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The Search for Intimacy in the Indian Context

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Abstract:

In recent research, interest has centered on the concept of intimacy, both as a subject and as an analytic direction. This article conceptualizes the understanding of intimacy in India, where globalization and popular media have led to an increased desire for intimacy in relationships. Western research shows that intimate relationships are a predictor of life satisfaction, whereas, lack of intimacy leads to psychological and psychosomatic distress. While mapping the changing process of intimacy in India, it was found that modernization has led to changes in the family structure and adjustments expected from a couple. Yet, achieving such intimacy has varied costs for Indian couples. Addressing these lacunae in actualizing intimacy is imperative to therapeutic work for marital and family therapists.

Keywords: Intimacy, intimate relationship, marriage, couple, love, desire, sexuality

1. Introduction

India is still looked upon by the world as a country where marriage occupies a sacramental position, both philosophically and practically. Yet, globalization has been a catalyst in transforming lifestyle choices, which have led to individuality and an increased desire for intimacy in adults (Giddens, 1992). The desire for intimacy in India is reflected in the prevalence of different types of committed relationships that precede marriage. Various studies have highlighted the prevalence of dating (Donner, 2002; Alexander et al, 2006; Grover, 2011; Bansal, 2013; Trivedi, 2014) and cohabiting relationships (Mishra, 2009; Sen, Biswas & Dhawan, 2011; Agrawal, 2012; Jawale, 2012) in big and small cities, as well as, across all strata of society in India. At the root of such relationships is a search for intimacy, which is a basic fundamental human need (Freud, 1922; Maslow, 1954).

2. Conceptualising Intimacy

“From its earliest origins, love raises the question of intimacy because it presumes a psychic communication and a meeting of souls” (as cited in Giddens, 1992; p. 45). Through his theory, Giddens (1991) provides a bridge in the modern expectations of intimacy, with actualizing such intimacy in relationships. He believes that, despite gender differences, globalization has enabled men and women to gain that equality in relationships.

Many theorists have defined intimacy. Perlman and Fehr (1987) found that intimate relationships are marked with affection, warmth, self-disclosure, closeness and interdependence. Prager (1995), Reis (1990) and Waring (1984) agree that intimacy is a critical component of a satisfying interpersonal relationship. Although the word intimacy has become a popular everyday term, its definition, understanding and acceptance still elude many in India.

Intimacy in India is still largely synonymous with marriage or sex, but lately, with other forms of relationships, such as dating or cohabiting, as well. Yet, there is more to intimacy than just the physical aspect. Although most of the existing literature emphasizes the importance of the emotional components of intimacy, there is still no consensus on the type of the actual processes involved in the enhancement, or even maintenance, of this aspect of a relationship. Additionally, there is no literal translation of the word ‘Intimacy’ in the Hindi dictionary. In colloquial terms, it is known as ‘atmiyata’. Although the study of intimate relationships could be said to have begun with Freud, Kakar’s work on intimate relationships in 1980’s, perhaps, laid a foundational structure of the conventional understanding of marriage, sexuality and intimacy in India.

In a marriage, Kakar (1981) believes that idea of a ‘couple’ may be a fantasy and the desire for intimacy, only wishful thinking. He found that a woman’s dominant theme in the Indian psyche of intimacy is a profound yearning to create a ‘two-people’ universe (‘jodi’ fantasy). This is one of the main reasons why, despite facing marital problems, many Indian women do not confess to being unhappy in marriage, and why, despite being educated and financially independent, choose to continue living with a repressive husband and suffer humiliation and marital stress in the marriage. Concurring with Kakar, Oberoi (2011, p. 14) states, *“Many women continue to stay in abusive relationships as they remain compelled by the force of their own (often unconscious) fantasies for love and union”*.

Nandy (1983) suggests that since India is evolving, especially in the domain of autonomy, love and marriage, Indians need to stop living in the past culture and live in today’s India. He believes *“A living culture has to live and it has an obligation to itself, not to its analysts. Even less does it have any obligation to conform to a model”* (Nandy, 1983; p. 82). In India, *“a nation embodied by the coexistence of opposites”*, Mascolo, Misra and Rapisardi (2004, p. 9) highlight that individualistic as well as collectivist cultures coexist and should be considered as independent rather than opposing aspects.

Social changes are also leading to evolved thinking in the Indian young adults. One such change is the rise in the age of marriage as dictated by Indian law. This has enabled women, more than men, to establish their identity. This change in the age of marriage is definitely being followed by urban middle class women, who are now being vocal about their ideas of marriage and sexuality, as corroborated by Das (1994). She believes that education and financial independence has facilitated the coexistence of modernity and tradition in contemporary India, which, in turn, has impacted the lives of individuals and their understanding of marriage. This increased awareness and sexual freedom among the young adults can clearly be associated with globalization.

The changes that Das (1994) referred to had already been documented by Giddens (1992) in the case of America, which he believed also spilled over to other parts of the globe. Thus, whereas earlier, marriage was considered as a state of affairs, "*a natural condition whose durability could be taken for granted and viewed as a duty to be carried out*" (Giddens, 1992; p. 137), in the post globalization era, it started to be viewed as a complex series of negotiated interactions that individuals work through; a world of sexual negotiations in relationships where 'commitment and intimacy' became an integral part. Since women no longer accept male sexual dominance, both men and women need to make changes in their relationships to accept this phenomenon of intimacy.

Globalization has influenced and initiated changes in human relationships in areas such as identity, intimacy, gender, marriage and sexuality across the world. In the Indian context, young people have developed a bicultural identity wherein though traditionalism is ingrained in their identity, global culture has also made an impact on them. However, increased changes in urban culture are causing discomfort among the Indian youth because they are now neither comfortable with traditionalism nor are they comfortable with the global culture. Though they want to explore love and intimacy and absorb the globalized understanding, they may not be ready or may not be 'allowed' to accept them. However, changes, such as education and job opportunities are making young adults more self-reliant.

The ideology of love and intimacy has, thus, become an important factor to impact marital preferences. Romance and sexual pleasure have gained acceptance for their own standing rather than existing only as an aspect of childbirth. Sandhya (2009) mentions in her book 'Love Will Follow' that the so-called sexual revolution that seems to have hit India is in fact a women's sexual revolution. For women, love and sexuality used to be tied through marriage but now the two are connected via a committed relationship. She concurred with Giddens (1992) that technological advances, education and the influence of literature and popular media have led to a change in the expectations of love and marriage, especially in India.

Globalization has also led to an increased desire for intimacy in India. This is being reflected in a majority of couples, whether they live in a traditional joint family or a nuclear family. Although in a joint family, a greater acceptability of relationship requirements such as intimacy and autonomy for the younger couples is emerging, the journey of these couples is, perhaps, becoming turbulent. This is because they are distancing themselves from the traditional marriage norms, while living in the same house. Similarly, for couples in a nuclear family, though they do not face problems that come with living in a joint family, they are facing different kind of issues. For them, this kind of intimacy brings forth new questions about equality, autonomy, shared roles and responsibilities, which these individuals are not equipped to embrace.

The prerequisite of this new kind of intimacy is equality, not just in shared roles but also in shared responsibilities, which most couples do not understand or actually desire. And, although couples manage to understand and achieve such intimacy in dating or cohabiting relationships, these very couples face a storm of problems after marriage because of the pre-set notions and expectations of the marriage system that still exist in India. To work through these problems and strengthen an intimate relationship, it is important for us to understand what the requirements of a healthy intimate relationship are.

3. Markers of a Healthy Intimate Relationship

A healthy intimate relationship is marked by self-disclosure, trust, mutual love, affection, respect, happiness, understanding and sexual pleasure. Laurenceau et al (2005) found that self-disclosure is an important aspect of successful intimate relationships. While self-disclosure was found to be the highest indicator for men in intimacy, for women feelings of being understood, cared for, accepted and validated by their partner were the highest indicator in assessing intimacy. Fife and Weeks (2010) found that maladaptive communication patterns that result in the need to lie, hide or cheat are found to be indicators of poor intimate relationships. Consequently, couples should strive to create a safe environment for their respective spouses wherein they are able to protest or express anger without fear of criticism (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1980) and Fonagy (2001) also believed that an individual's desire for intimacy, though biological to an extent, is primarily "*a self sustaining, intra-psychic human need*" (Fenn, 2011; p. 1). Healthy intimate relationships are marked with mutual respect and a desire to fulfill the needs of both partners. At times, managing stress at the work and family front can also lead to barriers in intimacy (Emmers-Sommer, 2004).

Sandhya's (2009) research in New Delhi examined the happiness urban Hindu couples, which included three socioeconomic classes, three family structures, and arranged and love marriages. Results revealed that, compared to unhappy couples, happy couples reported more agreement, empathy, validation, support, and fulfilled expectations. She found that though these changes were occurring in the Indian marriages, equality in gender roles is taking place very gradually. She attributes gender roles and expectations and financial authority in men as an explanation for gender inequality. She believes that the happiness of an urban educated woman is dependent on some specific actions and gestures of her spouse, and that these expectations are due to the influence of the prevalent popular media and literature. She found that the existence of intimacy, both imagined and definitive, was an important reason for happiness for men and women in a relationship, thus establishing the importance of expressing intimacy in definitive forms in marital happiness.

Mishra (2009) believes that a successful marriage entails equality between both the partners. Equality promotes happiness, sharing and togetherness, while a lack of equality leads to distress, irritation, loneliness and ultimately alienation. He encourages couples to make "*conscious effort to be willing, available and enthusiast to enrich the marriage*" (p.77). Couples should be non-judgmental towards

each other and should feel safe to not only share their happiness but also their concerns and fears. Partners should be sensitive towards and encourage each other to achieve their desires and dreams. Echoing Sandhya's (2009), he reports that for happy couples, disagreements, criticism and domination are outnumbered by positive approval and agreement.

Uberoi (2006) also believes that a significant increase in love marriages in both urban and rural communities, revealed in social surveys, can be understood as an indicator of enhanced intimacy and happiness, conspicuous in popular media, as well. It is interesting that media is changing the foundation of the way we relate to people by perhaps adopting behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs from those offered via the media.

4. Intimacy through the Lens of Popular Media

In the times of globalization, popular media has had the dual role of not only reflecting, but also influencing the present time. The fervor, with which intimacy is represented and packaged by media, resonates with a yearning that, perhaps, has existed but has not been addressed for a long time. Looking at the vast coverage of topics such as different forms of relationships, pre-marital sex, LGBT relationships and heterosexual marriages by top newspapers, Bollywood Films and Television series, they seem to question our understanding of intimacy. In fact, not only are they questioning our understanding of intimacy, they are in fact causing an enhanced desire for such intimacy. Newspaper heads seem to be addressing such topics head on by printing articles such as "Frothy intimacy rules telly soaps" (Jambhekar, 2015), "Things you did not know about your libido" (Baria, 2016), and "Marriage Counselling is the need of the hour" (Shinde, 2016) in Times of India. Such concepts were rare, yet openly represented, even decades back in Bollywood Films such as 'Sahib Biwi aur Gulam' (1962), Bobby (1973), and 'Dil Chahta Hai' (2001) to current times, like Cocktail (2012), 'Shudh Desi Romance' (2013), 2 States (2014), Queen (2014), NH10 (2015) and 'Tamasha' (2015); it is almost a pre-supposition that young adults would indulge in such patterns of relationships.

The search for intimacy is more fulfilling and satisfying than achieving it. Let us try to understand this process with the help of two of the popular Bollywood films – Queen (one that broke all box office records and won national awards) and 'Tamasha' (one that boasts of a very high star caste). At the heart of both these films is a search for intimacy more than an attainment of it. Queen is a film that touched many hearts, be it because some individuals related with the main protagonist's lifestyle or the experiences she had. Also, it was because she reminded women that they have an inner strength available to them if and when they want. It is a story of a middle class girl who is really looking forward to getting married, to her 'first night' with her husband and to her honeymoon in Paris, which according to her is "duniya ki best jagah" (world's best place). Her innocence, her laughter, and her raised eyebrows ... made the audience fall in love with her. In Queen, Rani's (Kangana Ranaut) search begins when her marriage is broken by her fiancé a day before their wedding. She is extremely heartbroken. When she comes out of the initial shock after a day, she has only one request of her family, "Kya mein apne honeymoon pe ja sakti hu?" (Can I go for my honeymoon?). This comes as a shock to her parents, but her grandmother understands her predicament and allows her to go alone. Little did she know at that time that she was embarking upon a journey of self-reflection, which would lead to a complete transformation in her! Like a falcon, she rises from the ground with independence, confidence and an increased love for herself. What she achieved at the end of her journey in the film was the start of a life, which was filled with a self-identity, individuality, self-respect and intimate friendships, and she wanted nothing less in a husband.

Similar was the journey of two people, completely different but brought together on a journey in the search for self in the film 'Tamasha'. This story is about two strangers, Ved (Ranbir Kapoor) and Tara (Deepika Padukone) who met by chance on the sublime island of Corsica in France. The story of the film seems to live up to the expectation of its name; Ved and Tara create an imaginary scenario for themselves while living in Corsica. They both do not share any real information about themselves with each other. Their logic is that they should have fun without getting into the dramas of a relationship. Yet, as their interaction increases, they realize that they seem to be developing intimate feelings for each other, which get heightened from the intimate moments they share. Their exploration is for a life larger than reality, personalities more than ordinary and a search for self, which eventually becomes a search for love and intimacy.

For Ved, who was a shy, obedient and an ordinary human being, his chance meeting with Tara leads to a phenomenal change in him, one that he is able to maintain while on vacation but cannot cope with once he comes back to his ordinary 9 to 5 life. After a gap of four years, when Tara and Ved meet in the real world, and decide to rekindle the romance they both fondly remember, Tara realizes that Ved is not quirky, fun and spontaneous as he was in Corsica. Instead, he is bound within the societal expectations of work and life, and thus, is only comfortable when he is talking about his work. And although he realizes that he loves Tara, the intimate connection they had shared in their make-believe world Corsica where they freely expressed love seems to have disappeared. Again, adhering to societal expectations, he proposes to Tara, but Tara seems to be searching for a deeper intimacy so she refuses the proposal. Here on starts Ved's psychotic breakdown wherein to achieve and actualize intimacy with Tara, Ved is forced to work through issues of his parental and societal pressures of his past.

So, achieving intimacy may require an individual to move out of the pre-set societal norms. Just like Ved had to work through his societal baggage that was hindering him from achieving happiness, in the film Queen, even Rani, who had had a sheltered life, and had not even ventured to the local market on her own, set out on an individual journey in a new country. And though in both cases, the family did not understand what the protagonist wanted in the beginning, both families (of Ved and Rani) understood and supported their children's need for individuality and intimacy and a life of their choice, once they explained it to them.

Besides films, television has also played an important role in shaping and reflecting the opinions of intimacy and sexuality in contemporary India through its serials and advertisements. Many serials, such as 'Yeh Hain Mohabbatien' on Star Plus TV channel, have taken a cue from society by explicitly portraying intimacy in a couple consummating their marriage (aired on 26th May, 2015). In fact,

many 'Bollywood' celebrities have shared with the media that they have had cohabiting relationships, which may or may not have led to marriage. Trivedi (2014) has quoted Kareena Kapoor, speaking in favor of cohabiting relationships, stating "*we shouldn't try to be traditional when we are living in a modern world*" (p. 328). Famous celebrity couples, such as Kareena Kapoor Khan – Saif Ali Khan, Katrina Kaif – Ranbir Kapoor, Anushka Sharma – Virat Kohli, have also openly admitted to living together with no pre-supposition of marriage. Thus, intimacy is the key to a healthy relationship.

5. Implications of Healthy Intimate Relationships

Current Western research indicates that intimacy, as a component of a healthy relationship, has been positively related to overall physical wellbeing. Whisman and Uebelacker (2003, p. 3) state that, "*satisfaction with intimate relationships has been identified as an important aspect of life satisfaction*". They quote a study conducted by Roberts and Robins (2002, as cited in Whisman & Uebelacker, 2003) to elucidate that young adults rate satisfaction in a relationship or marriage as the most prominent goal in life. Vandervoort (1999) found proof that social support is positively related to better mental physical health. She stresses that the quality of relationships, rather than the quantity of relationships, is an important predictor of mental and physical health. She found that social isolation led to depression, hostility and deteriorated physical health and that mental health treatment is beneficial to address such issues. Additionally, Yoo H et al (2014) found that couples' relationship satisfaction is related to fulfillment of sexual and emotional aspects of intimacy. They examined couple communication, emotional intimacy, relationship and sexual satisfaction and concluded that both emotional and sexual components of intimacy need to be addressed in clinical or therapeutic work with couples.

Traupmann and Hatfield (1981) found that relationship satisfaction was vital for overall mental and physical wellbeing. On the other hand, research indicates that unhealthy personal relationships lead to stress, depression, anxiety, health and medical problems in adults (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Popovic, 2005). Lack of intimacy in intimate relationships also leads to poor social interactions and loneliness (Hawkey et al., 2003), which in turn, leads to distrust, conflict, peer rejection and lack of social support (Parker & Asher, 1993). Deteriorated relationships with family and friends could also lead to low interpersonal functioning and social anxiety as well (Westenberg, 1998).

Healthy intimate relationships in couples create and foster a secure environment not only for the spouse but also for children. Distress in a couple's relationship leads to psychological and psychosomatic symptoms, along with fears of abandonment, in children as well (Bernet et al, 2016). Thus, parental relationship distress can lead to long lasting psychological damage for children and vice versa. Bowlby (1969), through his attachment & psychoanalytic object relation theory, extended Ainsworth's (1968) concept of attachment from infancy to adulthood, implying that a secure childhood leads to a secure adulthood. Hazan and Shaver (1987) further extended the attachment process to adult romantic relationships to imply that a secure childhood leads to a healthy intimate relationship in adulthood.

In the Indian context as well, research has indicated that mental health problems can also lead to family distress and financial and emotional burden (Chakrabarti, Kulhara, & Verma, 1993). Poor intimate relationships increase vulnerability in individuals for stress, depression and other mental health problems. Further, these mental health problems, in-turn, lead to poor intimate relationships, highlighting the need for therapy.

As stated earlier, emerging modernity in relationships can also lead to confusion of gender roles, especially in relationships where individuals do not adhere to the pre-set traditionally recommended sex roles. Therapy is effective in enabling the couple to work on sensitive issues related to sex roles. Jiloha (2009), in his article, *The Impact of Modernization on Family and Mental health in South Asia*, demonstrates how modernization had led to changes in the family structure. These changes include declining fertility and mortality rate, declining size of households and breakdown of extended family systems, while rise of age of marriage and first birth, female-headed household, marriage dissolution and women's economic participation and international migration. Among other areas, he believes that struggles, adjustment problems and transitions faced by individuals due to these changes have a direct impact on their mental health. He endorses therapy to overcome loneliness, alienation, depression and addiction. He adds that women are more susceptible to facing such problems due to the disproportionate burden of changes of modernization upon them. Puri (2002) also suggests that marriage can be demanding for women and can lead to adjustment problems with conjugal families, complying with their husbands' needs, managing working with housework and rearing children. She quotes Kakar and Caplan (as cited in Puri 2002) to highlight the lack of intimacy in marital relationships in India. The narratives of her women participants state that, along with the lack of intimacy, the work of the relationship leads to women feeling lonely and burdened. Overall, her participants felt that the ideal mate is classified as understanding, adjusting, caring, flexible, and egalitarian. A family and marital therapist can address this gap in the expectation and actualization of intimacy.

Lal and Bijlani (2015) also highlight how modernization has led to a transformation in India, which has wrought changes in family settings, gender roles, equality and work force. Coping with these changes has proved challenging for individuals, couples and families. Feelings of confusion, isolation and loneliness have started to surface. They struggle in seeking therapy because of the societal image of the family. The barrier to seek therapy becomes the desire to contain the problem within the four walls of the house. However, an increasing number of Indians seem to be grappling with changes with the onset of marriage and could benefit from therapy. Lal and Bijlani (2015) state that in situations where the couple is faced with differing views, perhaps due to anger and prejudice, a therapist is a skilled professional trained to be a neutral and can enable a couple to work through disagreements or conflicts.

Therapy increases an individual's ability to cope with otherwise stressful events and prevents psychosomatic and physical symptoms. Just as Jiloha (2009), Puri (2002) and Lal and Bijlani (2015) have emphasized the need for therapy for improving intimate relationships, similarly, Blow et al (2007) elucidates that a skilled family and marital therapist is the central force for successful couple therapy. Emphasizing the importance of communication in a healthy intimate relationship, Fowers (2007) found that teaching

communication skills is integral in improving intimate relationships. Working on this aspect in a therapeutic environment is particularly helpful for conflict resolution and understanding personal strengths. Margolin and Vickerman (2011) highlight that therapy is often helps couples resolve assumptions of egalitarianism, problem solving and role or task sharing.

Couples may choose to come to therapy for several reasons, such as the lack of communication, loss of love in the relationship, family dynamics, conflicts, and lack of time for each other (Fife & Weeks, 2010). Echoing similar reasons for opting for couple therapy, Geiss and O'Leary (2007) added alcoholism as a reason for couple dispute. Therapy is beneficial for couples because the aim of a family/marital therapist is to work closely with the couple to develop their personal strategy and a suitable solution and, thus, enable them to improve the quality of their life or their relationship without infringing upon their core values or deeply held principles. Thus, therapists provide a safe environment for couples to explore, resolve and enhance aspects of their relationships. A therapist is bound by ethical and legal responsibilities towards each partner (in the case of couple therapy) or each family member (in the case of family therapy).

Thus, the understanding of the changing family system and changing dynamics of couple relationships and its implications are key to achieving and actualizing intimacy in its truest form. So, therapy should not only be sought to improve intimate relationships, but also to enhance intimate relationships because as highlighted above healthy intimate relationships lead to good personal relationships, work success and good health.

6. Costs of Intimacy in Relationships

In India especially, developing intimate interactions is viewed by the family as disruptive elements that upset the close ties in the family, transfer loyalty from the family to a person, and abandon the family in favor of personal goals – even in the case of newly married couples (Gore, 1968; Kakar, 1981; Roland, 1988/1991). The restrictions and shame linked with intimacy and sexuality inhibit the couple in achieving emotional satisfaction and respect for each other. Oberoi (2011) believes that this is the reason why Indian parents find it difficult to acknowledge and accept their sexual desire, as well as their children's open expression of intimacy.

Therefore, achieving and maintaining such intimacy would definitely have costs at varied levels. First, it has a cost for couples at the individual level. Since the journey of the relationship will be guided by intimacy rather than longevity, it could, perhaps, lead to insecurity and anxiety in partners. Secondly, at the societal level, enhanced intimacy will cause the couple to become a strong entity, where the family will lack control over the couple's decisions and lifestyle choices. This will, perhaps, lead to reduced family bonding and relationships because the couple would put its needs and desires ahead of the family. Thus, heightened intimacy cannot coexist with heightened sense of security. However, actualizing such intimacy would require a change in our understanding of the Indian family.

7. Conclusion

Although recently some researchers have explored the changing concepts of marriage and sexuality, as well as other forms of relationships, they have neglected to explore the importance of intimacy as a basic fundamental human need; one that precedes marriage and is also essential for a long-lasting successful marriage. Popular media has also augured well to draw attention to the relevance, prevalence and acceptance of intimacy in all types of committed relationships. In this context, therefore, it becomes imperative that we explore in detail how intimacy is actually being understood and experienced and what influence the transforming cultural practices due to globalization are having on intimacy. It is vital to be able to distinguish and seek therapeutic help when intimacy is found to be lacking or absent. This paper, while mapping this process of change to understand intimacy through the research literature available in the Indian context, has attempted to address these very aspects of modern expectations in relationships.

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