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This is us

How the nuclear family changed the world

The term ‘nuclear family’ is 100 this year. But the human tendency to split up into small units goes back a long way. Cities, jobs, colonialism and leaps in technology have all worked to shrink the extended family. The ripple effects are everywhere: in our restaurants and phone plans, our house sizes and ‘family packs’. Except, now, the format is changing

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Last year, The Great Indian Family, a movie touted as a celebration of the spirit of Indian joint families, was a bomb at the box office. Released in September 2023, it garnered a rating of 5.6 on IMDb, despite a star lead in the form of Vicky Kaushal (who, incidentally, had two hits that year: the patriotically themed Sam Bahadur, and the romantic comedy Zara Hatke Zara Bachke). There was a time when theatres across urban India would have filled up with people eager to watch a film such as The Great Indian Family, about a devout young Hindu who discovers he is a Muslim by birth, and must now rethink his ideas of identity, community and family. Instead, the film sank without a trace. I couldn't help but think that a key reason was that large joint-family stories such as this one simply do not resonate in our cities any more, because there are fewer and fewer large joint families out there. They have been replaced, of course, by the nuclear unit. The term “nuclear family” is 100 years old this year. Its earliest recorded use was in a 1924 research paper by Polish-British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. Other terms in sociology for this format of parents and their children living in one home include “elementary family”, “atomic family” and “cereal packet family”.

According to a 2023 Consumer Connections report by market research company Kantar, nearly 50% of all households in India are now nuclear, a steep increase from the 37% recorded in 2008. In the southern states, the share of nuclear families stands at 69%, up from 50% in 2008. It is 49% in western India, 45% in the eastern states and 38% in the northern states. Meanwhile, on average, three-fourths of all new homes in both private and government-funded realty projects, over the past 14 years, have been designed for nuclear families, the report states.

The average number of people per household has fallen too, to 4.2 people in the average urban household and 4.5 in the average rural household, per the National Family Health Survey 2019-21. (The average size of the Indian household has shrunk, from 4.6 to 4.4 people, between 2015-16 and 2019-21, it found.)

If we look to the US, we can see signs of where we may be headed, over the next 50 years or so.

In 1960, 85% of all households were inhabited by families, with 44% of these consisting of a married couple with children, and 31% consisting of married couples without children, US Census data shows. The remaining family households were composed of single parents with children and “other family” with children.

By 2017, the share of homes inhabited by families had dropped to 65%. Of these, only 19% were couples with children, and 30% were couples without children.

More than 30% of US households in 2017 were made up of what are termed “non-family” inhabitants, which typically includes single people, flatmates, and unmarried couples. That's twice as many non-family homes as in 1960.

It is no wonder the TV series Modern Family (2009-20) was a big hit, reflecting the changing family structures in the US.

TO THIS DAY, INDIANS NEW TO A CITY OR COUNTRY MAY BE ASKED: ‘SO, WHO DO YOU HAVE HERE?’ AND THE ANSWER IS RARELY: ‘OH, NOBODY. IT JUST SEEMED LIKE A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE IN.’ WHETHER IN CHENNAI OR CANADA, THE ANSWER USUALLY INVOLVES SOME SORT OF KIN

Given how clearly the shift was reflected in Indian data, I wondered if it would be visible in smaller samples too. So I conducted a little experiment, asking two questions to my class of 50 at SP Jain Institute of Management & Research (SPJIMR), the business school where I teach.

The two questions were: When you were young (under the age of 10) what was the composition of your home; was it a nuclear or joint family? What was the composition of your home at the age of 20?

The findings were interesting. Almost 40% of the class had lived in nuclear family units 15 years ago; 54% of them lived in nuclear families today.

Another question occurred to me at this point, triggered by something I had come across during home visits and consumer research a decade ago. One quote in particular had stayed with me. Asked if she lived with her in-laws, a young woman had said: “Hum saath saath khaate hain, lekin choolah alag chalta hai (We eat together, but our kitchens are run separately).”

I turned to my class again. Almost 20% of my students — and 40% of those living in nuclear homes — said that their grandparents lived nearby; sometimes in the same building, sometimes on the next street, and sometimes in the flat next door.

Does this call for a new categorisation of households? Should we be viewing these as an Indian innovation: the Hybrid Nuclear Family?

After all, in a joint family, the grandparents are close enough to provide vital child-care, and to seek help themselves when it is needed. And here the same pattern was visible again, with the obvious differences of separated habitation and lifestyles.

The growth of these nuclear and hybrid nuclear families has interesting marketing ramifications. One is the significant increase in demand for new dwelling units.

Some builders are capitalising with multi-storey residential buildings made up entirely of one-bedroom homes. In one such case I was told that most of the flats were bought by people living in the same area, looking to provide an independent house for their soon-to-be-married son or daughter.

When new homes are created, there is demand for allied products and services: furniture, durables, appliances and so much more. There is a need to outsource services, from cooking to grocery-shopping and pre-Diwali deep cleaning.

There simply isn't the time, and with higher disposable incomes and less policing (especially for the women), there often isn't the inclination to do it all oneself. Cooking becomes a hobby; doorstep services include those of a beautician and masseuse.

Nuclear family units become a boon for marketers. From travel and leisure to sofas and dining tables, the change in format is visible in the pervasive “rule of four”. (Read the story alongside for more on this.)

We should expect to see more of this in the coming decade. Perhaps my coinage of “hybrid nuclear” will catch on too, replacing the Great Indian Joint Family.

(Ambi Parameswaran is the best-selling author of 11 books. His latest, All the World's a Stage, is a personal branding story)



(Below) The sitcom Modern Family (2009-20) captured changing family formats and how they shape us.

{ RELATIVE CHANGE } CONNECT FOUR

Roman runes: The ancient roots of the nuclear format

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So much can change in a century. When it was coined in 1924, the term “nuclear family” signalled modernity. It indicated a man, a woman and their child or children, living lives of relative urban independence. The term itself drew on the latest in cutting-edge science — the splitting of the atom; “nuclear family”, in fact, predates “nuclear bomb” by about two decades.

By the 1950s, it had come to be seen as the family format that “inculcated the liberal, capitalist, democratic and economically dynamic values of individualism, independence, aspiration and social mobility,” British historian and genealogist Kevin Schurer and history and public policy professor Simon Szreter wrote, in an article published by the UK-based Cambridge Group for the History of Population & Social Structure in July.

This was in sharp contrast to the extended-family households that “were thought to transmit the anti-individualist values of respect for... authority... and for tradition, collective solidarity... and social stasis,” Schurer and Szreter wrote.

By the late-1970s, a same-sex couple in the US had become the first to officially adopt a child, and a new wave of change was underway. The stability of the two-parent foundation was still considered essential. That would change too.

Today's happy-family formats include a single, never-married adult with children adopted or born via surrogacy or in-vitro fertilisation (IVF).

How old is the nuclear family itself? Traces of it have been found in family dedications to deceased loved ones in 1st century BCE Ancient Rome. “The Roman Empire encouraged a key foundation of the nuclear family, emphasising marital monogamy (rather than polygamy),” says Alice Evans, a senior lecturer at King's College, London.

Private property would play a key role, splitting tribes into large family units, then smaller ones. Technology and money would play a vital role too; a group this small could only support itself if members had access to at least a few labour-saving devices, and could buy what they didn't have the time to make, whether clothes or tools or bread.

By the 16th century, the nuclear family was widespread enough in Britain's cities for the government to launch welfare

schemes aimed at helping young parents with sick children, or a widowed single parent (with presumably no other support), Schurer says.

In Asia, the format would only become aspirational in the 20th-century colonial era. “There is this idea in Asia that paradise lies at the mother's feet, for sons, so staying in the parental home is seen as a kind of ideal, and also reflects a deep sense of loyalty,” Evans says. “This makes it relatively harder for people to choose to break away.”

For some individuals, those same bonds — of patriarchal heritage, set social norms and, of course, caste — made the nuclear unit more desirable.

It was a way for the individual to redefine and reinvent themselves, choose a profession and lifestyle all their own, select their own social mores, particularly in areas such as careers (particularly for women) and marriage, child-bearing and child-rearing.

It also made space for a focus on romantic love. This was especially crucial to the position of women, says Evans, because in a union built on love rather than on authority, the woman was more likely to have a say in major decisions.

The role of wife and mother in a nuclear family remained a difficult one to navigate. Around the world, there is societal pressure to “lean in” and do it all.

“The imbalance has been difficult to fix even now,” says Sonalde Desai, a demographer, principal investigator for the India Human Development Survey, and professor formerly at University of Maryland and now at the National Council of Applied Eco-



From the Wknd archive: We are many, we are one: Ambi Parameswaran writes on India's population milestone

From travel and leisure to sofas and dinnerware, the shift to nuclear has been visible in the pervasive ‘rule of four’. (Right) Advertisements for Tupperware and Ikea.