

Lone Fathers: The Unconventional Caregivers

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1. Introduction

The family in India is a near universal social institution. It is considered to be a private domain where the nations' important values are nurtured. As most people live in a family its commonplace presence makes it sensitive to critical inquiry. There is a tendency to think that there will be a threat to society's cherished values if the family is questioned (Uberoi 2005). Family studies in India for a long time focused on a broad categorization of family into elementary and joint. The elementary family is composed of a man, his wife and children. A joint family means two or more elementary families joined together. The debates centered on the impact of modernization on the joint family. The work of Shah (1998) necessitated its distinction with the household to show that the joint family was not really disintegrating. There has however been a conspicuous shift to the interest in the family as an important site for inequalities in contemporary India. This has brought into focus the position of women in conjugal relations, division of labor within the household and the primary socialization of the children. In this paper there is a shift to men in a family form that is prevalent amongst a very small percentage of the population of the capital city of India and is seen as an incomplete elementary family or can be called the lone parent family¹.

In the dynamics of the Indian family, parental roles and responsibilities are culturally defined (Kakar 1981, and Ramu 1987). Most accounts of Indian families point to an incompetence of Indian husbands, towards care which is culturally defined. In the Indian patriarchal family traditions there are role bifurcations such that women are relegated to the domestic sphere and are the primary caregivers and men by and large maintain a distance from care giving and domestic work (Roopnarine, Lu, & Ahmeduzzaman, 1989). Although there is change in the dynamics of the family and other ways of living are visible yet the heterosexual institution predominates and patriarchy continues to be the norm. The institution of marriage continues to be the only legitimate structure of the family. Any attempt at challenging this is seen as threat to the social order (Sen, Biswas, Dhavan 2011).

In this paper an attempt is being made to see how Lone fathers (Lf) are taking care of their children without the mother of the child. Beyond the role of the bread earner, Lf are involved in arenas of nurturing and care. They are taking care of the children in the absence of the child's mother and are doing 'routine' care work for their children. They are not only doing this as a sense of duty but because fatherhood for them is an important extension of the self. Since the role of father as a primary caregiver is unconventional according to the norms of society I want to understand if Lf are facing any challenges in playing this role. Since Lf are the primary care givers of the children and also bread earners are they able to maintain the work/care balance. Care within a household includes both, care for children and house work. It can have positive consequences for the person who receives it but have costs for those who provide it since it has to be combined with work outside the house. Additionally since patriarchies are played at multiple levels one of the problematic is to understand whether patriarchal structures interpellate the agency of Lf as well. This can be seen in the light of the immense importance attached to the institution of marriage not only for women but also for men such that men who are 'outside' the institution of marriage are sometimes seen to be challenging the norms of society. The focus of the paper however is on how Lf are playing the unconventional role of care giver and the ways in which they are involved in the expressive and instrumental tasks of child rearing. I also seek to understand how this basic father-child unit in which instead of the conventional other, there the many others, both kin and non kin, are creating 'larger families' which are structured differently and what are the implications that this has for gender roles.

2. Research design

Lone father families of an urban (New Delhi), upper middle class/middle class setting in North India where fathers' who were earlier married and now separated/divorced from their spouses, are a part of this study². Widowed fathers are not a part of the study as choice rather than circumstances was to be the basis of their being lone. Most Lf though said that it was not necessarily 'choice' that was the deciding factor in their

separation/divorce. Implicit in the use of the term lone rather than single is that lone parents are said to have deviated from the norms of society hence they do not enjoy its support. Educated Lf who had separated for three years or more and whose children are residing with them in separate households were contacted through various methods. They were visited in their homes so that they could be seen interacting with their children. In-depth discussions were also held with the Lf.

The difficulties faced in studying lone father families were many. As a result of the conventional notions there are not many single fathers who remain single over a period of time. Single fathers usually remarry hence are difficult to locate³. Lone father families where the father and the children were residing alone were difficult to locate especially if the child was a girl child⁴.

3. Fathers' transition to the primary care giver

Fathers have been the less common primary caregiver in the past, presumably due to the father working most of the day resulting in less bonding with the children, or possibly a young child still needs to be nursed and the mother seemed to be better suited for childcare while fathers were in economic activity. Some Lf however said that they were already involved with some form of childcare before their divorce which varied from playing with the child mostly in the presence of the women folk or taking care of the child when the mother was involved in other activities. But their actual physical and emotional involvement with their children started only after their child began to reside with them without the child's mother. The transition from becoming a father to the primary care giver involved various tasks which the fathers were unaware of due to their own socialization hence the process was gradual and not automatic.

Rahul a Lf who is in the teaching profession consciously chose his single status. Sometime after their son was born his wife asked for a divorce⁵. *Rahul* said that her decision took him by surprise. Though she could not give a reason for her decision to separate, he agreed but on the condition that he would take his son with him. He felt that she was confused and so he did not want to leave the child with her. Initially she resisted but once it became clear to her that he was not going to relent she agreed. *Rahul* moved out of the house with his six year old son. Hence forth the purpose of his life became the care of their son. He did not want him to be affected by their decision. Apart from the fact that *Rahul* and his son lived in a different house, *Rahul* tried to keep everything else in his child's life constant. Despite pressure from family and friends *Rahul* did not to remarry (even though his wife remarried) as he thought that it might further lead to a change in his child's life. He rented a house close to the house in which they earlier resided even though it was very far from his own work place. He bought a car (even though he was ideologically against it) so that he could ferry his son and his friends to and fro from school. *Rahul's* relationship with his in-laws remained intact. No event in their house was 'complete' without him. (Contrary to the north Indian culture he performed their last rites which, though were done along with his son). Initially *Anita* (the help) who had been assisting his mother in laws, was sent with them. Unfortunately *Anita* hit the bottle so she had to be sent back. 'That was a sad day as she was a part of our family'. After that *Rahul* did the entire house work and care of his child. *Rahul* was one of the Lf who used to share childcare with his wife yet it was not easy given the fact that he was the solo care giver and also the bread earner.

...It was like working double shift. Multitasking all the time. Right from getting him ready for school, preparing his breakfast and dropping him to school and then going for work himself. After school I would pick him up, prepare his lunch and supervise his home work. His friends would come over to play and I would complete the household chores. My career took a back seat... I also faced financial difficulties. But... it was my decision.'

Sidhant another Lf who was pursuing a modeling career took a conscious decision to parent alone, so he adopted a child. Describing the adoption process as cumbersome he said that there is still a perception that single parents (especially fathers) cannot do responsible parenting. After becoming a 'dad' his life changed and he became a more disciplined person.

The transition to becoming a caregiver for these fathers was gradual, even though they were already 'fathers'. The experience of Lf reinforces the fact that they are breaking out of the conventional moulds and carrying out tasks which were earlier in the preview of the women like giving every day care to children and bonding with them at an emotional level.

3-1. Doing routine work for the children

In recent decades an increasing amount of theoretical effort has gone into broadening our conceptions of what fathers do for their children beyond the basics of providing for their financial needs. Lamb's (2000) threefold typology of engagement, accessibility, and responsibility has had enormous influence on the literature on father involvement. By engagement he means hands-on activities, such as helping with homework; accessibility refers to fathers' physical availability and monitoring; and responsibility signifies his ownership over tasks and decisions related to childrearing.

Lf were involved in the everyday care of the children especially during infancy. According to Kakar (1981) infancy is a demanding period that requires intense care giving and during which the Indian mother is highly indulgent with the child. Likewise demands on Lf were high when their children were infants. Differences exist within Lf but most are hands-on fathers. *Irfan* a pilot by profession whose daughter was all of 3 years old, when she started to live with him without the mother. Though challenging he said that bringing up his daughter had been a very amazing experience. His wife and he agreed to get divorced when their daughter was one year old after which his ex wife requested Irfan to take care of the child since she wanted to pursue a career in modeling. He readily agreed but now attributes it to a decision related to his youth. He fondly remembers taking her for work and sometimes even for important meetings. His work though gave him flexi time and he was also able to cook meals for her.

...that was before she reached adolescence. I was anxious about the biological changes and often asked her if she needed colored underpants. Her answer would be 'no not now but I will tell you when I do' even at that age she understood what I was talking about.

The day she got her first period she was waiting me to tell me, I understood even before she told me. 'After sharing the excitement...I cried...my little baby had grown up'. He decided to change his occupation as he felt that taking care of children especially a girl child involved a lot more responsibility. 'It was difficult to explain to her not to talk to strangers while I spoke to women who were strangers to her'. He then mostly worked from home which he admitted created problems and he subsequently lost a lot of money. That he said did not seem to be of much importance compared to the fact that he had succeeded in bringing up his daughter well. He said that from a very young age she had begun tell him how to run the house more economically. In fact if he got friendly with a woman his daughter would grill him about his divorce and say 'why not my mother'. He fondly remembered the times when she was a young girl and they travelled together. People asked if she was his girlfriend since it was difficult for them to comprehend that a father could be on holiday with his young daughter (without the mother).

Routine care then means emotional involvement, physical presence, time and effort on the part of the parent. Gender of the child also throws up different issues for the care giver and LF devised ways of dealing with such issues .The discussions then turns to how Lf are creating meaningful networks of relations with kin and non kin and the ways in which these practices both follow and challenge traditional expectations for family life.

4. The Larger Family

The father-child unit is the basic unit of the lone father family. This larger family is not 'structured' the way two parent families are and instead of the mother there are the many 'others' who form a part of the 'larger family'. Though both kin and non kin are included in the larger family yet it is the non kin who form an important part of this father- child unit.

4-1. Father- Child unit

Lone parent families also have implications for the socialization of the child. Family according to Parsons (1955) is the primary agency for socialization. Although family plays an important role in the early years, the learning process continues throughout life (Beteille 1991). *Arun* aspiring for a career in politics and whose daughter was 12 and son was 10 years old when he separated from his wife. Both children took on responsibilities around the house. His son would often get on a table to roll the 'rotis' (Indian Bread). His daughter helped Arun take care of her younger sibling. Even as a child she did not do things just because girls were supposed to do them. Marriage did not figure as the primary goal in her future plans and she told her father that she would marry only if she found the right 'boy', someone who would agree to take care of

him(father). She wanted to get a degree in management and Arun's son wanted to become a chef. They planned to open a restaurant where all three of them could work together.

Regarding day to day issues maintaining the balance between discipline and friendship for Lf and the child is sometimes challenging. There is a loss of the 'echelon structure' which is a feature of two parent families and children become more like peer which might not be psychologically good for either the parent or the child⁶. The experience of fathers with their children shows that the children are being not being socialized in the stereotypical manner. In fact children grow up seeing their fathers in the kitchen and going out for work, playing the role of nurturer and provider. Unlike children in conventional families the children in lone parent family forms are not socialized into fixed gender roles and have the potential to learn in a different family setting.

4-2. Parent's of Lone fathers: responsibility and resentment

The parents of Lf extend support after the break in their son's marriage, especially their mothers⁷. Despite the love for their grandchild they are not very happy with the added responsibility of bringing up a child just when they are otherwise ready to retire in their old age. Instead they would have expected their son and his wife to take care of them. Hence they put pressure on their son to remarry so that they can pass on the responsibility of the childcare to his wife. *Irfan* said that his parents had got a lot of marriage proposals for him which he had declined. In fact his father has recently offered to start a business and get a 'lovely' house for him if he agreed to marry. They were also upset about the fact that *Irfan* did not have a son who could carry their family name forward. Though they had two daughters and grandsons but in patriarchal societies of North India it is the son who carries the name of the lineage. This created a lot of tension between *Irfan* and his parents such that when he spoke to his father he referred to himself as their *nalayak* (good for nothing) son.

There is a socio-cultural expectation that sons will take care of parents in their old age even though daughters also extended support to their natal families after marriage. It is this stereotypical expectation that causes resentment in the minds of the parents' even though there may not be any direct conflict with their sons⁸. The other relationship that continued to be problematic is with the ex spouse, but for the sake of the children some Lf work on it.

4-3. Ex- Spouse: A workable relationship

The ex spouse/ the mother of the child did not play a very active role in the lives of the Lf families. Lf like lone mothers shared a bitter relationship with their spouses after the separation. This relationship continued to be problematic though for the sake of the child they tried to work on it. *Amit* a Lf who was in a business enterprise with his friend and whose younger child was with his ex wife and the older one with him, tried to maintain a cordial relationship with her. He said that he paid a monthly allowance to her and also for the education of the child. He said that he had to sell the house he was living in so that he could take care of the expenditure of three households⁹. His wife whom he had helped set up a business was now doing better than him but she still expected him to pay for all the expenses. He had just bought a car for them as when he bought a car for himself his younger son too asked for a car. He said that his ex wife had tried to reconcile with him five years after their separation as she did not want a divorce. For the sake of the children he agreed. Yet he made it clear to her they would be living in separate bedrooms. But it did not work as she would pick up a fight not only with *Amit* but also their older son who had refused to stay with her.

Lf made a distinction in the relationship between their ex wife with whom their relationship could never be the same and the mother of their child with whom they were in a sense forced to keep a relationship for the sake of the children. For Lf it was the support of non kin that was valuable and whom they considered to be family.

4-4. Friends: The lifeline

'Life is hell without friends' was the status of a lone father on a networking site. Lf said that they liked to spend time with friends. Friends for lone mothers were someone they could depend on for day to day affairs; for Lf friends' were to 'hang out' with. *Ajay* father of a 15 year old and an engineer by profession but who operated a property firm because of the flexibility in work hours it gave him said that the only way to relax was to be with friends. Narrating an incidence he said once a friend and his wife came to stay with him and the man

hit his wife in the bedroom. Ajay intervened and asked his friend to either behave or leave his house. He counseled the wife and asked her not to live with a man who did not know how to respect women. His was an 'open house' for his friends but he wanted some decorum to be maintained in the house lest they become a nuisance for the neighbors.

Friends for most Lf's were the ones with whom they were sharing an emotionally reciprocative bond. This more than the relationship with the kin as is the norm in most conventional families is what constitutes family for them.

4-5. The help: The outsider-inside

Lone parents referred to 'the help' by their name or as a relationship and connected with them like family. The help then, though neither kin nor friends of lone fathers, were described as a part of their larger family¹⁰. *Rana* who was working with a multinational firm at the time of his separation and whose stayed son and daughter stayed with him even though his wife had legal custody of the children, introduced the help as *jivini* (the one who helps sustain life). He said three generations of her family had lived with his patrilineal family and even though she was unwell he did not want to send her back to the village as she would not be taken care of over there. It was reassuring to have her around he said just like it was to have a parent. The other members of his family were the watchman, plumber, electrician who even if he called in the middle of the night they would leave everything and be by his side. Not for the money but because of the relationship he shared with them.

Lf seemed to have an orientation that was 'outward' as they were not just restricted to members within the family. The meaning of the family for them has transcended to relationships beyond the kin¹¹.

5. Consequences for the lone fathers

Lf are said to be promoting norms of an individualistic ethos. Despite trying to create larger families, which because they are differently structured than the conventional two parent family, they are often considered to be going against the norms of society. The emotional and financial cost at which they are taking care of their children is seldom considered.

5-1. Home and work

Finances are often a source of anxiety for lone parent families. Lf like lone mothers are involved in the routine care of the children and find it difficult to be involved in a demanding career. Furthermore since childcare activities are more of a barrier to workforce participation it is also difficult for lone fathers to be the primary care giver and bread earner. Hence Lf found it difficult to be in jobs which were demanding as they required flexible work hours. Ambition and careers took a back seat and routine work took precedence. *Vijay* who was working as a manager in an export house and whose wife left the house, on the pretext of going out of the country for some work, to never return, became a passive acceptor¹². He took care of their 8 year old daughter but it was difficult as he did not have flexible work hours. His boss though sympathetic to his situation could not offer much help. The child's security was a major concern and Vijay had to move close his parent's house. Vijay's mother took on the responsibility of the child in his absence. He even handed over most of his earnings to his parents. The grand parents took care of the child's security concerns but could not fulfill her emotional needs. Vijay was busy taking care of the financial needs of the family and his own needs of companionship. Despite trying his best he could not take care of his daughter the way he would have wanted to. The problems faced by Vijay reflect the problems of most lone parents. There are no concessions at the work place for lone parents' particularly lone fathers. People at the workplace even if sympathetic cannot do much as they are no laws separate protecting the rights of lone parents. Since there is a stereotype regarding the roles of parents the law does not take into consideration the needs of Lf. Thus it becomes difficult for a lone parent to bring up a child without support even if he wishes to do so.

To deal with such issues some lone parents have formed self help groups. They felt that being part of a group with similar concerns helped them cope with issues related to child care. *Sanjay* who had a professional degree worked in his father's firm as it gave him flexible time. He is the father of a 12 year old boy. He said that he was a part of an informal single fathers' support group in which they address issues common to their situation. They meet once in a while and even organize joint outings. *Rana* another Lf said that his son's friends' and their

parents always went out together. A lone mother and her daughter was also a part of the group. This helped his son realize that there were others who had similar family forms.

5-2. Marriage and Masculinity

The association of marriage with masculinity creates a stereotype painting all non married men with a similar brush¹³. Lf even though married, on separation, get 'branded,' as is the case with single unmarried men. The unmarried status of men casts a shadow on their masculinity and there is pressure on their 'sexuality'. In a society where there is a high value placed on marriage and fertility not only for women but also for men, unmarried men, as well as women are seen as a threat to society

The divorced men considered in the study, though married and had children living with them, were still considered a threat to society. *Irfan* said that 'married men considered him to be a threat around their wives'. He married his girlfriend when he was only 21 years old after she told him that she had become pregnant. He had the marriage registered in a back date. The marriage lasted for two years and they separated by mutual consent. Even as a child his daughter hated seeing him with other woman so he decided that he would not get married. He got into innumerable relationships that would eventually break and people especially married men became uncomfortable around him. Society considers such men to be a threat to the social order since there is no check on their behavior as marriage and family are considered to be institutions within which men's sexuality is (supposedly) contained.

Chowdhry (2011) in her study in rural Haryana found that unmarried young men and men past their youth if still unmarried, are slotted and accorded an inferior status¹⁴. This was also found to be true of the Lf in the urban areas. *Vijay* whose wife left at the pretext of going abroad for a job, said that his status in his house was that of an 'irresponsible' person. His father thought that he was incapable of taking important decisions because his 'love marriage' had failed. Men who are unable to control their women are considered to be weak as the exercise of power is considered to be a sign of manhood. So men who could not 'keep' their wives were considered to be less masculine as it is assumed that their wives did not submit to their power. Masculinity then has multiple indicators the most important of which is marriage.

5-3. Loneliness and sexuality

According to Uberoi (2004) there is avoidance on discussions related to sexuality in India. Contemporary work on sexuality problematizes the notion that sexuality is a world unto itself. A consequence of this thinking is that sexuality is treated like a private 'thing' that is disconnected from the public domain (Srivastava 2013).

Lf discussed their relationships with their women friends in a more casual manner and the secrecy that surrounded such discussions with lone mothers was absent. They readily discussed their need for a sexual relationship. 'I have a girlfriend in every city. I think being single is better than being in one relationship for life', said Rohit. Rohit a businessman whose son and daughter stayed with him said that men had sexual needs and for him too that was important. His ex wife though he was sure was not seeing anyone and he wondered how women are able to manage without something so vital to the existence. He said that he got into a relationship twice after his separation and had just got out of the second relationship. As a result of his 'activities' his daughter was sent to her mother. The Lf's attempt at discussing multiple relationships seemed a subtle way of dealing with issues of masculinity.

Lf's said that they understood the 'syndrome of the empty nest' and could empathize with mothers' who spent their entire lives around children. Lf primary reason for not remarrying was their children as the child was their primary responsibility. Once the children grow up there is a certain emptiness but that does not necessarily mean being lonely said *Rana*. Another Lf was saddened by the fact that his daughter has gone for a higher education to the country where her mother now lives. 'Not to be with the mother but for a better education. My dogs are now my family. I travel a lot and but whatever part of the country I am in I Skype and connect with my babies. I live to come home to my babies... you need not have a human to communicate with'. I am the envy of my friends as I am 'free' and don't have any commitments'. Though with a far away look in his eyes he did say that his life would have been very different if it had not been for his daughter. Yet there was no resentment that his daughter was enjoying her life without him. He looked forward to her being with him soon. Loneliness and issues of sexuality of Lf are not really a point of discussion as they are considered to be the private concerns of a group of individuals who are considered to be an anomaly of society

6. Conclusion

Challenging conventional notions, Lf are playing the role of bread earners and care givers. Though they were already fathers before their separation/divorce yet their transition to becoming the solo caregiver is a process that requires them to be engaged with their children, much more than is expected of men in the Indian context. Giving them physical and emotional care they involve themselves with the children at various levels. The experience of lone fathers shows that they share circumstances similar to mothers' in bringing up children as compared to fathers' in two parent families. In trying to creating a balance between care and work lone parents are unwittingly reinvention gender roles and this can have wider implications for gender relations. The larger families that they have succeeded in creating are 'outward' in orientation. The basis unit of these families is the father-child unit and instead of the conventional other there are the many others not necessarily the kin. This then is a witness to the fact that Lf are not promoting an individualistic ethos. These families with their diffuse authority structures and flexible gender roles are not structured like the patriarchal family. Though not large in number, lone father families could be prompting us to rethink the family.

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Notes

¹According to data, widowed /separated /divorced men are clubbed together and constitutes 1.7 % of the total male population of Delhi No data however was found for single father families.

²The thrust of my thesis is urban upper middle/middle class Lone parent(father /mother) families.However since lone fathers are difficult to find hence 11 lone fathers are a part of the study.

³Jalan (2010), a comparison can be drawn with the study of single parents in Germany which showed that single fathers usually remarry.

⁴Since care is still in the purview of the (joint) family in India and the norm is for sons to continue to stay with the parents after their marriage, it is the responsibility of the grandparents to take care of their grandchild and more so if the marriage of their son breaks.

⁵All names are pseudonyms

⁶Goffman (1966)An echelon structure consists of a hierarchy in which one individual has authority over another.

⁷Kakar (1981) argues that in the Indian system mother son bond is emphasized over the husband wife relationship.

⁸Das (1995) the duality of the family is expressed on the one hand as a site of oppression and on the other hand as a 'haven in a heartless world'.

⁹Amit's elder son lived with him. But when his son went to do engineering in another city he fell ill so Amit rented a house for his son and his widowed mother in the city in which his son was studying. His wife and younger son lived in another house bought by Amit.

¹⁰*Uberoi, (2005)* researchers may sometimes not include non-kin like servants in enumeration of household, who contribute critically to household maintenance.

¹¹Palriwala (2011) Love in which there is expectation of return is considered to be corrupt love.

¹² See O'brien(1982)

¹³A single status though is equated to being unmarried but data shows that was also the case for divorced men.

¹⁴Chowdhry,(2011). It is not only the women but also the men who may find it difficult to live up to the stereotype of a patriarchal structure. The unmarried youth are considered of an inferior status and are sometimes slotted as problem creators.