

## Defining Kinship

By Maya Krishna

Chaotic conversations and impatience. It had been almost an hour, the rain was pouring outside, the petrichor thick in the air around us, mixing with the anticipation and restless energy in the room. Our hunger hung like a dead weight, bringing down the usual enthusiasm that drove our interactions, as we anxiously waited for my uncle to come back with our dinner. In Kerala, almost as if to atone for their past sins, prisoners in the central jails make delicious dishes and assorted articles of common use for the public at lower rates. Whenever my extended family got together for dinner, we would buy the "*jail chappatis*" (Indian flatbread). My uncle had gone to buy the bread so that we could start our meal, but as the minutes passed, the light hearted arguments started getting heated and intense as snarky comments and meaningless insults flew across the table. My uncle bursts through the door, like a scene from a movie, the cold wind gushing in through the open door behind him as he walks towards the table heroically, with a pale blue packet of food in hand. "*Idhendha bhakshanam aakeetu vannadhaano?*" (did you take this long because you had to make the food and then bring it?), my aunt shouts mockingly, resining an eyebrow at my uncle as she stands by the open door with her hands on her hip. A brief and impatient laughter erupts through the room as we rush to lay the food out. For a moment the only noise heard is the loud scraping of our chairs on the white tiled floor as we hurry towards the large glass table decorated with a wide variety of appetising dishes. The small jute chairs from the *veranda* are brought in and laid out on the floor so that the smaller kids could fit into the tightly knit unit around gathered the table. Elbows brushing, children scurrying about, and the elders shouting at them to settle down, we begin our meal.

The food is being passed around, its rich aroma filling the air. There is a rare and momentary silence as we relish the food, taking a minute to enjoy the intense flavour of each

dish. We make it through our first serving with relative calm. There are at least 10 different dishes, most of them traditional Keralite food, covering the table with an array of bright reds, yellows and greens. The spicy and savoury *curries*, plates of cut fruits and vegetables, huge vessels filled with *payasam* (traditional dessert) and fragrant Indian sweets receive our brief but undivided attention. As our hunger subsides, the conversations get louder, and then it's a short way from "Did you watch that new movie that came out last week", to "How in the world do you think the government is better now than it was 5 years ago?" In the midst of this erupting chaos, my grandfather sits in his old wooden rocking chair, in a small nook by the garden. He would often sit there, admiring the lush green plants that his wife spent hours together nurturing. The little children are sitting in a small group at his feet, looking up at him wide-eyed, eagerly waiting for his stories to begin. My grandfather scrunches up his eyebrows and strokes his chin as he pretends to formulate a story and its complex characters. The children sit quietly, all of them on their best behaviour, knowing he won't start until he has their undivided attention. I watch as his story finally begins, each word fuelling the curiosity of his enthusiastic listeners who gasp, laugh, and jump up in fear, following his every movement down to the small wrinkles that form by his eyes as the plot of his fascinating narration takes a turn.

As we finish eating, the whole group moves to the backyard. My grandfather and some of my aunts and uncles now sit around a small, round table and start playing a game of cards, which would undoubtedly end in indignant complaints of "I swear to you he cheated!" and "Come on, that was pure luck! Play another round and then we'll see." This was a familiar scene, a recurring one during these yearly get-togethers. The fact that we all gathered together so rarely never doused the intensity of our card games or heated political debates, nor did it tame the laughter we shared or hinder our ability to confide in each other. We bask in the warmth of this moment, knowing that we would have to go back to our

individual lives after these few days. But in the time that separates the end of our meal and the packing our bags the next morning, we do not waste a single minute. We each have our own nuclear families, our own lives, and our fair share of problems, but that doesn't take away from the bonds we develop with each other. Even though we don't live in an extended family, we are each other's support system, wisdom and reason.

“An extended family is one or more families in a supporting web. Your spouse and children come first, but there are also cousins, in-laws, grandparents—a complex web of relationships among, say, seven, 10, or 20 people.” (page 2). David Brooks, political and cultural commentator, writes this quote in support of extended families in his article “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake.” He talks about how an extended family consists of a collection of individual families that live under one roof, bearing the trials and troubles of life together. Resilience and socialising force are the two strengths of the extended family that Brooks highlights in his article, saying that the members of this larger family can share unexpected burdens and also raise their children with multiple adult figures to help with parenting. I completely agree with these aspects of being part of an extended family. Although I haven't experienced it in its entirety, the sense of support and dependence that my relatives have amongst each other, in spite of living miles apart, gives me a rough idea of how much more amplified that would be if we were to live together.

However, as perfect as that seems, it isn't the only reality of an extended family. The 'shock absorbers' that Brooks talks about in reference to the resilience that an extended family provides in times of trouble could also act as fuel to the fire. When my cousin's marriage ended in a divorce a few years back, she was living in an extended family with her parents and sister. I often heard from my parents about the hushed conversations in their kitchen as the meals were prepared, the closed-door arguments that were often just loud enough to reach those pretending not to hear as they say in the hall outside, and the strained

smile on my cousin's face as she was forced to walk around the house with a million thoughts on her mind. While nuclear families might not have the support that extended families provide, they definitely have a lot more privacy and allow for free expression of opinions and emotions. Especially in places like India, where divorces are fiercely looked down upon in society, problems that occur in extended families between spouses are often suppressed and glossed over for the sake of avoiding conflict. This is definitely a significant disadvantage of extended families that David Brooks does not mention in his argument. In an extended family there is an unavoidable interference that develops between any personal relationship. A small argument that you have with your spouse could be blown out of proportion by the opposing opinions of the other family members.

Brooks' view of the nuclear family is largely negative and absolute. His claim that nuclear families are "fragile" is in my opinion rather debatable. In his article, Brooks brings out why he feels the extended family is superior, by saying that "A detached nuclear family, by contrast, is an intense set of relationships among, say, four people. If one relationship breaks, there are no shock absorbers." (page 2) He says that in these families, there are no voices of reason in times of trouble to even out the problems and conflicts in personal relationships. Having lived in a nuclear family consisting of four people, for eighteen years, I find that one of its biggest assets is the safety and security that it provides. It creates an extremely conducive environment for personal growth and development, and more importantly for independence and self reliance. There is an obvious negative bias in Brooks' views of the nuclear family. Even when he mentions the advantages of the nuclear family, it is worded such that the readers are told, despite these pros, nuclear families have numerous cons, such as the individualistic mindset that these families are driven by that create a society that is more self-oriented. My inclination towards the nuclear family, as well as my rather conflicting beliefs about the extended family could very well be

because I have been fortunate enough to live in a healthy nuclear family household while also being able to maintain close relations with my extended family. Being in such a situation might have led to me not having a complete understanding of the need for a conventional extended family. Moreover, living in India, which is a country that values community and societal ties to a high standard, I can safely say that living in a nuclear family does not suppress our sense of community to a significant extent. Having lived in an apartment complex for most of my life, my family has been able to form loving and inseparable relations and friendships with other families within the community. Hence, the idea of a forged family is an extremely appealing concept.

In our opinions about the forged family, I think that Brooks and I are in total agreement. Brooks mentions in his article that “ The most interesting extended families are those that stretch across kinship lines.” (page 5). Here he talks about the ability to build such close relations and create familial bonds with people who aren’t biologically related. By living either in the same house, or in a community together, we are able to form a sense of dependence and develop a familial bond with the people around us. In our apartment complex, my family is part of a community of Keralites who have bonded over their shared language and traditions. We plan and celebrate festivals like *Onam* (harvest festival), and *Vishu* (Malayalam new year) together, thus keeping our culture alive through these festivities. We also routinely meet for lunches or dinners, watch sports games together, and plan crazy trips that we hope to take some day. This sense of kinship is certainly distinct from the unique sense of familial bonding that I feel from my blood relatives, but it is also an equally important and cherished relationship. Although I haven’t directly been a part of a traditional forged family, it is something that I think I would love to experience someday.