

[Eulogy for the Hindu Family](#)

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Eulogy for the Hindu Family

Born 10,000 BCE - Died 1994

Palani, Sivasiva Most of our readers know that 1994 is to be the United Nation's International Year of the Family, and HINDUISM TODAY has been publishing a series of articles and editorials on the Hindu experience of family. Our articles, revealing cultural and scriptural insights seldom discussed, have ranged widely: child-rearing, teenage crises, violent games, career, divorce, abortion, suicide, mothers-in-law, dowry and, this month, the proliferating predicament of cross-national marriages.

Someone in New York must be reading all of this, for last month the team commissioned by the UN to publish a book on family values faxed HINDUISM TODAY to inquire: "Would you write the chapter on the Hindu family for a book we are preparing on the spiritual dimension of family as experienced in the world's great faiths? Oh yes, we need the finished manuscript in 20 days!" We said yes, then with winsome wife inspired Lavina Melwani and Archana Dongre to contribute their considerable skills to the project.

The UN had asked us to address problems families face, so our first reflections proved a bit depressing. Death in the family can be woeful, but what if the family itself were dying? What if the very institution, the cauldron of our cultural and spiritual consciousness, were struck by some fatal disease and perished? Who could measure the tragedy? Who could weep sufficient tears? Yet that is precisely the path which we are semiconsciously following, a path leading to the demise of the traditional Hindu family, the source of our strength, the patron of our spirituality, the only guarantor of our future.

Is it our fault that the family is disintegrating? Perhaps. Does it portend

uncertainty? Be certain that it does. Is it inevitable? Probably not. A eulogy for the Hindu family may be premature. Consider it a warning, a glimpse of the future that all must heed so none may have to see it.

Leaving the womb (itself a less and less safe place today, as this month's color poster on abortion reveals), we enter another complex system of support, protection and nurturing. The family is an intricate web of relationships in which we grow from birth to humanhood, from ignorance to knowledge and from the cycles of death to immortality. Just how intricate can be seen from the definitions below, taken from a contemporary Hindu sourcebook. They describe a sophisticated system of interrelatedness that far transcends the unstable nuclear family that has become popular today:

Joint family: Kutumba or Kula. The Hindu social unit consisting of several generations of kindred living together under the same roof or in a joining compound. Traditionally, joint families live in a large single home, but in modern times accommodations are often in individual, nuclear homes within a shared compound. The joint family includes the father and mother, sons, grandsons and great-grandsons with their spouses, as well as the daughters, granddaughters and great-granddaughters until they are married - thus often comprising several married couples and their children. The head of the joint family, called *kutumba mukhya* (also *mukhya* or *kartri*), is the father, supported by the mother, and in his absence, the elder son, guided by his mother and supported by his spouse. From an early age, the eldest son is given special training by his father to assume this future responsibility as head of the family. In the event of the father's death, sacred law does allow for the splitting of the family wealth between the sons. Division of family assets may also be necessary in cases where sons are involved in different professions and live in different towns, when there is an inability for all to get along under one roof, or when the family becomes unmanageably large. The main characteristics of the joint family are that its members 1) share a common residence, 2) partake of food prepared in the same kitchen, 3) hold their property in common and, 4) ideally, profess the same religion, sect and *sampradaya*. Each individual family of husband, wife and children is under the guidance of the head of the joint family. All work together unselfishly to further the common good. Each joint family extends out from its home to include a second level of connections as an "extended family."

Extended family: Brihatkutumba or mahakutumba. One or more joint families plus their broader association and affiliations. Unlike the joint family, whose members live in close proximity, the extended family is geographically widespread. The

extended family is headed by the patriarch, called brihatkutumba pramukha (or mukhya), recognized as the leader by each joint family. He, in turn, is under the guidance of the kulaguru, or family preceptor. It includes the following, in order of their precedence: priests of one's faith; elder men and women of the community; in-laws of married daughters; married daughters, granddaughters, great-granddaughters, and the spouses and children of these married girls; members of the staff and their families and those closely associated with the joint family business or home; maternal great-grandparents and grandparents, parents, uncles and their spouses, aunts and their spouses, children and grandchildren of these families; very close friends and their children; members of the community at large.

There is a more cosmic definition of family taught by every grandma and village elder, that in truth all of us on earth are the creation of the One Great God; thus, Hinduism teaches that we belong to a single family. Vasudaiva kutumbaka - "The whole world is one family." That's no innovative notion derived from New Age insights or Gaia ecology. India has taught it for 6,000 years.

How else is the Hindu ideal of family experienced differently? Only in the faiths of India does one encounter the decree that we all experience a multitude of families in our journey toward God. In birth after birth we evolve, our tradition assures. In family after family we grow and mature and learn. Thus in the Hindu family we find that the past and the future are intricately bound together. How intricately? We know a Sri Lankan family who is certain that their daughter, now nine, is the father's deceased grandmother. In this community it is considered a very great blessing - especially if one had the privilege of being part of a fine, noble family - for a departed relation to be born again into its midst. There is a profound intuition that when relatives pass they will return, perhaps soon and perhaps in the very same home. So everyone watches for the telltale signs. How wonderful, the family feels, to care for grandma as she once cared for us!

Hinduism teaches a constellation of principles which sustain a family. Dharma is one. When dharma, with its emphasis on duty, service and sacrifice, is the shared ideal of every family member - as opposed to self-fulfillment or social-economic objectives - it is easier to live through seasons of loss or lack, to endure times of emotional or mental difficulty.

Then there is faith in karma. The Hindu family believes, in its heart, that even life's

difficulties are part of God's purpose and the fruition of each member's past karmas. To go through things together in natural, expected, accepted. Breaking up, divorcing, separating - such reactions to stress don't resolve karmas that were brought into this life to go through. In fact, they make things worse, create new karmas and thus further need for births.

Then there is the ideal that father and mother are the children's first guru, first teacher of things of the spirit. This brings a deep honoring to the parent-child relationship. Such a tie transcends the physical, emotional, intellectual relationship that is the sum of some bonds. It brings a sacredness into human interactions, a reverencing which powerfully connects a daughter or son to his mother and father. One sees this expressed beautifully when young ones gently and lovingly touch the feet of their parents. They are adoring the divine parents. Who can defy or disobey those they so deeply honor?

There is much more that holds the Hindu family together. The pattern of the four ashramas gives a place of purpose and pride to elders, who become advisors rather than burdens when their earning years are over. The home shrine sanctifies the house, bringing the Divine into each member's daily shared routine. Hierarchy of age brings clarity of authority, making it easy to follow directions from elders, and to cherish and protect those younger. Even differences of a few months are respected. Many problems that could arise in less structured families simply never come up. There is less vying for attention, less ego conflict, less confusion about everyone's role in the human scheme of things.

Hindu families all over the world are struggling - some failing, some succeeding. Our experience is that those most rooted in their Hinduness are the better survivors. And those who live as a joint family are the most secure and happy, the most likely to carry family values into the next millennium.

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