



HT ILLUSTRATION: RAHUL KRISHNAN

{ HEIR AND THERE } UNIT TEST

So, we're going nuclear. What's next?

Sukanya Datta

sukanya.datta@hindustantimes.com

For most of Indian history, one has had to have a compelling reason to move away from the larger family.

A good one was work. In the absence of such a reason, a son who left his parent's homestead with his wife and children was primarily seen to be doing so out of discord.

Even when choosing where to shift, family, in the form of more distant relatives, served as a beacon. 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 Chandigarh, Chennai or Canada, the answer usually involves some sort of kin.

Then came liberalisation, and a boom in such movement. India awoke to new kinds of ambition and aspiration. The tilt towards migration was helped along by the sad fact that rural economies were not growing, and agricultural land holdings were shrinking with each generation.

"The decline in traditional occupations has affected the size of the average family in India, as employment moved toward non-traditional jobs and once-joint families became more scattered," says Poonam Muttreja, executive director of the non-profit research and advocacy body Population Foundation of India.

The result is a rise in nuclear families across rural and urban India, because elderly parents left behind by themselves count as nuclear families too.

Because our social ties remain strong, however, the very idea of the nuclear family in India is difficult to pin down, 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 Economic Research (NCAER).

According to the 2011 census, there is a whole sub-section of families lying between the conventional joint and nuclear formats. The "supplemented nuclear household" makes up 16% of the 25 crore households in India, according to census data. These are nuclear families that also contain an unmarried, divorced or widowed relative.

The "broken extended family" makes up another 4% of total family households. This is a unit in which someone who is without a spouse lives with other relatives of whom at least one is married. For instance, a widow may move in with a sister and brother-in-law, or with a nephew or niece and their spouse and children.

"In-laws / parents also rotate between children's homes," says Desai. "Younger siblings and cousins may spend extended periods with married couples as they study, find work and settle, over time, into their own homes."

This broad spectrum of what constitutes a nuclear family is likely to keep changing as family sizes shrink and care-giving responsibility, for both elders and children, is shared more widely.

"Lower fertility rates always have implications for elder care. It could, for instance, potentially increase the reliance on institutional care for the elderly. This could further contribute to the decline of the broken extended family and the joint family," Muttreja says.

She predicts further diversification in family structures too. Just last month, she points out, the Reserve Bank of India clarified that there are no restrictions on same-sex or queer couples opening a joint bank account.

"These shifts reflect broader societal changes, including greater acceptance of diverse lifestyles and relationships. They will further challenge the traditional joint and nuclear family models, creating a more fluid understanding of family structures."

omic Research (NCAER).

Even so, some elements of housekeeping and childcare have to be outsourced, and one of the most visible changes this has wrought is the growing number of industries catering to the nuclear family.

There are play schools, creches, nanny agencies and other childcare facilities; tiffin services, house-keeping and house-cleaning services; ready meals and packaged snacks.

In construction, that bellwether of society, most urban homes are designed for the nuclear format. In cars and furniture sets, vacation plans and phone plans, the template is two-plus-two.

Now, other formats are emerging too. Since the global economic downturn

of 2008, which has been followed by further blows such as the pandemic, there has been the emergence of a boomerang generation. Here, unable to keep up with expenses (primarily housing), the nuclear unit moves back into the parental home.

The last time the boomerang was visible on this scale was during the Great Depression.

A July 2020 analysis by the Pew Research Center indicated that 52% of young adults in the US lived with one or both parents, up from 47% in February that year. It was the largest-ever share of 18-to-29-year-olds living with parents in that country, since the Great Depression (1929-1939).

Meanwhile, data from UK's Office for National Statistics shows that the total num-

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ber of adult children living with their parents rose from about 4.2 million in 2011 to 4.9 million in 2021.

A large number of adults are also living with chosen family — friends, flatmates, partners — in formats that are not registered, except on a lease agreement, and sometimes not even there.

"This shift reflects broader societal changes, including greater acceptance of diverse lifestyles and relationships," says Poonam Muttreja, executive director of the non-profit research and advocacy body Population Foundation of India.

Was this inevitable, once the cult of the individual began to take shape? Perhaps. What does this mean for the future of the family? "We can expect to see further diversification in terms of how a family is defined, as social values, legal frameworks and global trends tilt towards inclusivity," Muttreja says.



Stills from Breaking Bad, Emily in Paris, The Last of Us, The Crown, and the Star Wars spinoff The Acolyte. Spot the shows that are all icing and no cake.

Anesha George

anesha.george@hindustantimes.com

Lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over."

That was the mob boss Tony Soprano, in an episode of The Sopranos, a show that would set new standards for the small screen from 1999 to 2007.

Lately, viewers have been getting the same feeling, not about their crime families (so few of us have those), but our watchlists.

The number of shoddy spinoffs alone might have prompted Soprano to pull a gun.

There is so much new content, yet so little worth watching. So much time and money spent, to produce shows that are all icing and no cake (such as Emily in Paris).

In April, The New York Times chief TV critic James Poniewozik called this "the golden age of Mid TV". He described the term as "what you get when you raise TV's production values and lower its ambitions".

How did we get here, from the era of Prestige TV that took off with The Sopranos (one of HBO's early experiments with the original-series format, for cable)?

Freed from the fetters of mainstream television, these series could target the adult rather than the family; depict drug use and cursing, sex and violence. Storytelling blossomed in strange and riveting new ways.

Six Feet Under (2001-05; HBO) told a darkly funny tale built around a dysfunctional family of undertakers. The Wire (2002-08; HBO) explored biases of race and class, and the misuse of power by cops. Other networks joined in, with shows such as Lost (2004-10; ABC), Mad Men (2007-15; AMC) and Breaking Bad (2008-13; AMC).

"TV was the new literature, back then," says writer and translator Poonam Saxena.

Shows dug deep to explore questions that dated to the earliest myths: How does anyone come to terms with the ever-presence of death; what would really happen if a group of people was trapped on a deserted island; what does greed do to ideas of self, family?

Amid the rise of the smartphone and smart TV, streaming platforms took the model mainstream, with shows designed to be so unmissable that they drew new subscribers in. Game of Thrones (2011-19) helped boost HBO Go in this way, a year



CHECK OUT Wknd's watchlist of under-the-radar TV shows too good to miss

{ DEE FOR DRAMA }

Deepanjana Pal



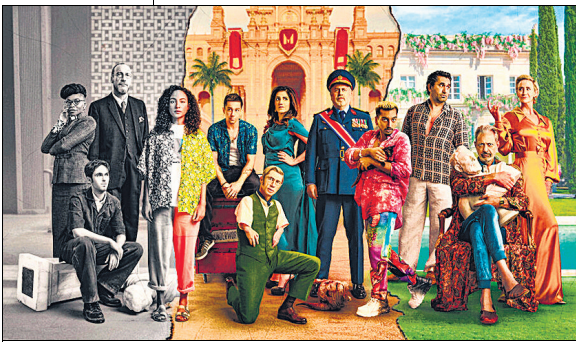
Seeking comfort in the Kaos

The Netflix show about entitled gods is a set of exquisitely crafted wheels within wheels, and a reminder: the best things are human

Towards the end of Netflix's new show Kaos, Zeus (Jeff Goldblum) hosts a watch party. At it are his wife Hera (Janet McTeer), son Dionysus (Nabhaan Rizwan), and brother Poseidon (Cliff Curtis). He has called them over to witness Minos, ruler of Crete, disprove a prophecy that foretold that he (Minos) would be killed by his child.

In this world, imagined by the show's writer-creator Charlie Covell and inspired by classical Greek mythology, every human is born with a prophecy. Zeus, who was once mortal, fears his because it predicts that he will eventually lose power. Even though he has cast aside his humanity, recent incidents make him suspect the prophecy has been set in motion, and he spirals into paranoia and cruelty.

These are gods as we rarely see them. Over and over, they dismiss humans as weak, contemptible and puny. It is only when we learn the roots of their own immortality that Kaos's core irony is revealed: it is the essence of humanity that makes the gods divine.



after the platform's launch. House of Cards (2013-18) was so widely discussed that it prompted people to ask: What is a Netflix?

By 2015, Amazon Prime's big hit, Transparent (2014-19; about a father and grandfather embracing his identity as a woman) had become the first streaming show to win the Best Series award at the Golden Globes.

By 2021, Netflix, HBO and Apple TV+ were sweeping up Emmies, for series that included The Crown, Hacks and Ted Lasso.

This golden age would also see the release of titles such as Chernobyl, Succession and The Last of Us (HBO), The Irishman, Sacred Games and Snowpiercer (Netflix), Severance, Slow Horses and The Morning Show (Apple TV+).

Seasonal changes

Despite all this, subscriber numbers failed to reach the levels expected. This created a sense that the big ideas had not paid off. "Platforms are now less inclined to experiment," says film and TV critic Suchin Mehrotra. "Today, most of the original shows being greenlit are ones being made on a very low budget or with mass appeal and big talent attached."

The soaring demand for content in the pandemic, which drove a shift to volumes and widespread appeal over fine-tuned quality, finally began to take its toll.

Another key factor in the rise of Mid TV has been the demise of the writers' room.

In an effort to keep costs down, platforms rely on "mini-rooms" with just a handful of writers and a showrunner. The writers are often freelancers and may not stick around, which explains why so many second seasons seem to simply fall away.

There will always, thankfully, be exceptions. Netflix's new dark comedy, Kaos, starring Jeff Goldblum as the Greek god Zeus trying to navigate faith and power in a modern-day version of Greece, is a well-knitted, dynamic example. Apple TV+ has Season 2 of Shrinking (about the private lives of exclusive therapists in California) due out next month, and the long-awaited Season 2 of Severance due out next year.

"It takes some sifting through the glut, but there are shows that have not received the love they deserve," Mehrotra says.

When that happens, it just reinforces the vicious cycle, and so it goes. Maybe they could make a series about that.

Returning to the watch party: Minos is ordered to disprove his prophecy so that Zeus may be reassured that prophecies can be defied. And so the gods gather to watch him kill his son.

This is when a curious parallel unfolds. As they watch Minos on a live video feed, the audience watches the gods (and Minos), in an Escher-esque illusion of screens reflecting screens. If Minos and other mortals are idle entertainment for the Olympians, then Zeus, Hera and the others in Kaos are the same to audiences around the world.

They're trying to dazzle Netflix subscribers in hopes of being renewed for successive seasons; much like the humans in Kaos live in hope of "renewal" or rebirth.

Kaos quickly makes clear that though the gods revel in being supra-human, they have little under their control. The situation is similar for us, off-screen. The importance given to views and box-office earnings suggests that audiences are powerful, but we have limited influence over what is commissioned and released.

Just as Zeus devours news coverage of events in his honour and natural disasters he has unleashed, and just as Hera, queen of the gods, listens in on people in confessional boxes, we as viewers turn to art with a sense of entitlement, and yet depend on it for comfort, distraction and more.

Of course, being a consumer of culture doesn't have to be as exploitative.

Over the past two weeks, my family and I have grappled with the reality of my father being diagnosed with cancer. We live in hope that it can be beaten into remission. At the end of each of these impossibly long days, my parents and I found ourselves turning to art in various forms.

Earlier this week, Mohammed Rafi sang Main Zindagi Ka Saath Nibhata Chala Gaya to us. It's a song from Hum Dono (1961). Literally everything associated with that film is long gone. Yet here we are, drawing comfort from Rafi's voice and Jaidev's music.

The song is eternal because it is just a click away and loses nothing with new listens. If anything, it is a little more alive because new memories are made around it.

The solace that such art offers us reminds me of a line spoken by a character in Kaos: "All the best things are human."

(To reach Deepanjana Pal with feedback, write to @dpanjana on Instagram)