

## The Changing Images of Parenting in the Three Subcultures of India

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In recent years there has been a growing concern amongst the researchers about parenting because it's ideas not only shape the parents' self-concepts but also influence the parents' behaviors and affect the development of child. Now the implications of social ecology of child development including the setting, customs, and practices of childcare are being taken up more seriously. They are diverse and multifaceted and are determined by a variety of factors including personal, contextual, and cultural ones. The ideas about parenting contribute to the continuity of the cultural pattern by transmitting information from one generation to the other. It is being realized that any comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of human development does require attention of the variation in parenting across cultures.

**Keywords:** Changing Image, Parenting, Sub-culture

Bornstein (1995) has described four essential functions of care giving i.e., (1) *nurturant*, (2) *material*, (3) *social*, and (4) *didactic care* giving to understand the world outside the parent-child dyad. The process of parenting is not confined to the relationships between an adult and his / her biological offspring, but occurs whenever an individual takes an active role in the process of helping a child to grow and develop. The task of parenting takes place in the socio-cultural context. The context is the ecology, which views family as an open system responsive to and dependent upon its environment. Families constantly exchange with social groups and neighborhoods, which are major aspects of the family's immediate social environment. One of Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological frameworks described developmental ecology in terms of a hierarchical system consisting of four levels i.e. microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. Sinha (1982) had extended the above

framework to the Indian setting with certain modifications.

Within the ecological framework, family happens to be a universal, basic social institution that performs important social functions. As a dynamic and complex organization, family comprises of different age and sex configurations to perform the important task of socializing its younger members. Some of the major dimensions of this complex organization are its structure and composition, patterns of role – relationships, dynamics of interaction, value system and ethos. It is important to view these dimensions as intertwined and as bearing significant influence on the socializing process of the children. The joint family is identified as the traditional form of family in India. Kakar (1978) maintains that most Indians spend the formative parts of their life in some form of extended family setting or frequently spend a large portion of their time visiting members of extended family.

Certain identifiable features characterize the Indian family system. In particular it consists of a definite system of role relationships and systems that binds its members together. The members share their feelings of *family solidarity* and strive to uphold family dignity and status in the society. A high premium is placed on *family unity and cohesiveness*, which are necessary for family stability and survival. *Elaborate family practices and rituals* foster a feeling of belongingness and convey the message that family bonds are immutable, lifelong and have primarily the directive, decision making responsibilities, and adults the responsibility for active, physical work, children have lighter or no major tasks to perform. The parent-child relationship in a joint family are likewise regulated and discouraged from becoming emotionally exclusive, especially the father-child relationship. This serves the functional requirement of preserving family harmony because favors shown to one's own children may weaken the central importance and their greater scope for it becomes emotionally strong. Similarly, there is greater scope for the development of close parent-child relationships too.

The present study was formulated to investigate the aspects of cultural construction of parenting in the Indian context. Here parents and grandparents from three communities, i.e. Bengali, Punjabi and Marwari were studied to see the differential pattern of parenting and the inter-generational differences in parenting.

In this study, cultural variety at the group as well as at the inter-group level has been investigated. This strategy has been used because a vast country like India has considerable amount of cultural diversity and pluralism. It is evident that the different culturally homogeneous groups within India have developed distinct identities, lifestyles, goals, and aspirations. This has led to

different views of parenting in respective groups. In addition to the above-mentioned measure observations of the families under study and the ecological context of the entire setting were made by the researcher. The focus of observations was on the organization of mothering behaviors and interactions of family members. To this end, 2-3 visits of 2-3 hours duration each were conducted for each family. The researcher prepared detailed notes based on the observations made.

The responses obtained through open-ended interview schedules were analyzed with a focus on capturing different aspects of considerable change in the ideals and practices of parenting.

1. The three communities are expected to show differences in terms of parenting ideals and practices as these communities hail from three different areas.

2. Since the psychological profile of parents of younger generation differs from that of the parents of the older generation in terms of education and the society in which they live, differences are expected across generations. In the present study, therefore, parents and grandparents both were included so that inter-generational differences in mothering may be explored.

3. The structure and functioning of family provides the immediate contact for parenting. In contemporary India, the institution of family has been undergoing significant change. The system of joint or extended family is becoming weak. The emergence of nuclear families has its own problems. In practice, people living in nuclear families do maintain their links with kin and do enjoy the connections of extended family. This scenario indicates a transitional state.

### **Method**

This study was conducted in Delhi. Forming an enclave inside the eastern frontier of Haryana state in northern India.

Delhi is city of cultural diversities. The studies on various cultural groups settled in Delhi, are few in number. This study attempted to focus on three communities or culturally homogenous ethnic groups namely the Punjabi, Bengali, and Marwari.

### ***The communities***

The Punjabi community hails from Punjab. In order to appreciate this community it would be pertinent to understand the region of Punjab. As one of the major cultural regions in North India, Punjab, the land of five rivers, namely Ravi, Chenab, Jhelum, Beas and Sutlej have a past reverberating with echoes of fierce battles and the rise and fall of empires.

The Bengali community hails from Bengal. The state is long and narrow, running from the delta of the Ganges river system at the Bay of Bengal in the south to the heights of the Himalayas at Darjeeling in the North West. The Bengalis follow their traditional practices of childcare. Many of their rituals pertain to the important moments of man's life like birth, marriage, death, etc.

The Marwari community belongs to the home of the Rajputs, a group of warrior clans who have controlled Rajasthan for 1,000 years. Rajputs are known for their sense of bravery and honor. Due to their promising attitude and business-mindedness, they have been able to take over the places where business was possible.

### ***Participants***

In this study, 135 mothers (60 mothers, 30 grandmothers, 30 fathers and 15 grandfathers) from the three communities, namely, the Punjabi, the Bengali and the Marwari living in Delhi participated. The study included only those families, which had non-working mothers, and had two children with at least one child aged between 0-5 years. In each community, 10 nuclear families and 10 joint families were taken. There were 20

participants from the joint family and 10 participants from the nuclear family. These families were residing in Nivedita Enclave, Punjabi Bagh, and Rajouri Garden areas of the metropolitan city of Delhi, India.

### ***Measures***

In order to study changing images of mothering, an interview schedule was conducted. The participants were interviewed through this schedule about mothering where they were asked about the meaning of mothering and the processes involved in the differential facets of mother-child interaction, focusing on decision-making in mothering and experiences of motherhood.

### ***Procedure***

The parents were approached at their homes at times convenient to them. After establishing proper rapport, and collecting background information interviews were conducted at relatively isolated places free from disturbances. An interview lasted for about an hour. Each house was visited at least twice to collect the data. Though some of the grandparents were hesitant to be interviewed, after clarification and persuasion they were convinced and were made to feel comfortable with the interview. At the end of the interview the participants were thanked for their cooperation.

### ***Results***

The data on open-ended interview schedules were analyzed with a focus on capturing different aspects of parenting and to get hold of the range of meanings. As the participants were free to articulate their views in their own words, there were differences across the protocols/ accounts in the style. Thus, while some of them gave single response in relation to a question, others responded in elaborate ways, employing multiple categories. In this situation, the interview protocols were examined carefully and the contents were analyzed in developing a picture of mothering.

The present analysis is organized to learn about variations in parenting in relation to variables such as community and generation. In the beginning, a descriptive account of the protocols was prepared on the basis of transcriptions of interviews and the responses were coded into different categories. In order to systematize the data and present a comprehensive picture, the obtained responses were thematically organized. In this process, the ambiguities and duplications were avoided. Another investigator crosschecked the responses thus obtained in different categories and consensus was reached in case of any ambiguity.

When asked about the meaning of parenting the parents reflected on the processes involved in the different facets of parent-child interaction. The details revealed that this interaction was focused on children and parents both. Also the parental articulations were referring to the biological, psychological, social and cultural facets of parent-child interaction. It was noticed that parents were aware of the fact that engaging in parental roles invited them to experience a set of responsibilities for children intimately linked not only to the individual child but also related to the shaping of society and ensuring its continuity both biologically as well as culturally. Based on all the responses of the parents interviewed, three broad facets of the range of parenting were identified, i.e. biological, psychological and sociocultural. A brief description of these facets is as follows.

**Biological Facet:** Giving birth and to procreate, Extending family tree so that children can take care of parents in old age.

**Psychological Facet:** Taking care, being responsive, fulfilling and understanding the needs of children, looking after physical and mental development of the child. Experiencing motherhood and avoidance of loneliness. Providing independence training to children.

**Sociocultural Facet:** Disciplining children, teaching of values to children, making children good citizens, etc.

Being a parent simultaneously engages a person in a series of activities geared towards fulfillment of biological, social and psychological needs of children. Parents appear to have two-pronged responsibilities, which involve on the one hand, understanding the child in terms of her needs and desires and on the other hand facilitating achievement of those needs and desires by creating the necessary conditions and actively guiding the child in this endeavor. Parents empower the child by facilitating development of competencies and skills. This highly demanding task has implications for nurturing the child as well. Table 1 shows that despite egalitarian plans of the fathers and mothers for sharing the domestic world, when the baby arrives there is a distinct traditionalization of roles. Mothers are generally seen to play a biological role in parenting, in giving birth and extending the family tree. On the other hand, fathers were seen to play a psychological role in disciplining and providing opportunities for independence training to the child.

**Table 1 Facets of Parenting Emphasized by the Parents of Three Communities**

Facets of Parenting	Punjabi		Bengali		Marwari	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Biological	60	30	-	10	20	50
Psychological (A)	70	5	70	10	85	20
Psychological (B)	-	-	40	5	35	-
Psychological (C)	5	25	-	25	-	65
Socio-cultural	5	35	50	75	10	75

Note: F= Father, M= Mother

Both mothers and fathers shared social and cultural roles by making efforts to inculcate moral values in children and making them good citizens. As one of the Bengali fathers defined parent as: “One who helps the child come out of the cocoon (the protected environment) and teaches the child

to fly. Till the child learns to fly, He/she kept in a secure environment and provided with all the nourishment she requires" (#<sub>11</sub>). A close perusal of the protocols of parents revealed variations in emphasis on the different facets of parenting. The mothers from all the three communities voiced their concern with care, protection and security of children. Nurturing the child was the obvious reason given by mothers and formed the central component of the meaning of parenting to them. In contrast, the responses of fathers were more variegated and comprehensive to encompass all the three facets of parenting. Looking at the sub-cultural differences it may be noted that the Punjabi fathers gave almost equal emphasis on biological and socio-cultural facets while Marwari parents stressed more on the biological and cultural facets of parenting. The Bengali parents emphasized the psychological and socio-cultural facets of parenting.

Table 1 shows that while fathers and mothers concentrated on biological and psychological facets of parenting, the grandparents emphasized more on the social and cultural facets by focusing on teaching children the values and making them good citizens. The intergenerational comparison tends to show a shift from emphasis on socio-cultural to bio-psychological configuration of parenting. However, all the three communities do not equally share this shift. It was noticed that there is greater degree of continuity in the socio-cultural facet of parenting across generations particularly in Marwari and Punjabi communities. In contrast, the parents from Bengali community evinced considerable amount of shift from socio-cultural facet to biological and psychological facets of parenting when compared with the grandparents.

**Table 2 Facets of Parenting by the Two Generations of Parents**

Facets of Parenting	Punjabi		Bengali		Marwari	
	P	GP	P	GP	P	GP
Biological	45%	25	5	10	35	40
Psychological(A)	37.5	27.5	35	55	52.5	45
Psychological(B)	-	2.5	45	15	17.5	15
Psychological(C)	15	22.5	12.5	7.5	32.5	30
Socio-cultural	20	35	70	72	37.5	37.5

Note: P= Parents (Includes fathers and mothers both)

GP=Grandparents (Includes grandfathers and grandmothers both)

A comparison of the responses across families (see Table 2) indicated that parents from nuclear families emphasized on the biological and psychological facets of parenting by giving independence training and disciplining their children, which is not so emphasized in the case of parents from joint families. They were more concerned with social and cultural aspects of parenting. As one of the Marwari parents said: "*Being a parent means extending the family tree (vansh ko aage badana)*" (#<sub>12b</sub>).

**Table 3 Facets of Parenting across Nuclear and Joint Families**

Facets of Parenting	Punjabi		Bengali		Marwari	
	N	J	N	J	N	J
Biological	42%	42	30	46	60	78
Psychological(A)	60	65	53	25	62	42
Psychological(B)	-	12	30	16	-	17
Psychological(C)	17	2	19	12	16	7
Socio-cultural	23	7	17	52	9	49

Note: N= Nuclear family, J= Joint family

An analysis of the responses across the three communities shows that Punjabi and Marwari parents emphasized the biological facet of parenting. The Bengali parents were found to emphasize on teaching good values

to children and making them good citizens. Marwaris seemed to emphasize the biosocial facet of parenting like extension of the family tree. The Punjabi mothers viewed a parent as a responsible agent of society having obligations to take care of its diverse needs of its as extending the family tree. Also, children provide company, but one may think that there is also a hidden meaning or some grand design behind it. As one Punjabi mother said: "God is not available everywhere that's why he made the parents especially the mother". Whether people deliberately choose their roles of a 'mother' or unexpectedly join in, there are certain inescapable changes in the adult roles and responsibilities accompanying the status of being a 'mother'. These significant changes in their lives may or may not be liked by them. Depending on the stance of individual mother the changes felt, however, are positive as well as negative. Mothering brings in emotional satisfaction, excitement and self-reconfiguration. On the other hand, it also puts on extra physical and mental demands on mothers, imposes restrictions of various kinds and regulates interaction not only between the spouses but also with others within and outside the family. On the whole, mothering transforms adult life in totality and makes a person different. As one of the mothers articulated: "After becoming a mother my life has become so busy that I hardly have time for myself" (#<sub>12</sub>).

### Discussion

There are many social phenomena, which apparently appear so simple and obvious that we hardly take their cognizance but they have far reaching consequences for the lives of the people. Parenting happens to be one such phenomenon. It is simultaneously a product of the culture and a contributor to the formation and maintenance of a culture. It provides an occasion to see the interplay of the individual, social, and cultural factors, which shape the

basic fabric of any society. Through parenting, the elements of cultural heritage are also integrated across generations. It shares certain common purposes across all cultures and forms a part of adult socialization. Parenting is something, which all human beings indulge in. It is a phenomenon commonly observed across all cultures. It is no more seen as a phenomenon to preserve the status quo or to carry on cultures and traditions of the past but is seen as an investment in future. It is an intentional or deliberate social process ensuring societal continuity and to understand as to how culture contributes to the shaping of parenting there is a need to approach and appreciate diverse cultural groups and variations in each of them.

The present study has uncovered variations in parenting ideas, across communities, genders and family types. As seen there are similarities as well as differences in parenting ideas which indicate that 'childhood, as a notion is constructed with differing emphases and parents are really facing dilemmas and trying to opt for solutions. The solutions, soft or hard, are again subject to specific cultural backgrounds of parents. It was noticed that the three communities under study are responding to challenges of parenting in different ways.

India consists of many homogenous sub cultural and ethnic groups, which share certain characteristics with the mainstream culture and have certain important differences from the mainstream culture also. Therefore to understand how culture contributes to the shaping of parenting there is a need to approach diverse cultural groups and variations in each of them.

The study focused on parenting in the three sub-cultural groups namely Bengali, Punjabi and Marwari living in the metropolitan city of Delhi. Within each of these communities, gender of parents (father/mother), generation of parents

(grandparents/parents) and type of the family (joint/nuclear) were considered important factors. The three communities under study had migrated to Delhi and settled in its various parts. These ethnic groups represent different sub-cultures but are currently responding to somewhat overlapping demands of a broader socio-ecological setting leading to some kind of a homogenization. In this way these communities provided unique opportunity to see how parenting is constructed under diverse cultural influences from within as well as from without. The confluence of these elements of tradition and modernity were expected to yield different kinds of structuring of parenting across the three communities as well as within the communities.

Parenting is a multifaceted process. The parenting Punjabi parents emphasized on the social and psychological aspects of Bengali parents emphasized on the biological and psychological aspects of parenting and the Marwari parents emphasized the social and cultural aspects of parenting. Across the generations, a shift from the social and cultural aspects of parenting to biological and psychological aspects of parenting was visible.

Parenting is an activity having positive aspects like joys. The Bengali community referred to the psychological and emotional advantages of having children. It involved happiness for the individual parent and a feeling of personal growth and development. The Punjabi grandmothers, as compared to Punjabi mothers, also referred to a feeling of personal growth and development of the parent. The continuity of the family name was important for the Marwari community. Across the two generations, it was seen that the parents of the younger generation emphasized the emotional and psychological joys involved in parenting whereas older parents mentioned the kin group benefits. The same was true in the case of joint families.

A variety of restrictions imposed on parents are due to the demands of parenting. The emotional strains and stresses such as noise and disorder in the household were salient in the case of mothers in all the three communities. While a general similarity between mothers and fathers in their orientation towards children was noticed, some significant differences also emerged. Mothers tend to recognize more the affective bond with children and the companionship they provide. Fathers were more likely than mothers to emphasize the benefits of the continuity of family name, pride in children's accomplishments and family happiness. It was also seen that a small sized nuclear family involved higher level of emotional cost as compared to a joint family where the bond between parents and children was less intense due to the presence of many caretakers.

This study was a beginning and has attended to a very limited part of Indian society. There is need to have more comprehensive studies covering larger aspects of the Indian society in greater detail.

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Contemporary parenting has witnessed a multitude of adaptations over the past decade across various cultural settings. Adolescent attachment patterns with parents have been explored in varying cultural contexts. These attachment patterns have been extensively studied in the light of adolescence as a turbulent phase of development. This chapter offers a systematic review of the cultural factors influencing parenting, with a theoretical analysis specific to adolescents within the Indian context. Such findings have potential implications for the formulation of parenting strategies toward the future of adolescent mental health in the country.