
Of Children and Siblings

- Sougata Mallik

In India, in our childhood, we had lots of aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters and cousins that we grew up amongst. In most cases the age structure in the families was similar to that of a staircase – one step gradually giving way to the next, existing one after another. Every epoch fell just after the other and cousins, siblings had a close-knit age difference between them. Such was the hierarchy in those times. Even in our extended family my oldest cousin was only few years younger than our aunt, my father's youngest sister. When my grandparent's marriage was arranged, the first thing that my grandmother had learnt was that her would-be husband belonged to a family of eleven brothers and sisters.

There are numerous, umpteen instances of people and families we know in India or those now living abroad who belong to such households and have grown up with plenty of siblings and cousins. That was a phenomenon, an experience world apart - and however much we try to explain to our single child brought up in a nuclear family setup the delight, the sheer joy, the unending fun of growing up in such circumstances, it will remain something beyond their imagination or wildest dreams. Now having large families or too many children in India or elsewhere is somehow relegated to the less fortunate, illiterate classes. Sitting in the family-room couch and flipping television channels on a rare, lazy, work-free afternoon, all these thoughts crossed my mind when I chanced to watch a report that stated that a 33-year-old woman in The United States had given birth to eight children and all of them surviving.

The television camera sometimes pinned to the woman's house and then to the close-up of the babies in the hospital bed all wrapped up like white bundles, some with the oxygen and feeder tubes etc. It struck me that these kids will be growing up together all under the same roof, every day of their little lives! The number suggests that, what we would call a joint family. Fun, frolic ... modified, pressed, deprived existence?

My trend of thought detoured itself. It was 3 pm and my teenaged High school daughter returned home. I don't have eight kids – I just have one. Mothers like me who only have one or two children, will perhaps agree that we keep our eyes pinned on them. We listen to them; take note of them, their

activities, interests, wishes, desires. We pay far too much attention to them. By this time, my daughter is a young adult, a young lady. She sprints around the whole house like Julie Andrews in 'The Sound of Music'. She now takes decisions to buy the right kind of clothes for herself, advises her father and me on our formal outfits for work or social events, and on some rare occasions gives us presents and gifts. Friends and relatives who visit us, are often happy with her or find her gratifying. But let's not forget that she is growing up in a household that cherishes and nurtures fewer members. If under the circumstances she is ever required to live in the broader spectrum, I can vouch she will nowhere fit into the wide joint families, numerous siblings, cousins, relatives like we had in the olden times. As I looked at her with this thought, with a glint in her eyes she told me to anticipate something which can be unrevealed after her father returns from work. In the modern nuclear families of these days, father-mother-child is the only thing they know.

Nonetheless, I initiated my gift from my small family – it was a gleaming exercise-bicycle sitting in my room. While I am an absolute non-exercise pro, I was skeptical about the bike. My daughter told me it was more than a gift - it was about a trim and fit body that could enable trekking and allow me to pry into every cave in the Himalayas! She emphasized that I could put that cycle to good use: exercise-ing, de-stressing, load-shedding. Her words translated zest as I eyed the cycle. I was asked to take up the project with gusto!

So I did. In-between spells of chores and tasks, I would sit astride the cycle and pedal with profusion, fantasizing about shapely long legs, Himalayan trekking. It is a truth universally acknowledged that while men must be muscular, women should be tubular. Incessantly the implications are about maintaining the ideal physique, which will lead to good health, happiness, a protracted, sickness-free life.

After a few months of rigorous discipline and fervent enthusiasm on the exercise bicycle, I suddenly noticed I could rarely walk without experiencing pain in the knee and ankle joints. And what a pain there was, my country's men and women! Creaks, aches, crackle, rattling of bones - I had them all.

Behaving like a responsive, aware person I went to see a doctor. He advised and prescribed medicines, X-ray. The doctor mentioned that if I engage in excessive cycling I could develop knee erosion. Erosion! Since my last Geography test in high school, I had not used that word.

My husband was livid. *"You and your daughter"*. This possessive switch is quite common - when the daughter does something wise, it is his daughter and sometimes generously our daughter, but if she does something fallow, she is my daughter. Such is the politics of familial semantic jugglery.

I turned to my trusted associates and links for help or suggestion. I Google-d, Yahoo-d and the good genie in the computer showed me thousands of web pages that told me I was not alone. There are plenty of men and women with the same problem. I was assured. But at the same time was proud of myself - especially for a never-athletic woman like me, painstaking marathon cycling was one of the bravest things I have ever done in my life!

Thankfully, my friends from all over the world rushed to me. My childhood classmate who now lives in Houston sent urgent text, *"Throw that cycle right now"*. She had a similar story. Her conscientious jogging through the roads of Houston, only to become slender had almost sent her knees to the surgery. This incentive was also a flip side of the coin. Her America born and raised daughter wanted to be proud of a slim and trim mother to go shopping with. This young girl also had never lived with obese grandmothers, overweight aunts or plump, round, heavy uncles. Raised in America and in a nuclear family, she too had missed out on the assortment and variety of joint households.

Oh yes! What did I do with the vicious cycle? It is in the attic covered with an old, grey bed sheet. I am much better now. I climb up and down the stairs, drive long distance and finish my usual chores in time. I can once again sit on the floor, pick up something that slips and rolls under the bed or table. I can stand on my exercise-free, pain-free legs again with ease! □

