

HARI DUTT SHARMA

FAMILY SYSTEM IN SANSKRIT FOR GLOBAL WELFARE

Family is a firm foundation of social life in India. Family stands on the strong stone of faith and fraternity. Family is a noble conception, a unit of society and a way of life. *Kula*, *Parivāra* or *Kutumba* is the backbone of household or *gārhasthya*. In ancient times Indian seers had conceived the concept of family and old Sanskrit scriptures have a vivid account of all constituents of a family. The purpose of this system was to lead a life full of happiness. An ideal progeny was born in an ideal environment of a family and welfare of all was intended in the welfare of a family. Different Sanskrit texts from early Vedic age have been depicting the structure of a family, as it was a peculiar achievement and successful accomplishment of Indians, which India can boast of. The concept of family starts from a small unit of two to twenty, twenty five or more persons originally coming from one lineage (*kula* or *Vamśa*) living normally under one roof, having normally one kitchen. This family had one master to control it, he or she being the eldest member of the group.

The idea rooted in the conception of a family was that amongst all the *Āśramas* the *gṛhastha āśrama* or the house holder's *āśrama* is the best as *Vaśiṣṭhasmṛti* says:

“*Caturṇāmāśramāṇāṃ tu gṛhastastu viśiṣyate*”.¹

‘The *gṛhastha* only is the superior among the four *āśramas*’.

1. *Vaśiṣṭhasmṛti*, verse 231

Manusmṛti also states:

“*Gṛhastha śreṣṭha ucyate*”².

‘A house holder is the greatest of all’.

Family is a well-arranged group of persons sailing in the same boat and experiencing pleasure and pain, sharing comforts and sufferings of one another.

The concept of *Kutumba* in Indian culture starts with a small group and goes for up to the concept of the whole world “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*”, the whole world is one family or the Vedic idea “*Yatra viśvaṃ bhavatyekanīḍam*” where the whole world becomes a nest (for dwelling at one place).

The concept of a family takes shape from a pair, which gives birth to a child. The pair is called parents ‘*pitarau*’ or ‘*mātāpitatau*’ The roots of parents give birth to offshoots, the progeny son or daughter. Among the series the mother is the prime bearer of the same. *Śāṅkhāyana āraṇyaka* describes it in this way:

“*Jāyā pūrvarūpaṃ, patiruttararūpaṃ, prajā saṃhitā*”³

‘Mother is first form, father is the latter form, and the progeny is the perfection’.

In *Taittirīya upaniṣad* the words in this context are changed “*Prajā saṃdhiḥ*”⁴, the progeny is the union. It means mother and father get perfection or are united through the progeny. The same conception is depicted in another way in *Śāṅkhāyana āraṇyaka* such as:

“*Jāyā pūrvarūpaṃ, patiruttararūpaṃ, putraḥ saṃhitā*”⁵

It means wife is the first form, husband is the latter form, and the son is perfection. We may call duality of mother father or wife-husband, but one thing is certain that man and woman are two cycles of the

2. *Manusmṛti*, 6/89

3. *Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka* 7/16

4. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1/3

5. *Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka* 7/17

cart of household life. One is incomplete without the other. The concept of *Ardhanārīśvara* in Śaiva philosophy is a purely Indian vision that wife and husband both dwell in each other's body in a half way. Śiva is incapable without Śakti. Left side of Śiva belongs to his consort Umā. Still man becomes complete by giving birth to a new child, as *jāyā* in Sanskrit means, in whom the husband himself is again born (through her womb). As *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* establishes this theory:

“*Ardho ha vā'eṣa ātmano yajjāyā tasmādyāvajjāyāyāṃ na vindate, nai-va tāvat prajāyate, asarvo hi tavat bhavati. Atha yadaiva jāyāṃ vindate'tha prajāyate*”⁶

‘Wife is, in fact, one half of the man. As long a man is not married, he can not regenerate himself and remains incomplete. He becomes complete, when he gets a wife and produces progeny’.

These references of ancient scriptures show the strong bondage of relations between man and woman turned into husband and wife and in a later period turned into father and mother after giving birth to the next generations through their union. Thus relations tied with the rope of love and faith produce prosperity in nation, as *Atharvaveda* states:

“*Abhivardhatām payasābhi rāṣṭreṇa vardhatām*”⁷.

‘May the husband and wife prosper with milk etc. and with the national progress’.

It is with both of them that they may attain a new and sublime life. Indian culture through these scriptures does not teach *viccheda* or divorce, but a happy union, in which both of them may affectionately care for each other. Actually they are made for each other, as we find in *Nārada Purāṇa*:

“*Yathā sukhaṃ bhaved bhartustathā kāryaṃ hi bhāryayā |
anukūlaṃ hitaṃ tasyā iṣṭāyā bharturācaret ||*”⁸

‘A wife should work for the happiness of her husband, similarly a husband should work for the satisfaction and betterment of his beloved wife’.

6. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 5/2/1/10

7. *Atharvaveda* 6/78/2

8. *Nārada Purāṇa* 2/16/55

Again *Bhaviṣyapurāṇa* admits that the wife is the source of attainment of fourfold *puruṣārtha* of man:

“*Jāyā tvardham śarīrasya nṛṇāṃ dharmādisādhane |
Nātastāsu vyathāṃ kāṃcit pratikūlaṃ samācaret ||*”⁹

‘The wife is half of the husband. She helps in rituals and pleasures. It is, therefore, not good to work contrary to her wishes or inflict pain on her’.

Mahābhārata maintains the position of wife in relation with husband in the same way:

“*Ardham bhāryā manuṣyasya bhāryā śreṣṭhatamaḥ sakhā |
Bhāryā mūlaṃ trivargasya bhāryā mūlaṃ tariṣyataḥ ||*”¹⁰

‘Wife is the half part of the man, wife is his best friend. Wife is the root of trio, wife is root cause of crossing the worldly bondage’.

It is maintained now that woman in the form of wife was on the key position in the household life, She was source of all happiness, as it is said in *Pakṣasmṛti*:

“*Gṛhavāsaḥ sukhārtho hi patnīmūlaṃ ca tatsukham |*¹¹

‘The householding is for the purpose of merriment, and that merriment is caused by the wife’.

Prajāpatismṛti goes further and declares that no home can be said to be home. Actually wife herself is home:

“*Na gṛhaṃ gṛhamityāhur gṛhiṇī gṛhamucyate |
gṛhe tiṣṭhati sā yāvat tāvat tīrthasamaṃ gṛham ||*”¹²

‘The wise men do not tell the mansion as a home. The wife only is said to be home. Whilst she lives in at home, that home is as pure as *tīrtha*’.

Thus it is proved that woman as a mistress of the house was

9. *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa* 1/8/37

10. *Mahābhārata*, *Ādiparva* 74/40

11. *Pakṣasmṛti* 4/7

12. *Prajāpatismṛti* p. 55

placed on high position. The form of family is expanded, when mothers and fathers come across a newly wedded wife of their son. When this new bride enters her new house, she is called to be the Empress in relation with all and in every respect, *Rgveda* declares:

“*Samrājñī śvasure bhava, samrājñī śvaśrvām bhava |
Nanāndari samrājñī bhava, samrājñī adhidevr̥ṣu ||*”¹³

‘Be a queen to thy father-in-law, a queen to thy mother-in-law, queen to thy sister-in-law, and a queen to thy brother-in-law’.

These references confirm the purity and stability of the relations, and greatness of the positions of women in a family. The whole structure of the family is based on the cordial relations among all the family members, as *Atharvaveda* says:

“*Anuvrataḥ pituḥ putro mātrā bhavatu saṃmanāḥ |
Jāyā patye madhumatīm vācaṃ vadatu śāntivām ||*”¹⁴

‘Let the son be loyal to the father, and of one mind with the mother. Let the wife speak sweet and gentle words to the husband’.

There may be conflicts and clashes of interest in one family. The seer in *Atharvaveda* wishes elimination of all conflicts and establishment of harmony among the members of a family:

“*Mā bhrātā bhrātaraṃ dvikṣan mā svasāramuta svasā |
samyāñcaḥ savratā bhūtvā vācaṃ vadata bhadrāyā ||*”¹⁵

‘Let not brother hate brother, sister hate sister. Unanimous, united in purpose, speak you words with friendliness’.

The most important factor which nourishes the Indian family life is marriage. Ancient family life was bound by sixteen *saṃskāras*. Marriage was the most important among them. Marriage has its sources in family. In ancient times large family was a blessing. Marriage was a family affair rather than a personal one. *Vivāha* was meant to be

13. *Rgveda* 10/85/4

14. *Ātharvaveda* 3/30/2

15. *Ibid*, 3/30/3

the origin and centre of all domestic sacrifices. Every man in his normal conditions was expected to marry and run a home. A sweet home, a sweet wife and fondlings in the home these were coveted objects for the Vedic Āryans. We find references of marriage ceremonies in *R̥gveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Marriage might have started as a social necessity, but gradually when religious consciousness developed, marriage became a religious ceremony. Marriage was regarded as a sacrifice and man who did not enter married life was called one without sacrifice. *Taittirīya brāhmaṇa* says, “*Ayajño vā eṣa yo’ptnīkaḥ*”.¹⁶ ‘He, indeed, is without sacrifice who has got no wife.’ When the theory of three debts (*ṛṇatraya*) evolved, marriage gained more significance and sanctity, as one could pay off one’s *pitr̥ṛṇa* by producing children. Thus generations of offspring was main motive of every union to the end that a man’s house or family may not die out. So the boat of marriage is bound with such strong ropes of religion, custom, rituals and culture. Unlike western marriage it is not a sexual relation alone or a transitory contract, but a union of two souls, which cannot be separated in this life. Rather they are to be reunited in the next births again and again. It is only in India, where a noble wife can undertake a vow and pray that she may attain the same man as her husband in several births to come, unlike in western countries where a husband and wife can take divorce many times in one birth. The union of the pair was made lasting by essential religious ceremonies. We find references of a lot of rites and ceremonies in *R̥gveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Each and every ceremony confirms the piousness of the marriage system. The system of ‘*kanyāvaraṇa*’ and ‘*varavarāṇa*’ was a formal betrothal and acceptance of the bride and bridegroom from the family members of both the sides. The marriage ceremony is performed by adopting the Fire God, the purifier of all, as witness of the same. Vedic hymns are pronounced by the priests. The couple goes round the fire seven times.

The real ceremonial name for marriage is ‘*pāṅgrahaṇa*’ i.e. ‘the grasping of the bride’s hand’. The bridegroom seizes the right hand of the bride with the words:

16. *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa*

“*Gṛbhṇāmi te saubhagatvāya hastaṃ mayā patyā jaradaṣṭiryathāsaḥ*”¹⁷.

‘I seize thy hand for the sake of happiness, that thou mayest live to old age with me, thy husband. Come, let us marry. Let us unite our sperm... May we live a hundred autumns.’

At the same time seven conditions are put forth from the side of bridegroom, the bride takes a vow to admit them. Vice versa seven conditions are put forth from the side of bride and the bridegroom takes a vow to fulfil them. Only after this mutual agreement the bride comes to the left side of the bridegroom to be his wife. In the same order the great ceremony of ‘*Saptapadī*’, ‘the rite of seven steps’ takes place. The bride and bridegroom go round the fire step by step seven times. Till sixth step the bride still does not become wife, but as soon as seventh step or final step of *saptapadī* is performed, marriage is regarded legally complete.

The marriage in India is not a social contract only, but a religious institution, a sacrament. There are many sacraments and symbols to make marriage spiritual phenomenon. One symbolical ceremony in marriage is ‘*hṛdayasparśa*’ or ‘touching the heart of the bride’. The bridegroom touches the heart of the bride watching over her right shoulder with the words:

“*Mama vrata te hṛdayaṃ dadhāmi, mama cittam anucittaṃ te astu*”¹⁸
‘Into my will I take thy heart, thy mind shall dwell in my mind’.

One symbolical ceremony is ‘*samajñāna*’ or anointment. The father of the bride anoints the pair. While this ceremony is performed, the bridegroom recites the verse:

“*Samañjantu viśvedevāḥ. Samāpo hṛdayāni nau.*”¹⁹
‘May the Viśvedevāḥ, may the Waters unite our heart’.

Thus we see that various rituals and performances performed in the *Vivāha saṃskāra* indicate that marriage is not only a physical un-

17. *R̥gveda* 10/17/1.

18. *Pāraskara Gr̥hyasūtra* 1/8/8.

19. *Ibid.* 1/4/15.

ion of two persons, but also a union of two hearts or souls. Marriage reaches perfection only when the conjugal relationship is based on the realization that marriage is a great sacrifice, an act of responsibility for the welfare of the family. Marriage is the backbone of family system in India. On the one hand marriage is a union of two souls, on the other side it is a union of two families of the similar status. The institution of family was held on high esteem in ancient Sanskrit works, as it bestowed solace in soul, peace in mind, stability in relation and harmony in society. Breakdown of family life in many western countries is causing disharmony, dissatisfaction, distrust and disintegration in society. Men and women relations are on doldrums. Cases of divorce causing sufferings, conflict and frustration are increasing day by day. Prosperity cannot replace pleasure. Frequent divorce means distrust and dishonour between the two. In a system full of divorce somebody may feel a transitory relief for same time, but not a lasting happiness. Thus a joint family bound by love and trust can bring real joy in life. Joint family system in India gave affection and protection to the needy members at the time of mishap or misfortune. Though some evils and atrocities increased in family system also, but it was due to misuse of the system. The welfare of human beings is bound in family system prevalent in ancient India and described in ancient Sanskrit scriptures. The family system found in Sanskrit texts and practised in India from early dawn of civilization till today is certainly for the global welfare of the next generation.