

# HOW WE CAN STRENGTHEN OUR FAMILY BONDS THE BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

Family is the bedrock of human society. It is the first and oldest human institution also. Various types of family are there. Family has different limbs. Here, we prefer to discuss on family bonds which is the cementing power of it as well. By the phrase ‘family bonds’, I mean a good understanding, a good fellow feeling, unique discipline, ideal interrelation and, finally, a friendly environment. On the one hand, more or less, all sorts of societal developments depend on our family system; on the other hand, familial peace, prosperity, security, harmony is fully dependent on its bonds. Without it, we cannot imagine this institution to run smoothly. We have inherited this system through tradition of our society, i.e. local and Islamic culture. In fact, family bond is the most important issue to ensuring familial peace and security. There is traditional or nuclear family system which is more popular than extended family system. However, nowadays, our incapability to maintain this relationship is becoming visible. Since very recent past, the number of broken family is increasing dramatically in our country. Near about, 20-25% new couples are not able to continue their family life more than one or two years. Even, a little number of them is trying to maintain western living together system. A few activists are also working in our society to popularize the western coupling culture. Until now, it was mostly unfamiliar and prohibited in our society from the basis of all religions and local Bengali culture. It is not a good sign to all of us, as a member of a Muslim majority society and our inherited tradition. There arises a big question—why is that happening?

**Keywords:** Family, Nuclear family, Extended Family, Family bonds, Tradition.

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Bangladesh is an old society with a new structure. The United Nations categorizes Bangladesh as a moderate Muslim democratic society. Actually, it is a Muslim majority society. Our national approach is Bangladesh to be a “non-communal country” with a “Muslim majority population”.<sup>1</sup> More than 90% percent people are follower of Islamic ideology and rest of them are Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and others. There remain some exceptions in family tradition in respect of ethnic differences which represents a very small part of this society. In this paper, we would like to discuss on tradition belonging to majority. On the ground of population, Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim country in the world. From the Islamic viewpoint, Muslims are brothers to each other and non-Muslim inhabitants’ lives and wealth are to remain more secured in an Islamic society. As we know that an Islamic society is to be built and should stand on strong principles in connection with great feelings of brotherhood (in Arabic- *Bunianum Marsus*).

Being a Muslim majority country, Bangladesh is not devoid of those characteristics. In fact, the Bangladeshi family structures are built on the foundation of traditional Muslim society. As a result, its basis and bonds are very normally stronger. In spite of that, remarkably for more than three decades, our family bonds seem feeble. At the same time, we have lost our familial and social scope of teaching-learning process. Consequently, we are facing various types of social crisis and violence. Namely, breakdown of the moral values, absence of commitment, severe corruption, misuse and abuse of personal and national wealth, cultural decay, insecurity of women and child, drug addiction, adultery, conflict, faction, killing, terrorist activity, disunity, distrust, lack of tolerance, etc.

In this position, it seems that there is no way to protect us without restoration of family bonds. It seems obligatory for all of us. Many reasons are there. In this article, we would try to discuss on those.

**Scenario of Bangladeshi Family:** Bangladesh is going to be an important part of global village from many aspects, like a huge number of workforce providers, potentiality of people, world peace keeping activities etc. Not only that both the concerned authority and development partners of Bangladeshi people in home and abroad are more active in working on aforesaid issues but also many of them are searching for our loopholes of moral values, intruding our

mind and polluting our families and society. Most of the members of present generation are attracted to Western culture and lifestyle which is inhomogeneous to our own. The thing which is remarkable here is that they are attracted only on negative western practices. Astonishingly, positive western aspects remain overlooked by them.

If we look at the past scenario of our society, we find, earlier, married sons generally lived in their parents’ household during their father’s lifetime. Although sons usually built separate houses adjacent to their father’s ones, they remained under their fathers’ authority, and wives under their mothers-in-law’s authority.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes senior most male member was the leader of that institution, i.e. father, grandfather, elder brother, etc. All of the families’ members used to try to carry out his instructions with full respect and honor, more or less unconditionally. Not more than three decades ago, most of our families were extended families. Nuclear family system was unknown at all, especially at our rural areas. Now, both of our rural and urban areas family structure is nuclear. Nowadays, couples are usually trying to limit the number of children to one or two.

In comparison with previous family culture, at this period of nuclear family structure, there may two comments be made. In a sense, now we are passing a critical time in our family life. On the contrary, we are enjoying one kind of freedom in contemporary atmosphere. However we consider it, in reality, family structure is changing rapidly. Side by side, its bonds become so weak and delicate.

I would like to mention a comparative picture which refers our nostalgia for our better past-

The bright summer sun streams through the window. The year is 1974. Paternal grandmother (Dadima), Mother (Ma) and wife of paternal uncle (Chachima) are fast asleep as we make our way to the roof-our mission- steal all the aam er char (Pickled mangoes), meanwhile elder brother (bhaiya) gathers all cousins and boys of the area for a game of ‘gali cricket’.

The theft and games are timed accordingly, before father heads back home, because we all knew the moment our father, also invariably head of the household, returned home, no more games would be allowed. He scared us to our very core, would put an end to all games, going to the length of hiding or throwing away our deviously-engineered toys.

1 The Constitution of the people’s Republic of Bangladesh, Article: 8 (Fundamental principles) The principles of absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah, nationalism democracy and socialism, meaning economic and social justice, together with the principles derived from them as out in this part, shall constitute the fundamental principles of state policy. (1A) Absolute trust and faith in the Almighty Allah shall be the basis of all actions.

2 Enayetur Rahim. “Family, Household, and Kinship” in *Bangladesh: A Country Study*, ed. James Heitzman & Robert L. Worden (Washington D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1989), 62-65.

Fast-forward to 2016, Minu, now a mother of two, returns home with her husband after work and finds her daughters engrossed in their smart phones. Her husband urges his children to go out cycling or at least have tea with him on the roof. Minu wants them to try her home-made pickles-but is met with grunts. The children no longer fear their father like we did back in those days, now they press all their demands with him and he readily complies!

There is a growing change in conventional family structures and we are seeing a rapid shape-shifting in the Bangladeshi family today. As we celebrate the International day of families, let us take a glimpse into the lives of changing family dynamics. Below are excerpts and insights by fathers, mothers, daughters and husbands on how their families have changed over the years.

Minu, remembers her days as a young girl in a house full of sisters, cousins, older brothers, uncles, aunts and the head of the household-father. Now her family has shrunk from the boisterous twenty something people crammed under one roof to only four people occupying a huge space.

Her husband, Shafiqur grew up in his village-home. Shafiq boasts of a pot-belly, a ravenous appetite and is full of wondrous stories of the village summers, for which his two teenage daughters have no time. He recalls his visits to his maternal grandmother's place, first hopping trains then walking almost an hour through mustard and tomato fields, picking seasonal vegetables on the way!

Shafiq's young daughters, one 13 and the other 17 go to one of the city's top English medium schools, their childhood is one dotted with many comforts and very little connection with nature. They have a pet dog, which is mostly cared for by the maid. His daughters, Humayra and Nahiyah only have Friday breakfast with the family and are occupied with classes on all other days. They rarely get to visit their grandmother in their village home.

I want my children to go out play, to be in touch with nature, but their days are occupied with their smart phones, TVs, gaming consoles, visits to shopping malls and restaurants," Shafiq sighs.

Much has changed since those early days of both Minu and Shafiq. Nuclear families have replaced joint families, easy carefree dad has replaced fearful head-of-house father and working mom has replaced stay-at-home mothers, love marriages have replaced arranged marriages.

We used to be scared of our father. When he came back home, it meant the end all other daily shenanigans. Pin-drop silence would ensue and we would be on our best behavior," says Zahid, a 38-year old man currently employed in one of the city's top banks.

Zahid himself is a new father now and when asked how his relationship with his 2 year-old son is, he is all smiles and says that in his case, he is the fun parent whilst his wife Nafeesa is the stern one.

I met Nafeesa during my Dhaka University days. Ours was a love marriage. I was the oldest son in my household so my marriage was the first case of 'love marriage' in our family," Zahid says.

Nowadays, most couples date first and then get married and if it does not work out they get divorced.<sup>3</sup> During our parents' time divorce was usually not an option and no matter how incompatible two people were they usually saw their marriage through to the end, Zahid added.

Meanwhile Shafiq's elder daughter says her parents though conventional, are trying to embrace their daughters' views on life. "Both mother (ma) and father (baba) have opened Facebook and though a little clumsy on the social media platform, they are incredibly endearing," Humayra grins.

Bangladeshi families these days are seeing a drastic change. As both parent's go to work, and more and more people move to urban areas, the social structure and our dynamics with families has also taken a changed.

In the hustle and bustle of our busy lives, we often tend to forget the blessing that is family. They are now our friends and foes. They are on Facebook and monitor all our moves, embarrass us and support us both on social media and in real-life. On the International day of families, let us take a moment for the constant yet always changing family lives. The conventional family structure is changing, but our constant need for their support and love is ever present. As we become more and more nuclear and independent, the greater is our need for family bonds."<sup>4</sup>

Above mentioned circumstances show a comparison between Bangladeshi family institution at present and past. Thus, we can discuss on our decreasing and weak family bonds as well.

<sup>3</sup> A countable number of couple is doing it.

<sup>4</sup> Abida Rahman Chowdhury. "The changing Bangladeshi family", *The Daily Star*, 15 May, 2016.

**Challenges which we are facing:** At present, we are facing many types of problems and critical situations in our family life. However, there also remain, within present familial phenomena, some positive sides which are alien to our rituals and culture. Some of all these aspects are visible to all and some of these remain within our minds causing haunting experiences. Actually, intensive research is needed to find out its causes and probable suggestions. So, I would like to discuss very briefly on this issue:

- I. More or less, in relation with sense of obedience necessary in family bonding, we are living in marginal arena in our family life.
- II. A large number of offspring are out of control of their parents though guardians are bound to ensure all their supports.
- III. A horrific number of teenagers are radically going to ruin themselves like-addiction in drug, film, robbery, terrorism, snatching, adultery, eve teasing, etc.
- IV. Kids and children's lives have dramatically been unsecured. Sometimes they are severely tortured, kidnapped and even murdered by their parents and close relatives.
- V. Uneasiness in parents-children relationship has reached at an alarming stage. Most of the parents/guardians are not at ease in advising and guiding. They always remain in fear of being refused.
- VI. Very recently, a countable number of solvent family members are preserving so called personalities, freedom of choices (!) and rigidity.
- VII. A notable part of present generation is comparatively frank and careful to their friends than their family members.
- VIII. Remarkably, we have lost our deep fellow-feelings, desired emotions, familial ethics and sense of bonding with each other.
- IX. Family law and guidance has gotten worse.
- X. To get married and planning family life has become a matter of respective couples' choice instead of traditional guardians' pronouncement.
- XI. Many of our families are suffering from a critical situation for the lack of our sense of cohesiveness and tolerance.
- XII. Breaking down of families is increasing geometrically. Statistically, 20-25 percent families are being broken down within the very year those are formed.<sup>5</sup>
- XIII. Gradual increasing of old home/shelter home and purification center in our society is a symbol of worsened state of family bonding.

We agree that because of the contributions of globalization, our country is being benefitted economically, technologically. But, we are to look at and think of equally important issue of ruining our family bonds. The western practices might be useful for west. But, those are not useful in an eastern Islamic country like ours. In this regard, we can try to way out to re-establish and strengthen our familial bonds according to faith and traditions of our inhabitants.

**Importance of Family Bonds:** In relation with this, we can ask ourselves what family is and what purpose it serves, what it functions for, what makes it strong, and what contributions each member should make to ensure its success. Certainly, we have got many answers. The researcher of this paper would like to concentrate on 'maintaining family bonds' as more effective factor than other ones to reach our desired goal.

In a simple word, family bonds means relationship among its members and close relatives. A close family bond is like a safe and sound dock where we find shelter. Reality is that the friends and others relationships can be artificial or for the time being, but family remains forever. On the one hand, it is matter of utmost agreement depending on conditions of a give and take relationship. On the other hand, it is heavenly and natural. Family bonding is the only thing which controls and balances interrelation among members of a family. We know life is relational. It is impossible to exist far from relationships and close ones whatever the relationship we have with them as very good, very bad or somewhere in between.<sup>6</sup>

Family traditions maintain the heritage of our society and religion. We are supposed to pass on the baton of beliefs, customs and rituals we have been following and cherishing since childhood, which have differentiated our family from others, to our offspring so that they can pass it on further, creating golden stone of our family in History.

**Strengthening Strategy of Family Bonds:** When one sees a happy family living in harmony, with a peaceful and relaxed home environment, and (above all) well-adjusted, pious children, this is not the result of chance. It is the result of hard work and effort to develop good parent-child relationship.<sup>7</sup> There is no readymade way to strengthen it. Undoubtedly it is so tough to make an effective strategy to strengthen our family bonds, but not impracticable. It is not a single and simple issue that we can overcome in the easy way, but it is a comprehensive working policy and strategy which will depend on the condition of a person, family structure, places and times also. So, it will never be unique, similar and pre-fixed.

<sup>6</sup> Ennis P, *The Importance of Strong Family Bonds*, <http://taitoday.blogspot.com>

<sup>7</sup> Hisham Altalib, Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, Omar Altalib, *Parent-child Relations: A guide to Raising Children* (London, Washington D.C.: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2013), 4.

<sup>5</sup> This is a primary observation and experiment of this writer. More and intensive study is needed in this field.

Maybe world peace is a little out of our reach at present, but family peace is not. There are some simple but powerful things we can do to reduce stress and conflict, and bring our family nearer. We would like to delineate some tips on it in brief:

- I. To clear Ideology:** First of all we should clear the ideological guideline to the concern. Because, it has a great role in human life. Namely, if you believe in an afterlife, you probably realize that making lots of money is only an earthly concern, and not something that matters in heaven. Religious believers make the distinction between earthly problems and things that are far more important in the long term. Usually, these earthly worries have to do with material things, like jobs, money, cars, and houses — rather than spiritual concerns like love, faith, and beauty.
- II. Love and affection:** Love and affection is a great power. It is a cementing power to protect and make stronger of a family relationship. So, we cannot skip up it. Without this element none can imagine of his family life. In Islam, it is obligatory for each and every one. It is should be treated as foundation of family bonds as well.
- III. Planning and design:** We know the family bonds and its component are something psychological. We cannot draw a picture but feel it, like air, light and darkness, etc. This will be our first and foremost agenda to strengthen family bonds. Each and every family should have a design according to their structure and atmosphere. It will vary family to family, time to time and place to place. Planning and design also can be set for short and long term.
- IV. Good understanding:** It is an essential component to ensure family bonds. On the one hand, good understanding is the key factor to protect and improve those bonds; on the other hand, misunderstanding is the main cause of unexpected incidents in family life. So, without proper understanding we cannot think of a smooth family life. One of the biggest problems in family relationships is speeding up in with our own opinions and advice before you really understand the circumstances.
- V. Tolerance:** It is a significant element of human character. We can say that tolerance is a precondition to do or achieve something, may it can be big or small. So, in family life, it should be treated as a powerful element which helps to establish and maintain good bonds.
- VI. Sacrifice:** Sacrifice is life. Without sacrificing we can't imagine our peaceful life. It is a symbol of greatness and beauty of a man's life. It is the most important pillar of individual and collective life. In our family life it should be treated as main pillar of protecting family bonds. So, it is obligatory for all of us.

- VII. Sharing and proper caring:** Family is an institution which is created and run by sharing and proper caring. It is refers a combined effort based organization where every member is accountable to do their own jobs. Guardian of this institution is responsible to manage ins and outs of it. They try to meet up every demand of family as it should be. Parents and children should try to pass some time together like taking breakfast, lunch and dinner each day. Now and then, we can invite our adult members to take part of planning and making decision. If possible, we can share it on weekends and discuss merits and demerits of it. In addition to that, we should try to share things that are happening in our life, and ask lots of questions about things our children are interested in.
- VIII. Delegation of Power:** We all remain responsible in our respective areas. None can run this institution without help of other members. Autocratic behavior is not useful for smooth running of this institution. So, we should delegate our power to the concern to perform respective duties and responsibilities.
- IX. Contribution:** Mutual effort is highly needed in a family life. There is no scope of inactiveness. In fact, family is also a collective contributory institution. It is founded and developed on the basis of contribution of its members. It is not necessary and justified also that the family members will contribute equally, but contribution is needed from all of us according to our capacity.
- X. Fulfillment of Demand:** Each and every family has a guardian and members. All of them have desires from their respective positions. It is an established tradition that all of them should try to fulfill the demand of each other.
- XI. Leadership:** Familial leadership is more essential to protect bonds. In absences of suitable leadership its bonds are affected. So, familial leadership building is a most important initiative to strengthen it.
- XII. Motivation:** There is no doubt that motivation is a very much useful, effective and scientific strategy to strengthen something. Philosophy of family building and its objectives will be the subject matter of this motivational activity. So, it is more important technique to protect the family life bonds.
- XIII. Safe and sound Environment:** Every institution demands a peaceful, sound and disciplined atmosphere. The same is true for family institution.

In addition to that we can try to continue in our everyday life to strengthen our family bonds:

- a. “Schedule some daily or weekly time to spend along together as a couple. This could include going for a walk, doing some exercise, or having dinner together. Talking on the phone during the day or getting up a few minutes early to focus on each other is helpful.
- b. Share expectations with your spouse. Discuss any anxieties which you may have concerning your new role as parents/guardians.
- c. Spend time on eating meals together, worshipping together, having sex, and exercise.
- d. Express your disagreements and do not be afraid of conflict. Regard a fight as an indication that something is wrong in the relationship, and seek counseling together.
- e. Talk with a trusted friend or a wise co-worker who has experienced the transition from spouse to parent. This help to alleviate feeling of isolation. Make sure you speak with a person of the same gender, and do not reveal anything about your spouse that is private.”<sup>8</sup>

**Conclusion:** Family institution is a cornerstone of human society. Bangladesh, as a Muslim society, has two types of tradition, i.e. Islamic and local culture. Most of our family structure founded on both culture. Because of this, generally, we appear a mixed picture in our familial environment. According to Islamic tradition, we can cope up those culture and tradition which will not be contradictory with its Ideology. In this consideration, we inherited a familial atmosphere where prevailed a strong family bonds with every sorts of love and affections. But, now it seems that we have failed to maintain this. We mark with acute anxiety that, gradually, our families are breaking down.

As a result, our society is filled with so much violence, anger, and apathy that it is downright scary like the world today. As we have children, it is of utmost importance to be a positive leader of our family. We all want to belong and feel accepted. In fine we say that now is the highest time to take initiative against this trend. So, currently, family institution of Bangladesh is in great threat and danger position. It is the vital cause of weaken bonds of family and out of desire of Bangladeshi people undoubtedly. We need to strengthen our expected condition.

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8 Ibid, 27.