Reclaiming Family Values in Contemporary Times: Towards a dialogical family nonviolent communication approach

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ABSTRACT

The tsunami of technological advancement, the overt pressure to achieve one's materialistic goals and declining work-life balance are some of the reasons of poor dialogues in families. The advent of frozen communication due to excessive use of technologies is leading to insensitivities and a slow-death of empathetic and open communication in many families. The dysfunctional communication patterns are having negative impact on relationships in families. This paper through in-depth interviews of families argues on the emergent need to reframe the communication ecosystems, encourage cyberfasting, and take up joint activities amongst family members. Through such efforts, the aim would be elaborate on a dialogical family nonviolent communication approach.

**Keywords:** Family values, family communication, family dialogues, nonviolent communication

The Budhirajas (name changed) are an urban, new age family. As is the case of many families, the increasing proliferation of technology in the household, the race towards crass materialism which is leading to individualism and a slow death of empathetic relationships, the four-member of the Budhiraja household all seem to going in their own path with little conversation and dialogues between them. They are not sure when did they last had a meal together or thought of a family vacation. The father is super busy trying to expand his business to newer heights. The mother runs a business of artwork. The son, who studies in class XI has already become a party animal. The daughter, in class IX is a connoisseur of expensive beauty products hoping to become a model soon. Neither of them would remember when the last time the four had a dialogue together.

But the Budhirajas are still lucky to have survived as 'a family'. Notwithstanding the dialogue deficit in the family, the four are still living under one roof. With growing individualism and the mad craze to acquire more money and luxuries, there are families which are crumbling. Bhasin (2016) argues in this context stating on how increasing individualism and the deep influence of western culture is bringing the traditional Indian family to extinction.

The Budhirajas are not alone in the increasing void in empathetic dialogues in many families across the country especially the metropolitan cities. This is also resulting in declining family values and family cohesion. The usual question is when the last time
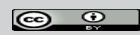
families had food together. The other question is on the quality of communication ecosystem in families. Communication plays a significant role as the quality of relationships in families is determined by the capacities of family members to engage with each other not only constructively but with empathy, compassion and spirit of kindness. This leads us to the question of how a dialogical family can be encouraged which promotes emotional bridge-building among members and the type of communication which becomes the guidepost of such dialogues.

This paper through a series of in-depth interviews of 10 different families attempts to understand the prevalent communication architecture in these households. It also tries to explore the alternative positive communication ecosystem which can encourage empathy, love and compassion in the family ties and encourage emotional bridge-building.

Indian family structure

The family represents the foundational institution of the society. India has a rich tradition of strong family structures. It has been the tradition since ancient time and has been highlighted in various scriptures and texts. For instance this verse from Chapter six of Maha Upanishad sums up the essence of Indian family values:

अयंनिजपरोवेतिगणनालघुचेतसाम्। (Ayam Nijah Paro Veti Ganana Laghucetasam)

उदारचरितानांतुवसुधैवकुटुम्बकम्॥

(Udaracaritanam Tu VasudhaivaKutumbakam)

The World Is A Family (One Is A Relative, The Other Stranger, Say The Small Minded. The Entire World Is A Family, Live The Magnanimous).

Notwithstanding the deep collectivist tradition of Indian families with *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* being its foundation, it would be oversimplification to generalize it given the wide diversity of Indian culture and tradition across regions. However, Chadda and Deb (2013) talk about how different 'sociological studies state that Asian and Indian families are considered classically as large, patriarchal, collectivistic, joint families, harboring three or more generations vertically and kith and kin horizontally'. The contemporary development pattern has been responsible for bringing changes to the existing family structure of India. Numerous studies point out on how the Indian family structure is increasingly giving more space to nuclear families instead of the traditional joint family structure. In this context, Chadda and Deb argue how there is increasing 'differentiation and heterogeneity' in the family structures, the new forms of roles and responsibilities, 'obligations and values'. In many parts of the country even in joint families, there is increasing move towards living together under one roof yet having separate kitchen and reduced responsibility.

Further, due to increasing urbanization and the pursuit of crass materialism, there have been significant social and cultural changes which are changing the entire lifestyle of individuals in families and the nature of interpersonal relationships. These changes are also affecting the existing power structures in families.

In the global context, which is also having its impact in India, the changing family patterns also includes the rise of single parent family and the rise of cohabitation where partners are in live-in relationship without getting into the institution of marriage. The Progress of the World's Women 2019-20, Families in a Changing World (UN Women), talks how the rapid changing social structures are leading to rise in divorce rates. It says this has been one of the most visible features of family change in most regions since the 1980s.

In the backdrop of these far-reaching changes in the family structures not only in India but globally, one of the most affected aspects of family life is rise of 'no communication' or even 'toxic communication'. This paper is an attempt to explore on how to reclaim a healthy and positive communication ecosystem in families.

Communication in Families

As mentioned above, communication is the central pillar of relationships in families. The way family members interact with each other, types of agreements that happen in daily lives, the way the children and adolescents socialize- all depends on the quality of communication ecosystem. The quality of communication depends on both the intrapersonal and interpersonal communication. The quality of communication in the family determines the image of the family, its rules and roles, how it manages the power structures, the level of intimacy, the set boundaries for the members and how individuals contribute both physically and mentally to the family life. The entire communication process is complex and in this regard, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2006) argue that it is challenging to theorize family communication as it depends on both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication process.

Koerner and Fitzpatrick observes that the first dimension of family communication was the degree to which families are able to create an ecosystem in which family members are encouraged to take part in interactions freely in wide variety of topics. Another dimension of family communication underlines the importance of homogeneity of attitudes, values and beliefs. In this dimension, the test is the extent of how the communication between family members evokes a spirit of harmony, conflict avoidance, in-built constructive conflict resolution approaches in situations of conflicts, and the level of interdependence between the members. An important dimension is also the quality of communication the family as a whole has with outsiders like friends, neighbours, relatives etc. It also involves the quality of communication individual members may have with others as the communication pattern may vary from individual to individual. An intersection of all these dimensions is important in a holistic family communication architecture which leads to agreements on different issues and help complete family tasks. A healthy communication ecosystem contributes to positive behaviour amongst family members where there are enough 'safe' space to not only share one's perspectives but also bring in new ideas for the betterment of the family and its members. It also helps in the avoidance of disruptive behaviour among family members. In this context, Procentese *et al.* (2019) delving on the need of positive communication in families notes, "Mutual acceptance and open communications among family members can help them in managing stressors and negotiating adolescents' individuation , as they allow children to talk with their parents about daily concerns, activities, issues, and in turn, parents being adequately supportive of them".

An important dimension of the communication pattern is also the quality of intergenerational relationship. In families, where grandparents, parents and children live together, importance of the quality of intergenerational relations is critical. Intergenerational relations are first shaped in families where children and young adults learn on how to interact with the world outside; this includes the type of desired communication approaches in interacting with others.

For the paper, the author conducted in-depth interviews of 10 families on the communication patterns in these families and the emergent need to reshape the communication ecosystem so that the strong and harmonious family values can be reclaimed.

Discussion on the Study

An increasingly disturbing trend that majority of the families discussed was dialogue deficit. Due to undue pressures and increasing stress level, there are less dialogues in families even in contentious issues. For many families, it is becoming a habit of self-denial and avoidance. The lack of dialogue is affecting relationship patterns. It is also felt when there are difficult issues confronting the family or if some members are involved in disruptive behaviour, the respondents said.

This lack of dialogues in families is also attributed to decline in communication amongst family members. Vansika (name changed) in one of the families said she does not get adequate space to discuss important issues like career and relationship with

her mother as she was too busy in her business. When she tried to discuss about her inter-caste partner, the mother said she disapproved of it without listening to her adequately.

In fact one of the critical issues which emerged during the study was a steep decline in listening habits of family members. Due to lack of time as all members were engrossed to fulfill their career goals, listening habits were not given credence. "We have started realizing that everything is becoming short-cut," a parent, Illyas (name changed) said, "Most of us try to avoid difficult and uncomfortable questions from our children as it would need more time to discuss these. Definitely this is not a healthy trend and we need to sincerely try to reverse this."

Many families are experiencing toxic communication patterns. There is a great impact of social media and violent media content. One of the girls, Tanya (name changed) who was interviewed that she is increasingly concerned at the level of toxicity and hate narratives which her father and brother relish influenced by the so-called 'WhatsApp' university and social media content. She said that her father who was retired and her brother who was still searching for a job have become so negative that right from the morning they are hooked into the social media and keep discussing issues of extreme hatred. "How come they are filled with so much hatred for other groups?," she lamented.

In fact, for most of the families, different communication channels like social media, over the top (OTT) platforms etc has started to occupy major space driving away genuine conversation including heart-to-heart communication. In fact all those who were interviewed for the study pointed out the new media tools were responsible for the profound ways in which these impacted on how individuals behaved and related to each other whether in families or outside. When Tanya and several others were expressing how their family members have started to behave in actual family life influenced by the content in the media platforms, it can be argued that many of these cultural practices are getting embedded in everyday lives of people. From simple interactions in families which used to be the norm even a decade back, the interactions due to the assimilation of these content are becoming more complex. Tanya's case suggest that it is not just the young people who are influenced by many of the hate narratives which are spanning out in social media platforms, even senior citizens like her father are getting influenced.

There are in fact contention and contestations on the use of the new digital platforms. For instance, Metilda (name changed) felt the easy access of digital platforms helps her to keep track of her son's movements- both physical and online. On the other hand, Procentese (2019) point out how the lack of modulation of social media and mobile devices use lead to 'phubbing phenomenon' which entails 'ignoring someone in a social environment by paying attention to mobile devices instead (e.g., interrupting a meal while eating together to check the phone for messages or missed calls)'

Asiya (name changed), a grandparent expressed serious concern of internet addiction in her family. She said her son, her daughter-in-law and their children – all suffer from Internet addiction. This has led to major decline of family time. "We no longer have those moments in our house that we used to have when we were younger, all the time the family members are hooked to the internet," she added.

A growing concern amongst parents who were interviewed for the study was the increase in mental health issues amongst young people due to dysfunctional communication ecosystems in homes. As there were situations of no open communication, young people were unable to share many complex issues which led to depression, anxiety disorder, alcoholism, and drug abuse. Some of the respondents felt that inconsistent and unpredictable family environment coupled with a toxic communication ecosystem led to psychiatric illness amongst children and adolescents. The role of families in preventing mental health problems amongst young people is of paramount importance. In this context, Robila (2016) discusses on how family relations have important consequences on the functioning of individuals. She notes, "Good family

relations, with good marital relations and parenting behaviors are conducive of well functioning parents and children, while parental mental health problems, marital conflict, low quality parenting determining dysfunctions for children (e.g., low academic achievement, psychological problems). Similarly, family relations impact health and health care utilization."

Discussion on the alternatives

All the members of the families who were interviewed were unanimous that for cohesive families and growth of all individuals in the family, there was urgent need to reframe the communication ecosystem. In majority of the cases, the present communication ecosystem were leading to chaos, increasing conflicts in families, stark individualization within families, replacement of heart-to-heart communication with 'frozen communication' and mental health issues. Several alternatives were discussed on how to encourage a healthy communication ecosystem in families. Here are some of the ideas which could help construction of the family communication architecture:

Serious efforts need to be made to draw family members away from excessive use of social media and mobile devices as it is leading to distraction and a poor communication ecosystem. An important dimension that was discussed to limit this was occasional practice of cyber fasting. Gupta (2019) explains the concept of cyber fasting which entails abstaining from online platforms and mobile devices for a period of time. Gupta points out children and adults involved with the The Peace Gong, a young people's media platform initiated the concept taking leaf from Mahatma Gandhi's fasting. Gupta further notes the time of cyber fasting should time to make deeper connections with others, introspect and reflect on the inner self. He adds, "The idea of cyber fasting aims to promote nonviolent communication and nonviolent volunteer action, experiencing inner peace and results of introspection."

Linked to the idea of limiting use of mobile devices and social media is the importance of placing dialogues as a central pillar of a family communication ecosystem. The respondents felt it was important to promote cohesiveness in the family. When there is an environment of dialogue in the family then family members will get to know each other better, their issues and concerns. Through intense dialogue we can discover the meaning system of other members as each member has their own systems of meanings, i.e., their values, perspectives, attitudes and personality. The level of inter-human relationship is determined by how much we have discovered each other. Greater discovery of each other leads to greater understanding, more intense feeling of trust, respect, closeness and love. Also dialogues leads to emotional bridge-building amongst members.

With the increasing use of mobile devices many families felt that there was rapid decline of families having dinner together. Respondents felt they needed to make genuine efforts to bring back the system of having dinner together so that there could be more interactions. They felt having dinner together could be encouraged by dividing roles and responsibilities during dinner like laying tables etc.

Deep and active listening skills were an important skill that family members need to nurture with utmost sincerity. It is part of the dialogic communication pattern that families need to adopt.

A peaceful communication ecosystem needs to be encouraged in the families where individuals find it safe to discuss difficult issues like mistakes, their anger, frustration, etc.

An important aspect of the peaceful communication ecosystem is the use of positive nonverbal communication. Understanding each other's nonverbal communication is an important aspect of the family communication ecosystem.

CONCLUSION

The study underlines the emergent need to encourage a positive communication ecosystem in families as dysfunctional communication patterns leads to disruption in family lives. Such positive ecosystem will be able to encourage dialogues, reframe the negativities to positivity, impact the existing attitude and behaviours of the family

members. It also felt the idea of cyber fasting was an important practice that needed to be nurtured amongst family members to limit addiction to internet and mobile devices.

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