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## South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal

16 | 2017

Changing Family Realities in South Asia?

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### Introduction. Family Realities in South Asia: Adaptations and Resilience

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#### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4365>

DOI: 10.4000/samaj.4365

ISSN: 1960-6060

#### Publisher

Association pour la recherche sur l'Asie du Sud (ARAS)

#### Electronic reference

Parul Bhandari and Fritzi-Marie Titzmann, « Introduction. Family Realities in South Asia: Adaptations and Resilience », *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online], 16 | 2017, Online since 02 August 2017, connection on 29 March 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4365> ; DOI : 10.4000/samaj.4365

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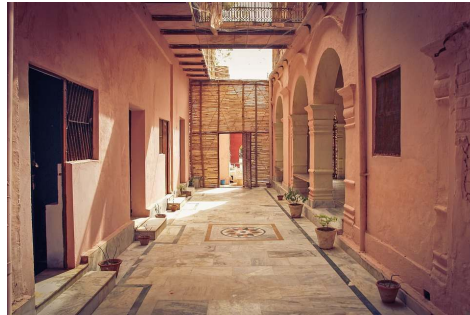
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# Introduction. Family Realities in South Asia: Adaptations and Resilience

Parul Bhandari and Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

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- 1 This special issue seeks to understand the South Asian family in contemporary times, both in its presence and absence, its control and contestation, and its potential to adapt as well as its resilience. The articles in this issue are a collection of compelling exploratory projects that explain the resistance, resilience, and adaptability of the family and its norms and values at the intersection of broader changes, particularly in relation to gender, technological intervention, media, and processes of individualization.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 The family occupies a pivotal space in the reality and imagination of societies and individuals. It is a crucial building block of identities, often mapped through the conjugal and filial relationships it produces. The family is shaped by—and also shapes—social, cultural, and technological changes. It is therefore pertinent to explain the status, structure, and symbolism of the family in the contemporary lives of South Asians who are undergoing an array of shifts. Being largely dominated by a patriarchal lineage and a family system, South Asian societies are witnessing changes as evident in the increasing participation of women in the work force, the rise of youth culture that shapes the experience of new intimacies, and a public discourse of love and companionship, as well as amendments to existing laws and the enactment of new laws. The family therefore, finds itself propagating continuity of certain normative behavior as it is also compelled to adjust its norms and values. These complex processes of modernization, the increasing use of technology in everyday lives, migration, and the imaginations and desires of South



Asians, raise the question of the place and role of the family in contemporary times and how it adapts to—and also shapes—these changes.

- 3 It is this question that has led to the compilation of this issue, since we aim to study the changing realities of contemporary South Asia and the special significance of the family. In doing so, we refrain from proclaiming whether the institution of the family, defined in strict terms, either persists or is on the wane. Instead, through rigorous empirical evidence, we argue that the family and the idea of the family, exists in multiple forms in contemporary South Asia. We explain, for instance, that the idea of the family is constituted or reinforced by media representation, and we also delineate the ways in which the family intervenes in the more individuated spaces of love and romance. With this issue we bring attention to the ways in which the family reflects, and at times resists, the shifts and ruptures that shape South Asian reality.
- 4 The reality of the family exists in a wide spectrum of social, economic, and cultural practices and representations, and the contributions in this issue bring attention to these from multiple perspectives. They focus on the relation between the individual and the collective (the family, state, and community expectations; facilitating structures (law and technology); different geographic and urban spaces (big and small cities); and both male and female voices of Hindu and Muslim families. This compilation of papers is certainly not exhaustive and does not include, for example, the perspective of other religions such as Jainism, Christianity and Sikhism; nor does it explain the dynamics within the grand-parental generation. Despite these gaps, this collection of papers aims for diversity in geographical setting, religion, gender, and perspectives on the interaction between individuals and institutions. We hope that this rich empirical detail and the diverse theoretical positions articulated in each paper will help to understand the realities of the family, both in its representations and practices of adaptability and change.
- 5 In the remaining part of the introduction give an overview of the scholarship that has most influenced the compilation of these papers as well as the methodological, theoretical, and empirical approach of this special issue. We then introduce the three main axes through which this special issue can be read: 1) The Individual-Family-Community Nexus, 2) Gender Roles and Agency, and 3) Technology and Media.

## Situating Studies on Family

### Assessing Social Change

- 6 Early scholarship has embedded the study of the family in the framework of kinship structures, The most prominent examples being Irawati Karve's (1953) exhaustive work on kinship types in India, Kathleen Gough's (1959) study of matrilineal kinship amongst the Nayars, T.N. Madan's (1965) study of Kashmiri family and kinship, and Veena Das (1976) and Paul Hershman's work on Punjabi kinship (1981). The Alliance Theory, as popularized by Louis Dumont, also became an important approach to understanding families on the Indian subcontinent (1957). Works by Dumont and Karve particularly brought attention to the differences between North and South systems of kinship. Karve, however—as Uberoi explains in her comprehensive book *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India* ([1994] 2008)—contends that despite the diversity observed, India's unity may be located in the existence of the joint family and the Hindu caste system throughout the subcontinent.

- 7 Subsequent scholarship studied the family without necessarily placing it within the framework of kinship. This shift in discourse was mainly motivated by a need to study social change, particularly in the wake of processes of modernization and urbanization (Ahmad 1976; Epstein 1962; Gupta 1971; Kapadia 1966; Karve 1953; Mandelbaum 1970; Singh 1973; Vatuk 1972). A key focus of these earlier studies was whether the households were shifting from joint to nuclear (Vatuk 1972; Uberoi 1994, 2006). The backdrop of this concern was two historical and global factors of established knowledge and imagination, and forces of migration. British administrator Thomas Henry Maine had understood the joint family system as an essential feature of Indian society, and subsequently, Indian sociologists as Karve (1953), Shah (1964, 1968) and others also emphasized the idea of the family as a unifying system of Indian society. In the period of industrialization and urbanization, the urban centers were beginning to be populated by increased migration. The question that loomed large, then, was whether this iconic joint family system would indeed persist? Secondly, there emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, a growing popularity of modernization theory as propounded by Parsons and Bales (1955), according to which one of the measures of a society's progress, from "traditional" to "modern," was an increase in the nuclearization of households and individualization. Scholars were keen to assess whether Indian society fit this paradigm and what the implications using such a paradigm would be.
- 8 This generated immense debate, with some scholars explaining that there has indeed been a nuclearization of households, and some others arguing that joint family households continue to be the norm, explaining that the bonds between migrants are re-invoked in the migration city since migration is enabled by kin networks (Rao 1970; Shah 1973/4; Vatuk 1972). These debates still seem pertinent to South Asian contemporary times that are witnessing processes of urbanization including migration for work. The changing times yet again raise questions about the form of family structure that persists and the impact of the intervention of technology, migration, and legal advancements on the importance of family. It is in this context that the viability of the family as an institution and a feature of unity, continues to be an important subject of enquiry, and Uberoi's article "The Family in India" (2006) provides important insight into this enquiry. Uberoi makes an argument for distinguishing between a family and a household. She explains that while there very well may be a process of nuclearization of households due to urbanization in India, this does not necessarily indicate a decline in the joint family but simply a change in household composition. Moreover, households too, much like individuals, have a "life cycle" of development that may lead the individual from a nuclear household to a joint family household (Uberoi 2006:282). She explains, for example, that migrants might move to new cities as individual workers but "the passage of time combined with the governing principles of household formation and the pressures of urban living may well encourage the development of joint households in due course" (2006:282-83).
- 9 According to Uberoi, the crucial question then is not about the form of residence but the persistence of the family value system and norms of behavior (2006:283). She argues that "there is a strong and generalized commitment to joint-family values and norms of kinship behavior", even in the nuclear household (2006:283). In other words, the household structure or type does not necessarily overpower the importance of family values and norms, as the family retains its image as a key figure of morality and unity. In fact, works on media and representation have demonstrated the role of Bollywood movies

and TV in consolidating the image of a happy joint family as the main cultural symbol of Indian society. Uberoi (2001) and Juluri (2008) demonstrate with their analyses of audience reception and visual symbolism of the romantic blockbuster movie, “Hum Aapke Hain Kaun” (HAHK 1994) that this movie ushered in a new era of “clean and morally uplifting ‘family’ film[s]” (Uberoi 2001:313) in commercial Hindi cinema, and in doing so, re-constructed the ideal of the family. By simultaneously choosing the Indian family as its main theme and setting and addressing Indian families as its target audience, the film propagates a return to associated normative values of the family. Juluri explains the popularity of HAHK and subsequent similar films as a process of re-traditionalization (2008). In fact, Uberoi also argues that in times of globalization, it is the family, rather than the nation, that is a suitable symbol of “the unity, uniqueness, and moral superiority of Indian culture in a time of change, uncertainty and crisis” (2001:170).

- 10 Following this work, we also argue that the realities of the family elude debates, however pertinent, on the change in household composition. The family now exists in various forms and ensures that its values are observed despite distance and separation. In this issue, we attempt to bring out this perspective by explaining, for example, the presence of the family in its represented absence (Sarma) in graphic novels. We also situate the family in spaces that are not immediately associated with them but outside their realm of surveillance, as in pre-marital romances (Bhandari, Titzmann). Our intention is not to claim that the family has not undergone changes. Instead, we are motivated to tease out the ways in which family appears and works in modern spaces and times.

### Site of Socialization and Oppression

- 11 Whilst family is seen to provide a sense of unity to individuals and the nation, it is also, as scholarship would argue, an important site of oppression, and of socialization of conformist gender roles. Anthropologists such as Dube (1988 and 1996) and Fruzzetti (1982) have underlined the ways in which the family socializes young girls to appropriate roles for women right from an early age. John emphasizes how, from the colonial period onwards, “the sphere of the home, family and marriage relations were critical institutional sites for social reformers and for the first generation of feminists” (John 2005:712). Some of the most radical critiques of the family already occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as social reformers’ fundamental critique of such “traditional” practices as child marriage, sati, or the prohibition of widow remarriage (John 2005:712). Feminist scholarship has particularly critiqued the institution of the family as hetero-normative, patriarchal, exclusionary and hierarchical. As Chayanika Shah writes, “[q]ueer, feminist, Dalit and left politics have all engaged theoretically and practically in an attempt to critique and transgress the familiar boundaries of marriage and family” (2005:709). Furthermore, feminist scholarship, such as John (2005) and Rao (2005), emphasize the entanglement of family and caste as factors of oppression on the subcontinent. John, furthering the Dalit critique of caste-based marriage alliances, states that the anti-caste movements, beginning during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, were alternate ways of politicizing the institutions of marriage and family “by addressing sexuality, gender, caste and religion altogether” (2005:712f).
- 12 Whilst scholarship has delineated the specific ways in which the family promotes inequality and asymmetrical gender roles, another set of scholarship has highlighted women’s agency in dealing with the structures and norms of various forms of oppression.

Ethnographic works have demonstrated that, far from being passive recipients, women have their own strategies to negotiate with familial suppression (Jeffery and Jeffery 1996; Gold and Raheja 1994; Thapan 2009).

- 13 The strength of the family's role in socializing submissive and oppressive positions according to one's gender roles comes into question particularly in times when women are increasingly employed in paid work and are undergoing the cultural experience of "exposure." In the context of their research on women in India's IT work culture, Fuller and Narasimhan use "exposure" as the key term for explaining the effects of IT employment on women's lives (2006). They describe the dynamics of social and cultural experience as increasing new opportunities, advancing skills, and maximizing general knowledge and life experience. Interestingly, "exposure" in the context of a career in the software industry was often contextualized as "empowerment" by the interviewed employees: "Through their productive complicity with the demands of their work, women IT professionals have partially but significantly reconfigured gender relations and, as they themselves sometimes put it, have gained freedom and opportunities that their mothers never had." (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008a:191). Fuller and Narasimhan thus explain that due to the emancipation through professional careers and individual income, young women's hierarchical position changes in relation to their families (in-law) (2008a:196f, 203). A similar inference is drawn by Ravinder Kaur's research on migration processes. In her work she has looked into different forms of mobility, varying from national and transnational bride migration (2012) to Indians' work migration to Cambodia (Kaur and Shruti 2016). Through these works Kaur argues that hierarchical positions are changing due to an altered distribution of spending power, agency, and thus independence from greater family structures. Herein, it is also important to note the role of the State that becomes an important stakeholder in this changing landscape of women's relations to household, work, and the family, as it promotes social welfare schemes and passes important legislative laws. The most recent bill passed in the Indian parliament that is seen as crucial to women's working status is the Maternity Bill of 2017, which has increased paid leave from 12 to 26 weeks for women and has laid down the provision of providing child day care in the vicinity of offices.
- 14 Our aim is to explicate this dynamic nature of the family wherein, on the one hand, it is an oppressive and dominant structure, especially with regard to gender roles and duties, and on the other hand, it has transformative abilities—becoming a space to externalize resistances, especially for women—and in this process it itself undergoes transformation. In this special issue we highlight this dynamic aspect of the family as we bring attention to the strategies of resistance adopted by women to follow their chosen paths in love and work.

## Marriage, Love, and Modernity

- 15 An aspect of change that has characterized modern India is the shift—real, imagined, purported—to "love" or choice marriages. At least in public discourse, if not in real practice, there is an insistence on choosing a spouse based on feelings of compatibility, affection, connection and love. In her extensive work on the middle class in Bengal, Donner (2016) explains that love is a crucial identity marker for being modern. Another recent ethnographic work that focuses on issues of companionship, love, and marriage is by Fuller and Narasimhan, on the Vettimas of Tamil Nadu (2008b). Fuller and Narasimhan

explain that the IT sector employees working in Chennai desire a “companionate marriage,” wherein they choose a spouse based on interpersonal compatibility. However, they also highlight that these companionate marriages follow caste endogamous rules. In other words, the spousal choices fall somewhere along the spectrum of “arranged” and “love” marriage, and it is this middle-ness, and not just the claim to “love” that constitutes the modernity of the young middle-class youth (Bhandari, 2018 forthcoming). Scholarship has highlighted that the dichotomy between “love” and “arranged” cannot withstand the reality of matchmaking in the South Asian subcontinent. These works reveal the reluctance and inability of the young to self-describe their experience in an oppositional construction of “love” versus “arranged” (Titzmann 2014:120ff), and therefore they popularly use terms such as “arranged-cum-love” marriages (Uberoi and Singh 2006) “companionate marriage” (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008b) and ensure a “family oriented individualism” in their process of spouse-selection (Titzmann 2013).

- 16 The desire to insert the sentiment of love into marriage and into the spouse-selection process is surely a process of individuation, by which the individual wants to assert his/her identity. The pertinent question then is: where does the family and its values fit into in this process? This special issue explores this complexity; it reveals that individual love and other processes of individuation are not just to de-tachment but in some ways, reattach the individual to the family. The papers showcase that certain experiences, such as engagement in romantic relationships or separate living arrangements from parents, allow individuals to distance themselves from the family and engage in modern activities. Yet, these contexts always intersect with familial duties, responsibilities, norms and behavior such that they both contest and support the supremacy of the family. In other words, the family is not necessarily absent in spaces of dating, pre-marital relationships, and live-in arrangements. In fact, they continue to have presence in these everyday intimacies.
- 17 Keeping in mind these strands of scholarship and perspectives on the role and position of the family in understanding social change, the papers that constitute this special issue can be read through the following three main themes:

### 1. The Individual-Family-Community nexus

- 18 The realities of the family are constituted and expressed at multiple levels, including that of the individual, the community, and the state and two of the papers in this issue focus on these levels of interactions. The papers by Bhandari and Titzmann explain the transforming position of the family in relation to the individual’s pre-marital associations and decisions on marriage. Through different methodological lenses, these papers draw our attention to the couple—dating, in romantic relationships, engaged, or living-in, and relate their position to the family. They argue that even in a coupledness outside the purview of marriage, the family continues to intervene, advocating its values particularly in relation to the gender roles in the couple. Bhandari’s ethnographic research amongst the middle class youth of Delhi, for example, queries the rhetoric of individual choice and freedom in pre-marital romances: she demonstrates the ways in which the family structures these relationships in expected and unexpected ways. The notion of individualism is also tied to ideas of desirable modernity—which amongst other aspects include the performance of consumerism—and Titzmann’s paper addresses this nexus of modernity, individualism, and consumerism. Titzmann analyses a commercial advertisement and the online responses it generated to argue that advertisers

disseminate the relevant consumer good in a framework of negotiation between a live-in relationship and the parental generation, and she thereby explores the facets of change and continuity in Indian family situations. She also juxtaposes the legalization (on the state level) of live-in relationships with its lack of social acceptance, and unpacks this unique interaction between the family and legal innovation in the context of the relatively new youth culture of romance and partnership, namely live-in relationships. Following on from these problematics, one of the main aims of this special issue is to explain that the debate about individualism and the role of the family ought not to be situated in binaries but should be understood as a dynamic process, which is shaped by considerations including middle-class identity, consumerism, and global culture.

## 2. Gender Roles and Agency

- 19 An important theme that brings together these papers is the ascription and construction of gender roles. A growing female workforce in highly qualified occupations, an increasing dispersion of families, as well as continuing global migration, have all changed the living situations of households, particularly for women, who may live away from their parents for purposes of work or may work away from home for long hours. These circumstances certainly cause anxiety and moral panic amongst families who want their daughters and daughters-in-law to be employed and contribute financially to the household, yet at the same time fear the loss of control over their sexuality and social life. One way of exercising control, then, is by inculcating ideals of respectable femininity (Belliappa 2013; Radhakrishnan 2011) that monitor their work cultures, leisure engagements, and romantic encounters. Whilst the women do obey these injunctions to some extent, they also resist their control mechanisms through various strategies.
- 20 Explaining this dynamic relationship between the family, women, and gender roles, the papers in this issue highlight the construction of femininity as enabled by the family through its practices of control and domination, while also bringing attention to the resistances of women in accepting gender roles and the use of their agency in negotiating these roles. In her paper on pre-marital relationships amongst the middle class of Delhi, for example, Bhandari explains that girlfriends are judged on their ability to adjust and adapt to the family, and they resist these expectations in different ways. Hussein describes how Bangladeshi women's negotiation with normative conceptions of respectability measured against their domestic and caring roles are set in an area of tension between global trends and local customs. Based on qualitative in-depth interviews, she explores highly-educated professional women's reconstruction of respectable femininity within the family. In doing so she shifts the focus of respectability research in South Asia from using a binary construction such as "good" and "bad," to how women make and remake their respectable status and class privilege in neoliberal Bangladesh.
- 21 The papers in this issue also argue that agency should be understood as a non-static concept describing the capability to act within a certain, often limited, framework of social expectations and opportunities. As the debate around agency oscillates between intentionality and resistance, we understand the concept, in Sherry Ortner's words, "as a form of intention and desire, as the pursuit of goals and the enactment of projects" (Ortner 2006:153). This interpretation is separate from an ideological understanding of agency as resistance and can therefore also capture those acts that appear to strengthen



conventional and even patriarchal structures. All four papers in this issue deal with varying forms of agency, in one way or another, be it freedom (and solitude) through individual urban migration (Sarma), the agency to negotiate a different form of relationship with the family (Titzmann, Bhandari), or working women's ability to carve out new spaces and ways of establishing respectable femininity (Hussein).

### 3. Technology and Media

- 22 The use of technology and media in everyday life in contemporary South Asia makes the interaction of family with these media—in usage and representation—a compelling field of research. Dasgupta and Lal (2007) examine those aspects of interpersonal relationships that are difficult to assess sociologically and belong more to the realms of literature, mass media, art, and “folklore.” They show that literary and cultural representations articulate emotional conflicts and tensions within interpersonal relationships in varied and nuanced ways. In many novels, films, and other cultural works, the family serves as a locale for challenges and changes that reflect global and locally specific developments. Or, as works on the new era of “Bollywood” family cinema have shown, films may contribute to the reinforcement of conservative ideologies (Uberoi 2001; Juluri 2008). In the past few years, scholarship has also diverted attention to the phenomenon of matrimonial websites and the ways in which this medium of spouse-selection is appropriated, whether as more individual centric or catering to a familial imagination of marriage. Titzmann, for example, has argued that the websites enable a “family oriented individualism” where individual choices are made keeping in mind the suitability of the family (2014). Kaur and Dhanda also take a similar position as they explain that the matrimonial websites allow the individuals to make an “informed” choice (2014:289), allowing a modernity of expansion of choices that allows transgressions of physical boundaries but not of caste, class, religion, and region (2014). Kaur and Dhanda caution us to not view the intervention of technology to cause any structural change to the widely accepted principles of marriage, for the matrimonial websites ensure that the individuals do not make any wrong choices—such as falling in love with the “wrong” type of person, of the wrong caste, class or religion (Kaur and Dhanda 2014).
- 23 Keeping in mind the growing import of technology and media in the everyday lives of South Asians, this issue includes two papers explore the dynamic relationships between the family and the media, in particular the representation of family (or its absence) in media. Sarma's literary analysis of two recent graphic novels highlights the perspective of young urban migrants. In relation to “Kari” (2008) by Amruta Patil she discusses a young woman's journey in the “big city” (i.e. Mumbai) and renegotiates questions of belonging in relation to home, family, and friends, thereby highlighting a new understanding of these concepts. In Sarnath Banerjee's “Corridor” (2004) the reader is confronted with a comparable migration story and the protagonist's effort to establish a “home away from home.” Titzmann analyses a commercial television advertisement depicting a family situation of conflict while synchronously publicizing a desirable consumer product.

## Conclusion

- 24 The papers in this issue aim at tackling questions of change, rupture, renegotiation, and continuity of the norms, practices, and representations of the family from different disciplinary and thematic angles. The four articles adopt different methodological tools including ethnography, interviews, media and literary analysis, and address the issue of the family through several themes: sexuality and relationship; class, community, and gender; and media representations of the changing family. This special issue examines the presence of family in spaces and experiences that might be considered outside the family's influence. Also, it explores family influence in the very absence of a depiction of family in graphic novels about the contemporary lives of the young adults who migrate to other cities for work. In that sense, a seeming absence of the family in the lives of these young adults is not taken as a strong indication of their dwindling control or influence.
- 25 We explain that the family is adapting but is also resistant to change, as it re-aligns itself with the changing realities of contemporary South Asia brought forth by technology, processes of individualization, media presence, and state involvement. Above all, this issue will help pose pertinent questions that will inform and shape further research. The articles ask, for example: What is the significance of the family in contemporary times? Do individuals allow their family access to and dominance over their life that is also increasingly shaped by processes of individualization, and if so how? What do the media representations of the family indicate—drastic change or continued presence? And are these representations close to reality?
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## NOTES

1. Two prior events contributed considerably to the discussion and research presented here. The international workshop on “Media, Technology and Family”—held at Humboldt University in Berlin in early 2016 (organized by Prof. Nadja-Christina Schneider)—provided an inspiring opportunity for exchange among the participants and further development of the presented arguments. Based on this network, we organized a panel on “Changing Family Realities in South Asia” at the ECSAS conference in Warsaw, July 2016, where more researchers on family-related themes joined in. It is from these two forums that we have brought together the articles for this special issue. Since not all participants from both these forums were able to include their research in this special issue, I would like to particularly thank Nadja-Christina Schneider, Ravinder Kaur, Mary E. John and Shilpa Phadke for their contributions to the ongoing discussion on family research in South Asia.

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## ABSTRACTS

The family as an institution garners much attention in the contemporary South Asian world, raising questions about its continued resilience and forms of change and adaptation. With forces of modernization, advancement of youth cultures, greater participation of women in the work force, and migration, the centrality of the family in the everyday lives and experiences of individuals is queried and piques interest. The four papers in this special issue deal with distinct aspects of realities and representations of the family in India and Bangladesh. These papers can be read against the background of three main themes, which, though not exhaustive, we believe form an essential analytical and thematic framework within which to understand the family in contemporary South Asia: the individual-family-community nexus; gender roles and agency; and technology and media. Situated in the context of these three themes, the papers herein explain that the family and the idea of the family exist in multiple forms in contemporary South Asia. The aim of this special issue then is to trace the ways in which the family realigns itself with social developments by adapting to certain changes and also undertaking strategies to maintain its central position in sites and situations of change.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** family, South Asia, representation, social change, media, gender

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