

SOMETHING'S COOKING IN THE KITCHEN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHANGING POWER EQUATIONS IN INDIAN HOUSEHOLD

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Abstract - Family is an integral part of a social fabric. In fact, the agency of family operates like a binding factor, instrumental in shaping the collective essence of any society. The institution of family operates in a variable manner and by no stretch of imagination can be called internally homogenous. It has evolved and diversified as a response to the various processes of change like education, globalisation. The roles typically occupied by the individual members within the family have been largely revised. This research study makes an attempt to understand and appreciate the changing hegemony between the roles of Mother-in-Law (MIL) and Daughter-in-law (DIL) using a qualitative paradigm. It aims at unearthing the nuances of the sources of friction and contextualising the same. The study has revealed the potential of certain factors as instrumental in turning the relations between MIL and DIL upside down.

Key Words- Power, Family, Kitchen, Mother-in-Law (MIL), Daughter in Law (DIL)

Introduction - One of the most important institutions in society is family. "The **family** is a variable conception. In one sense the family is a *nuclear* unit, consisting of husband and wife and those children towards whom they assume the role of parents. In another sense the family is a larger *extended* unit, consisting of 'blood' relatives and their several nuclear units." (Turner, 1963) Family system is not immutable; it functions in conjunction with and as a response to several of the socio-economic factors that surround it. Extended family (In popular discourse known as the Joint Family) typically includes more than one generation, hence holds a network of conjugal (based on blood ties) and consanguine (based on marriage ties) relations. With urbanization and industrialization, the family structure has undergone remarkable changes, however the component of **kitchen** is a cultural universal in any form or pattern of family. Food is a common need of all the family members and a common hearth to cook for everybody is one of the preliminary requirements of a

joint family. It is important to note that women sociologists like Irawati Karve, Leela Dube have highlighted the strategic significance of having access to the kitchen in their work.

Kitchen is a gendered area predominantly shaped by and associated with women. In a patrilocal set up the dynamics in kitchen acquires a pronounced male dominated flavor with the women being mere pawns of the game. These pawns acquire their role and status through the assorted strings attached to different social, cultural and economic configurations. Their relations with the male members in the family, their maternal family background, caste background, class structures, age play an important role.

Several feminist sociologists have discussed the conventional power dynamics between mothers and daughters in law and the construction of power prism in the institution of family.

The sex role socialization for girls in India revolves predominantly around food making and kitchen management. A woman's association, affiliation and identification with kitchen is overwhelming.

Background- Typically, for a married woman her husband and then her son are like pillars that she constantly leans upon for perceived accomplishments. She measures her success, happiness, gratitude based on their reactions. Cooking and feeding them is her way of helping them, reaching out to them and staying connected to them. She also tries to perpetuate a sense of dependence in their minds. Entry of DIL automatically challenges this status quo.

In a patrilocal set up, kitchen is handled by the most senior married woman in the family, in most of the cases by the mother-in-law (MIL). Her son's marriage alters the equation in and stake to the kitchen space drastically. MIL's position is then contested by her daughter in law (DIL) once she enters the scene. Mother in law's experience and her cultivated expertise are effectively challenged by the newcomer. The MIL expects to

continue her exclusive power over the kitchen; however, she seeks active assistance from her DIL to run the daily chores. Though in the initial 'honeymooning period' clashes are strategically avoided handled or mitigated; in the subsequent period both of them are not always willing to be understanding, adjusting or tolerant towards each other. The passing years in the life course of the family result in 'aging' of MIL and 'youthening' of family with new generation members being added. The utility, efficacy of MIL; while the DIL is away for work is silently acknowledged and is tolerated due to inevitable circumstances. Eventually, around the time when children are close to being self sufficient (roughly around 10 to 14 years), coupled with MIL's progressive ageing and she being economically unproductive due to superannuation is typically the phase when open clashes and silent abuse bzzgin.

Research Design - The study is nested in the model of Age Stratification drawn from the work of Riley, Johnson and Foner (1972). The model underlines that society members can be understood with reference to their age cohorts. Age strata using the 'Life Cycle Approach' recognizes the developmental stages as, Infancy, early childhood, adolescence, young adulthood mature adulthood, middle age and old age. (Ward, 1979). It utilizes the framework of 'Role Theory'. The theory revolves around the prescribed role structure allotted to different individuals in society. Certain social roles are neutral, open and flexible, certain other social roles make an approximate and at times even a definite statement about an individual's gender, age group, etc., certain roles are positioned as hegemony and certain others are relegated to a subservient zone.

The study has a qualitative approach with the main objective of elaborating on the perpetually conflicting relation dynamics between the MIL and DIL in the kitchen. The secondary objective of the study is to arrive at the plausible causality of the rankling relationship. The reference point for the study was the hypothetical stand, which is popularly established

A Narrative Interview Analysis technique is used on twenty respondents who are mothers in law and are living in a joint family composition for at least five years. All are above the age of sixty and are superannuated. All of them were working women. Out of the total 20 women; seven are widows and 13 living with their married partners and the next generation members. All of them have married son/s with whom they are living.

The data collection was done in a pre-covid scenario. In person interviews were conducted for all the twenty

respondents. Un structured, non standardized interview schedule was utilized. The narratives were studied in detail in order to arrive at the correlative interpretations.

Observations - All the respondents reported uneasiness in the equation they have with their daughters in law. All the respondents spoke about being discontent, unhappy in sharing kitchen with their DILs. Most of them have, managed to keep their dissatisfaction under wraps; a few of them have had open arguments, quarrels with their DILs. The clashes are result of multiple factors which range from preparation of food, choice about what is to be cooked, mode of cooking, style of cooking, usage of type and amount of oil, type of vessels, number of dishes, serving style, use of modern kitchen appliances, refrigerator management, hiring kitchen help, cleanliness and hygiene, buying provisions, type of gas stove and occasionally ordering food from hotels. The clashes pertain to practically everything possibly associated with planning, preparation and serving of food.

The kitchen related clashes between MILs and DILs were stronger in inter regional, inter caste and inter class marriages. Verbal attacks, remarks, neglect, exclusion from decision making process are common forms of kitchen politics. Fear, confusion or air of resignation, passivity, withdrawal or increasing depression, helplessness, hopelessness or anxiety, reluctance to talk openly are the most common symptoms observed in the respondents while interviewing them. The behavioral symptoms indicate mental and emotional distress. In addition to it a sense of ambivalence was perceived as well which manifested in the form of contradictory statements and allegations on DILs by the respondents.

Most of the respondents revealed that the origin of the differences can directly be traced to the young earning male member of the family; the MIL's son and DIL's husband. Old age seems to be operating as the 'protagonist' in the tragedy. The process of ageing for women proves to be exceedingly impoverishing; thereby making her increasingly vulnerable to abuse, maltreatment and marginalization.

In a modern urban setup, a woman's role of MIL in her family or community is itself a source of weakness. It is strange to note that the social role that was earlier described as powerful has acquired the sense of vulnerability and marginalization. The elderly women in their interviews discussed several coping mechanisms. Withdrawal, compromise, spirituality and selective intervention etc. to help and manage difficult and painful emotions of alienation and marginalization.

Many used adaptive coping mechanisms like meeting members in the neighborhood of the same age cohort to share worries and concerns. Age and social roles are the binding factors in these clusters.

By extrapolation, one can deduce that there is a clear and explicit observation about the rapidly changing equation between young couples. In the past, the perception of success of a conjugal relation depended quite heavily on the wife's ability to manage kitchen, cook food and be hospitable. During those days apparently, young girls of marriageable age were repeatedly told about 'the path to her husband's heart runs through his stomach', bottom line being if she has to keep him happy, she better be a good cook. This axiomatic belief is largely challenged by the modern couples. All the respondents seemed to be unhappy about the altered equation where their DILs don't have to prove their kitchen related proficiency to keep their respective partner happy. They revisited the days when they were young and openly criticized the Going back to the Role Theory, one clearly can deduce that in India the impact of the processes of change has proved to be unsettling. It has challenged the conventionality of important social variables like gender and age. Role descriptions of MILs and DILs are in continuous transition having a direct impact on the construction of age prism. Gerontocracy is largely interrogated and modified where seniority is no longer a virtue and is not revered upon.

Thus, this paper concludes on the basis of the interactions with the respondents that, the age is a significant trigger which engineers and perpetuates asymmetrical relations within family. The process of ageing impacts women in a strong manner, challenging the hegemony in the family structure and turning it upside down. This can be attributed to the changing economic role of women and their consequent participation in the workforce.

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