our ration. When the lockdown got extended and no jobs in our hands, our frustration level kept on increasing and we became bitter with each other. Our children saw and heard things that they should not have.

Pandemic, State and modern reflexivity

The middle classes distance themselves from public procurement in a risk society, and in some ways they are justified in doing so because that assistance was suited to a particular perception and condition of risk. People who have a more active approach to their life also have to have a more active approach to risk management, which is why those who can afford it choose to opt out of existing welfare systems.

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In the pre-pandemic family system, we witnessed that the relationship between individuals and State and individuals and institutions were mostly cordial. The essential challenge in modern civilization, according to Beck, is risk and how it might be avoided, managed, or diverted.

Individuals have expressed concerns about the government's support throughout the pandemic, whether in terms of healthcare or financial security.

28-year-old Kunal, shares his experience,

During the pandemic, the government attempted to politicize the crisis by arguing among themselves, which was unnecessary and should have been avoided. Hospitals were treating patients as if it were not their responsibility to save or at least try to save them. None were held accountable for anything. Whatever one received, even if they deserved it, was made to seem like a blessing.

Another experience about the role of State funds which target lower income families is shared by Malti who is the wife of a daily wage labor,

We are grateful to the people who started the idea of 'private rasoi (kitchen)' and helped us with at least one meal daily. We had access to grains for the first two weeks after the lockdown was imposed, but it soon became a distant reality.

Family savings and the Pandemic

Casualties are no longer age specific and financial insecurity as a result of unanticipated healthcare costs has become an inextricable aspect of life. Because of modern market dynamics, the concept of saving has long been obsolete, but as a result of the pandemic, families are turning to not only insurance but also other institutions for financial stability. This has also affected internal migration and has a direct impact on family system.

Parvati, a 36-year-old single mother of four girls who had migrated to Jaipur from her village before the pandemic, narrates

I was always told that having a son would safeguard my future after I had my first girl. I left my alcoholic husband after the birth of my fourth daughter and moved to the city with my cousin sister. We were stunned when the lockdown was announced, wondering to ourselves, "What if this is the end of our existence here?" I was unable to return to that man or that location. I work as a cook with my two older daughters and make 15,000 rupees each month. When we arrived at our separate places of work the next day, they had all sacked us and refused to pay our dues. We were repeatedly traumatized by hearing others remark, "You people will give us Covid." We had experienced discrimination and distancing in the past, but this time it was accompanied by a lot more pain.

Fragmentation of relations during the pandemic

There is a lack of interaction as a result of the increase in spatial distance. The family group structure is undergoing a transformation. Love and devotion have become secondary in a new form of selfishness that has emerged. Cultural learning is now being questioned, and the values of sacrifice are being replaced by putting one's own health and life first. A sense of disconnect and loneliness has evolved from the absence of family members during meaningful events. (Kirmayer 2020) The ritual

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system is changing, as seen by modest wedding gatherings, and it calls into question the existence of social institutions.

As 'risk assessors,' new actors and crucial players continue to emerge. Good can emerge from bad, according to Beck. During the pandemic, many examples of this argument were witnessed as social units began to face the dangers jointly by sharing the accompanying challenges. As a result, imagined communities arose outside of close-knit groups or families.

Suruchi further adds,

Soon after the lockdown we could gather who is really family and who is not. The distance between us and our kins kept on increasing with every new explosion of information through social media or word of mouth. Towards the mid of the lockdown even in our own family of six members there were episodes of altercations frequently. We all had hit saturation and after every five to six days we would burst out our frustration on each other.

42-year-old Deepak, a businessman by profession who lives alone with his mother narrates

I saw my own friend crying over not only the loss of his own father but how nobody helped him with any of the rituals. We were in shock that even his father's own brother who lived nearby made an excuse of illness to not be a part of the ritual.

Spending time at home, I realized a few things that had gone unnoticed all these years. They were especially little things about my mother who had aged so much and nobody to share things with. I noticed how she waited for the maid and her children so that she could discuss about the soap opera she was following then.

Post-Covid fear and culture of new normal has been institutionalized in the social units of the society. It seems difficult to back to the previous way of living as the changes have made a qualitative impact on family, marriage, kinship and friendship including neighbors.

30-year-old, Suruchi who was working from home during the lockdown shares

Despite the fact that I was not a regular at the gym, I had the impression that if I could just get to the gym, I would feel better. Nonetheless, because I didn't have the choice of going outside, I became more attached to the screen. Also, fear fostered in me after reading and hearing about untimely deaths. One of the main issues that made me feel more exposed was a lack of defense against the virus.

Deepak further narrates,

There were times we spent weeks without even walking to our garden. We would ask the vegetable seller to leave everything outside the gate and we did not see his face in the longest time. I remember I was so scared of my mother catching the virus, I spent hours washing the utensils, vegetables, groceries. I once even washed slices of bread as a part of my routine, he laughed as he recollected this episode.

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Entire domestic world was facing several kinds of threats due to the pandemic especially during the second wave when a huge number of casualties and deaths were reported. Death has since then, taken a psychological route and it makes us wonder whether it can take a new kind of philosophical discourse?

We are mostly presented with a picture of an ideal family system through media and culture but the pandemic induced shifts make us scrutinize such presentations.

Due to the financial repercussions on families, we may classify family system soon on the basic of their economic situation. The loss of close ones, loss of jobs and loss of finances has broken the safety syndrome.

Prashant, an event manager by profession says

During the pandemic, I stopped receiving bookings, and my father's pension was suddenly stopped being credited. During the first wave, I lost my father to the virus, and we were in serious financial trouble as a result of all the medical bills. I didn't have a choice but to start a new job. As a result, I opened my own tea shop near my home. Only government employees and large businesspeople, I reasoned, were likely immune to the impacts of the lockdown and pandemic.

Conclusion

Modernity, according to Giddens, is a risk culture that introduces new risk factors that were not present in prior eras. Because new dangers differ from past ones, the social environment is organised around uncertainty. During the pandemic, social units continued to generate new hazards, such as the breakdown of family relationships, the development of continual fear, and paranoia. According to him, global expert knowledge must reclaim lost confidence, recognising that danger can also be viewed as possibilities, such as stakes in order to achieve specific outcomes. Confidence is a psychological state that allows people to deal with risks that might otherwise cause them to stop acting, resulting in anxiety attacks, fear of death, in case of the pandemic.

Fear, instability, insecurity, and a lack of engagement are all evident in the post-pandemic family system. Emotional violence has grown commonplace in the home, despite the fact that social isolation, both physically and emotionally, still exists outside. Young children's socialization is now dominated by technology devices instead of family members. The family works in tandem with the child's socialisation and interaction with extended family and neighbours (Beteille 1991) Screen time has increased dramatically, particularly through communication devices. People prefer to broadcast their lives on social media than talk to family members at home, even during the lockdown.

People have been denied opportunities to work or study outside the area, yet have been obliged to stay due to responsibilities or constraints. Deviance may become a reality of broader nature as a result of instability in family structure and repeating changes in everyday reality. Not only has the family experienced financial losses and the absence of kin, but it has also endured a significant emotional loss. The intersection of mental health concerns, alienation, and fear psychology may result in a massive loss, as well as an increase in suicidal instances.

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"In a liquid modern life there are no permanent bonds, and any that we take up for a time must be tied loosely so that they can be untied again, as quickly and as effortlessly as possible, when circumstances change - as they surely will in our liquid modern society, over and over again."

- Zygmunt Bauman

Note:

The names of all respondents are changed in order to maintain the confidentiality.

*Professor
**Research Scholar and Lecturer
Department of Sociology
IIS (Deemed to be University) Jaipur

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