

# Vedic Concepts of A Happy Family

Harish Chandra

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**Family – the First Institution of Learning:** Family life of the householders serves as an umbrella for the entire society. *Gr̥hasthāśrama* (the householder stage life) supports the members in the other three *āśramas* – *brahmacārin* (student), *vānaprastha* (hermit), and *sannyāsin* (one who has renounced the material world). It also serves as an institution of learning for both children and parents. While the learning of the parents will be discussed later, it is easy to see that a child's very first teacher is the mother from whom it learns many first lessons, the most prominent being that of language. The child's next teacher is the father. Thereafter the child goes to a school for further education from teachers. The unique aspect of education in human life is beautifully summed up in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*: *māṭrmān pitṛmān ācāryavān puruṣo veda* i.e. we human beings gain knowledge from mother, father, and teacher. Hence, it can be rightly stated that the child gets his or her very first education from the family during the formative years.

**Family Life – the Most Prominent Subject in the Vedas:** The four Vedas have a total of about 20,000 verses. It is interesting to note that family life (*gr̥hāśrama*) is the topic dealt with by the largest number of verses in the Vedas, generally believed to be books of philosophy and spirituality. But what is true is that the Vedas are down-to-earth and no topic could be of greater importance than the family life where all of us were born and raised during our early years. Family is the institution through which the maximum number of human beings have passed. *Kalpa* ("correct performance of rituals"), which is one of the six *Vedāngas* or auxiliary sciences based on the Vedas, contains within it a huge family of texts called *gr̥hyasūtras* pertaining to family life as the name suggests.

**Institution of Family – India's Contribution to the World:** Indians can be proud of the fact that the concept of family has been taught by India to the entire world. The Sānskrit word *pitṛ* got transformed into *pitara* in Prākṛit, *peter* in Latin, *vater* (pronounced *fater*) in German, and *father* in English. The words *māṭr*, *bhrāṭr*, *svasṛ*, *duhitṛ*, and *sunu* traveled across long distances and time periods to transform into mother, brother, sister, daughter, and son, respectively, in present-day English language. Since people borrow the words associated with a concept when they borrow the concept from the people of another language group, it is safe to conclude that Europeans and others borrowed the concept of family along with the words for family relationships from India.

**Marriage with Mutual Consent and Selection:** The family begins with the union, called marriage, of a man and a woman. The marriage is based on exercising the mutual selection process. Any kind of force, intimidation, coercion, greed, etc. is out of question. The classical Indian procedure of *svayamvara* (selection by the self, i.e. the bride) shows that it was not uncommon for the bride to select her life partner. Atharvaveda XI.5.18 states: *brahmacaryena kanyā yuvānam vindate patim*, meaning that the girl should go through education and then select a young man after attaining youth. Note that girls used to go through the same education as boys, without any kind of discrimination.

**Marriage as Union of Two Hearts:** Some verses from the Vedas are very enlightening as to how the Vedic culture viewed marriage. Ṛgveda V.51.15 beautifully describes marriage as a true partnership in togetherness: "We two should move together on the

path of righteousness and goodness, following each other as the Sun and the Moon do (not quite bothering who follows whom!). In so doing, we will give (our goodness) to each other again and again – without hurting, with full understanding, and continuing to move along in the company of each other.” Every word in this passage is significant. Another well-known example is Ṛgveda hymn X.85, which describes the marriage of Sūryā, the daughter of Sūrya (the Sun), to Soma, who here personifies the Moon; this cosmic event is the model and image of every human marriage. In the final verse of this hymn, togetherness is again stressed: *samañjantu viśvedevāḥ samāpo hṛdayāni nau*, “May all the divine Powers together with the Waters join our two hearts in one.” Also, verse 33 of this hymn makes it very clear that marriage is not a private affair. A number of noble souls are to be invited and it is in their presence that the ceremony takes place.

**What is the Primary Purpose of Marriage?:** Vedic literature is unambiguous that the primary purpose of marriage is to give rise to birth and development of children. All other benefits are incidental. The focus must be on keeping the stability of the family environment that is essential for a child’s growth. The parents must raise the child so that he or she is better than themselves. This is the constructive way to leave the world better than we found it to be. This purposefulness gives meaning to the natural feeling that parents have with regard to the progress of the child – they derive the biggest joy when their child exceeds their expectations and their own achievements. As Ṛgveda X.53.6 states: *manurbhava janayā daivyaṃ janam*, “May we become true human beings and give shape to the intellect of our children to make them *devata*, the noble people.”

**Family – the Institution of Learning for the Parents:** Family is the institution of learning for the parents as well as for the children and if they do the learning properly they may find themselves elevated to the highest pedestal of *devatva*, i.e. becoming persons of the noblest kind. To see this, let us understand that human beings are the only species where its individual members can be characterized as devils, fair persons, or noble ones (*rākṣasa*, *manuṣya*, and *devata*) depending on the nature of the individual’s *karma* (acts, works, and deeds). One who gives no goodness but snatches away our peace and good possessions is called *rākṣasa*. One who gives and takes in equal measure is a fair person indeed, called *manuṣya*. One who gives goodness and takes nothing is called *devata*. Since the parents love their children and want to give all goodness to their children without expecting anything in return, they become naturally *devata* in the sphere of their family. As Taittirīya Upaniṣad I.11.2 instructs, *mātr̥devobhava pitṛ̥devobhava*, “May the mother be your God; may the father be your God.” In other words, as soon as the seed of love of the highest quality is planted in the hearts of the mother and father at the time they attain parenthood, they are automatically put on the highest pedestal of *devata*.

If the parents lead their life sensibly and enlarge their sphere of *devatva* from their children on to the other members of the society and other species as well, then they indeed become the most noble souls on earth. They become *devata* not only for their children but also in the eyes of the entire society. Thus, the family can become an institution of learning for the parents. A society that has a large fraction of such noble souls indeed becomes a single family as stated by the Vedic ideal of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*, i.e. the entire world is one family, indeed a small family. The Sānskrit word *kuṭumbam* means a family while *kuṭumbakam* means a *small* family. This vision and foresight of the Indian sages is very laudable.