Negotiating Challenges of Being A Parent

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Abstract

Like other social constructs, the notions of family and familial relationships are replete with stereotypes and ideals. While the archetype of parenting has undergone a change over a period of time, in India it continues to remain rooted in traditional ideals of collectivism and togetherness. Developing close family bonds, providing for the child, and caregiving in terms of resources and love, are not options, but compulsions. Parents in contemporary urban Indian set up are struggling with maintaining these traditional notions while also trying to redefine them. Their own sense of parenting is influenced by the ideals created by society at large, their peers, and print and electronic media. Constraints posed by a collectivist culture are juxtaposed with letting the child fly solo. Parents live with trepidation of stifling their child with love and becoming overly detached. In this paper, the author explores his personal experiences of parenting over the last few years and especially during the past two years (2020-2021) when children spent exceeding amounts of time at home given the constraints imposed by corona virus led pandemic. The time was marked by strengthening family bonds on the one hand and making ends meet on the other. The uniqueness of the family set up of the author also provides for careful thought and reflection on negotiating challenges of parenting.

I, along with my mother, am 'co-parenting' my younger sister. My sister is a student of primary school. She is younger to me by close to twenty-five years. Although she is aware of our relationship as siblings, the interaction patterns between us are not as well defined as that between siblings or between a parent and a child. Our relationship has led me to challenge the archetypical notions of family relationships. I have assumed the role of a primary caregiver along with my mother. While most of my friends continue to identify my role as a closer approximation to that of a parent than an older brother, I would wish to revisit these categorizations. Role definition of parents and siblings is often culturally contextualized.

Parenting is an extremely enriching experience, at least that's how it is perceived by middle class family values. The idea of family which originated in western Europe along with the development of industrial society, was imported in some sense by the colony. And has influenced how we understand family and parenting today. What it means to be a parent is entirely subjective as it depends on social and cultural values. How we understand parenting is thus influenced by our cultural upbringing, our education and the society at large. What it means

to be a parent or a sibling often varies within urban and rural contexts, social class backgrounds, and culture.

My role as a caregiver assumes significance because of the extraordinary age gap between my sister and me. This changes not just how I engage with her in comparison to a sibling closer to her in age, but also the relationships of all the family members engaged in caregiving or parenting her. In a 'normal' family, conflicts between parents involve adults who are of the same generation. First time parents, struggling to make sense of their own roles are likely to be more open to listening to each other, sharing opinions and perspectives, and learning together in their new found roles as parents. However, in my family, the primary caregivers are of different generations. While my mother looks at parenting based on her prior experiences, for me, this experience is that of a first time parent. The hierarchy between my mother and me, as parent and child, overlaps with the relationship that each of us shares with my sister. This further complicates situations and leads to conflicts and disagreements. In situations of conflict, the differences in opinion are more pronounced and addressing the issue involves greater complexity, as my mother's notions about learning,

discipline, punishment, space for finding one's unique identity, self-expression, and freedom, are at a different point on the spectrum of parenting, from mine.

Parenting is not something that we are taught actively in schools or homes. We tend to imbibe a lot of what parenting is from our own experiences of being parented. Growing up, we intuitively pick up characteristics, qualities, behaviours and habits, along with notions of what is right and wrong parenting, from our parents. In times of illness, for instance, we rely on the same indigenous remedies that were passed on to us from our parents. We sing the same lullaby that our parents and grandparents sang to us, we narrate the same stories and create family traditions as we grow up and become parents. Much of family history is passed on to prospective generations through these methods of oral narration. In doing so, we tend to become similar to the kind of parent that we had. The stories passed on across generations are enriched with narratives that we gather from books, movies, and internet, that widen the content of engagement between parent and child. The traditional folklore and mythological stories are supplemented by stories of Disney princesses and superheroes. My sister's everyday life is replete with access to stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata along with knowledge of religious rituals and demigods from her engagement with our mother. These provide her important cultural rootedness. While my engagement with her revolves around living a good life, finding passion, living authentically, developing empathy, and becoming a more compassionate human being. This is not restricted to discussions on religious thought or indigenous culture.

In contrast to the ethno-theories of parenting, is the nagging realization that we want to become a different version of our parents. We want to tread our own paths, overcome what we think were mistakes that our parents made in raising us. The new parent is thus in a state of constant turmoil and learning and growing with the child. I see a sharp contrast between how my parents visualized their roles as parents and how me and my friends see our roles as parents. I grew up with parents who cared but did not make the same effort at constant, active engagement with their children as I do with my sister. This idea of parenting that requires an active effort of engaging with the child, of providing stimuli at the appropriate developmental stage, and being available all the time, is often drawn from print and electronic media, much of which is replete with images of parenting drawn from the western world. The parents of the yesteryears were not plagued by the same anxieties of being an insufficient, unavailable parent, as we are. The earlier generation was not as occupied with being the 'perfect' parent as the young parents of contemporary times. The notion of an 'ideal' parent places pressure on us to meet the 'standards' of parenting and constantly working towards meeting them. The efforts made are never enough. The insecurities of being a less than perfect parent and what it might to do to our child are building a generation of overanxious, overthinking parents. These standards did not exist a few decades ago. We were raised with parents who made efforts in the best way that they could, without external, exacting standards being thrust upon them.

Another dimension that I wish to highlight in this paper is the ups and downs this relationship went through during the last two years. Parenting is a huge responsibility, at least that is how it is perceived by middle class parents residing in the towns and cities of India. Since last two years, parents have had additional responsibilities of being a teacher, a peer, a classmate, and many more. As if parenting was not enough! Parenting a young child is a challenging task especially for those who have full time employment and in the case of first child. The two years of COVID'19 and frequent lockdowns had a huge impact on the world economy as also on the family economy. Without referring to statistics, it can be positively argued that a number of people lost their jobs and those with children of school going age were faced with numerous challenges, as sometimes even paying the school fee with our reduced salaries was extremely straining.

With great difficulty, I had managed to change the school of my sister in the same academic year in which COVID happened. Thus, my sister

did not manage to make many friends in the new school. COVID and lockdowns had a strong impact on people's lives. Besides the loss of employment and reduction in salaries, it took a huge toll on the mental health of the population. The mundane, meaningless, routine activities like travelling to work, seeing familiar faces at work in the same bus/ metro, have the potential to have a therapeutic effect. All of this was lost when we were forced to sit down at home and when the home was converted into a place of work. Work in many senses operated as an intruder in the residential space. Since my sister was very young when the lockdown started, I had to request my employer to assign me work from afternoon onwards so that I could facilitate her classes in the morning. The parents at home had to deal with anxieties of both parents as well as of completing tasks of children including excessive homework and written work assigned by teachers. With children at home for the entire day, it was the parents' task to find ways of engaging them in physical, mental and playful activities. This further added to the mental strain for parents as they themselves did not get a break from this continual engagement with children. This was a welcome change in one way, as it provided extended periods of time for communication and active connectedness with children. The comfort level in conversation and an understanding of each other's needs has enhanced. This may be due to her growing up in the two years or due to the shared space and time that lockdown during COVID provided. Yet, there was no space for personal engagement and no respite from the exhausting task of engaging with children. This was exacerbated by the increase in workload of home chores in the absence of domestic helpers. Parents were thus under a constant pressure to perform well as an employee, a home maker, and a parent. All of this was coupled with the general anxiety of a world that was marked by news of sickness, lack of resources, loss of wealth and lives.

It is important to acknowledge the fact that parents too are individuals with physical, emotional, and social needs. They play several roles, in their everyday life, often doing so simultaneously. Being an individual, a man, a woman, a lover, a partner, a child, a parent, an employee -each of these carries with it a set of responsibilities and demands. Being a parent means juggling these roles along with all other responsibilities. Without appropriate platforms for learning to be and coping with being a parent, this responsibility is becoming increasingly tough for young parents.