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## Understanding The Complexities and Challenges of Single Motherhood in India: A Study

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### Abstract

The entire discourse of single parenthood in India is still a subject of question on the issue. The primary aim of this paper is to throw light on this very contentious issue of single motherhood in India. This paper seeks to unearth multifarious facets of such lone parenting and its socio-cultural, economic and legal ramifications. Firstly, this paper seeks to limn light on the various reasons that culminates in lone parenting. Secondly this paper seeks to explore the challenges faced by such matriarchs and the daily hardships that they overcome in order to raise their children singlehandedly. These mothers also tremendously suffer from serious psychological and mental anguish. These families that donot conform to the typical, conventional family structures they are debased and vitiated. Besides the mental anguish, these lone mothers specially the ones who has to solely fend for their next-of-kins, suffer from severe financial crunch, sometimes barely maintaining their hand-to-mouth existence. Besides, crafting a legal edifice catering to these special cases, a strong societal scaffolding coupled with adequate facilities of public health and education is the need of the hour. Being purely theoretical research, it's based on qualitative analysis and drawn from articles, books and relevant websites.

**Keywords:** single motherhood, India, socio-cultural, legal, psychological

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has indeed opened a multitude of horizons for women; yet there remain certain stereotypical notions and conventions cantered on gender which still doesn't go unnoticed. And one such issue on which this paper would limn its light is the issue of single motherhood. This entire narrative of motherhood has various moot points and is a matter of contention for many. For one school of feminists, this one-of-a-kind quality of women to procreate is something that they cherish and celebrate while there's another school of feminists who consider the very onus of motherhood as bondage and a major obstacle hindering the advancement of gender equality. Keeping aside this clash of wits, this paper aims to dive deep into the very depths and garner a nuanced understanding of the complexities and challenges faced by single mothers till today.

Single motherhood can be a consequence of one's choice, severance or in some cases sheer absence of a patriarch (Munsayac et.al, 2024, p.95). The "intersectional challenges" of such is myriad and copious ranging from socio-cultural to economic (Munsayac et.al, 2024,

p.95). From enduring society's vying eye to professional hurdles the list goes on. Although women are endowed with the ingenious virtue of begetting off springs yet the society has always relegated the role of mothers as caregivers to a secondary position in the social hierarchy where as the father or the main patriarch of the family is held in high esteem for being the bread winner of the family (Nigam, 2024, p. 04). Despite the theoretical discourse, the society coupled with the authorities often gives a cold shoulder when it comes to single or lone mothers (Nigam, 2024, p. 04). These entire processes of lone parenting on the part of single mothers are cumbersome ranging from hankering after custodial and guardianship of their off spring (Nigam, 2024, p. 04).

The dominant paradigm of the "heteronormative family" often fails to capture the drudgery of lone parents (Nigam, 2024, p. 05). On top of that, often single mothers are stigmatized and branded as "broken" and "degenerative" (Nigam, 2024, p. 05). This is a tale of contrasting views. Some consider these women as being susceptible, precarious and fragile, yet another section of the society put the entire onus of a failed relationship on these mothers by identifying them as being duplicitous, cunning and crafty (Nigam, 2024, p. 05). In order to have a nuanced understanding of the aforementioned drudgery of single mothers, few legal cases can be unearthed to substantiate the aforesaid ones.

i. In ABC vs. NCT Delhi case (2015), a Christian spinster, without divulging the identity of her child's biological father, pleaded before the court to have the sole custodian of her son. The Supreme Court in a land mark judgement acknowledged the full potential of a mother to singlehandedly raise her offspring and reprimanded the role of an unresponsive father in the life of his children (Nigam, 2024, p. 07).

ii. In another instance of Mamta vs. State of Rajasthan, the lone mother after legally parting ways with her spouse requested for the issue of a new birth certificate which would be bereft of the name of the patriarch. The judiciary issued a verdict of prompt issuance of such certificate to ease the turmoil of the lone parent (Nigam, 2024, p. 10).

iii. In another landmark judgement passed on 2018, in Bhavika Jayant Lahor vs., Mumbai Municipal Corporation, the single mother with the aid of a sperm donor at an IVF clinic begot a child while demanding the complete secrecy of the donor (Nigam, 2024, p. 11). But to her utter surprise, and unbeknownst to her, the name of the father was clearly stated on the birth certificate (Nigam, 2024, p. 11). Upon coming under the jurisdiction of the Mumbai High Court, it immediately rebuked and ordered for the issuance of a new birth certificate bereft of the name of the father (Nigam, 2024, p. 11).

These few aforementioned instances, showcases the quagmire and incessant tribulations which these women undergo for the mere rights that they are entitled to (Nigam, 2024, p. 14). The sheer imagination of the trauma of rape sends shockwaves across the spine. Coupled with the innumerable who already infest the life of a survivor, raising her kind singlehandedly and to bear the brunt of society becomes too excruciating for them at times (Nigam, 2024, p. 14). Yet in many other instances, the court has upheld the rights of women to abort the foetus cultivated owing to the sexual assault of the women (Nigam, 2024, p. 15). In 2015, the Allahabad High Court astounded the world, when it rode to the rescue of rape victim who happened to be a minor girl and advocated that her child not withstanding its illegitimacy was entitled to have rights over the property of her paternal progenitor (Nigam, 2024, p. 15).

These few aforementioned cases, are an ingenious example of how these resilient solo matriarchs, have been steadily making their way through the rough terrains of patriarchy (Nigam, 2024, p. 16). These cases also throw light on the fact that a father who hitherto was considered as the primary custodian of the child – this stereotypical convention now stands broken by the judiciary themselves. In a society where female sexuality, is controlled and suppressed by innumerable devices of patriarchy the journey of lone mothers differs markedly (Nigam, 2024, p. 19). This entire discourse of motherhood is dominated by the narratives of heterosexual nuptial ties where the entire concept of motherhood is glorified and mothers have been hailed as the epitome of sacrifice and renounce (Nigam, 2024, p. 20).

It's a sheer disgrace, where Goddess Kali and Durga are celebrated and lauded as the embodiment of valour and dignity, and extolled as the sentinel of humankind. (Nigam, 2024, p. 20). Yet the lone mothers are looked down on (Nigam, 2024, p. 20). The very concept of single mother is an eclectic category (Nigam, 2024, p.22). The entire narrative ranges from widowed or divorced or deserted mothers to forlorn ones who may have begot an offspring owing to a sexual abuse in the past where in some cases the paternal identity remain indeterminate or she might have opted for donor gametes to conceive (Nigam, 2024, p. 22). Even in areas being affected by war or ethnic strifles where men either get killed in action or are simply sequestered from their places by the security forces, in many such cases, the entire onus of the household falls on the women (Nigam, 2024, p. 23). Besides socio-cultural factors, economic reasons as well as topographical sites are responsible for the magnitude of indignities faced by the lone parents (Nigam, 2024, p. 24). With the proliferation of such cases, the mental anguish of mothers is on the rise (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). Owing to lack of financial sustenance and societal reinforcement, often it leads to their recurrent mental break- downs (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). Quite often they are disenfranchised, precluded from social functions, and suffer from operational inundation due to uneven saturation of work (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). For most of them, especially the ones coming from households having hand- to mouth existence or left at the pitey of bare minimum wages for their sustenance often find it difficult to get themselves incorporated in work-force cadre owing to innumerable taboos and stereotypes prevalent around them (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). As a result of managing everything single headedly coupled with the immense pressure both at the personal and professional fronts, these women bereft of sound network assistance, suffer from melancholia, despondency, angst, psychic unrest, nervousness, perturbation and fretting (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). Such turmoil becomes a huge impediment in fostering their kids with virtuosity (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). Because of the societal opprobrium and collective reproach, they shudder from asking help lest they get mortified in the public eye and labelled as a failure in raising their kid. A report claims that in comparison to heterosexual married couples and men who happened to be lone parents, single mothers are more likely to languish under fiscal collapse (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). Owing to the entire burden of their family, often one these women belong to destitute households and thereby perpetuating the drudgery (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). In compared to lone fathers, the emoluments of single mothers are generally considerably less and on top of that they have to take the stewardship of their next-of-kins (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). Many of them owing to their paltry -remunerative jobs

coupled with frenetic timetable and inhuman work – load, they fail to spend quality time with their kids which in turn further has psychological ramifications both on the mother and child (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). As already mentioned, utter absence of community sustenance, affiliative aid or collective empathy has detrimental ramifications both on their physical and psychological well-being (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024).

Countless women, especially those being subjected to physical and mental torture are left with no choice but to opt for lone mothering by parting ways with such toxic partners and giving up on their nuptial ties (Nigam, 2024, p. 24). Being labelled as ‘deviants’, single mothers often bear the brunt of societal scrutiny (Nigam, 2024, p. 33). Disintegrated families are always scrutinised under the observant lens of societal norms (Nigam, 2024, p. 33).

With the passage of time, there have been recurrent cases of single parenthood and that too for different reasons (Nigam, 2024, p. 35). State has also been trying to come up with laws to enfranchise such women and in order to keep pace with the changing times (Nigam, 2024, p. 35). The Indian Constitution upholds and pledges to advocate gender equality (Nigam, 2024, p. 35). The 1993 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination has been ratified to espouse and champion the cause of women enfranchisement (Nigam, 2024, p. 35). Yet the cases specifically catering to the needs of lone mothers need to be cultivated and fine-tuned. For instance, the Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act is commissioned to enfranchise the rights of surrogate mothers and children; yet a lot needs to be done at this front (Nigam, 2024, p. 35).

Justice Verma Committee has quite a lot of recommendations catering to the needs of single women (Nigam, 2024, p. 39). Yet when it comes to the execution, the bureaucracy demonstrates inadequate functionality and fall short of expectations (Nigam, 2024, p. 39). National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005, although enumerates the rights of single women, yet the participation of such in reality remains quite at an abysmal level (Nigam, 2024, p. 48). Legal apparatus and the bolstered and fortified in this regard (Nigam, 2024, p. 48). Besides, facilities of public health, education, housing rights needs to be crafted keeping in mind the prerogatives of such lone mothers.

The recent movie, *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway* (2023) which garnered huge accolades across the globe and even bagged a national award, exemplified and conveyed the heart-wrenching journey of motherhood. This film also portrayed the impediments and pitfalls and snags that beset the life of a mother who desperately implored and beseeched the custody of her children. The court room spectacle at the very pinnacle of the movie where she implored for the custody of her children, must have resonated with thousands of single mothers whose struggle nonetheless have remained the same at different levels. Or, the movie *Paa* (2009) featuring Amitabh Bachchan and Vidya Balan; delineated the hardships of a single mother who had to unilaterally raise her progeria afflicted son.

So, at the concluding section of this paper, it can be discerned that the very issue of single motherhood is contentious and subjected to multifarious disputations and deliberations. A particular feminist school of thought expound the fact that motherhood acts as a thralldom and enslavement while there’s another tranche of feminists who extol the unique ability of women to procreate. But despite the deliberations on motherhood, the very issue of single motherhood has always remained factious and disputed. The reason for such can be multifarious but nonetheless these women have to bear the brunt of society

for being something which sometimes isn't even their choice. The society still not being accustomed much to the concept of lone parenting, often doubles the drudgery of these women. From languishing for stewardship of their own kids to prove for her next-of-kins, the lives of single mothers are beset with challenges. Since these aforestated families don't adhere to the typical, classic orthodox family model, hence they are often labelled as debased and atrophying. Also, the entire onus of such estranged relationship on the women which only intensifies their already existing pain. Some landmark judgements have been depicted in this paper which portrays an astonishing facet of judiciary, where in the time and again, have enfranchised these women by empowering them with rights that they are rightfully entitled to. This entire discourse of single mothers comprises of assorted typologies owing to multitude of reasons. Their daily wearisome travail ranging from singlehandedly raising their children to fend for the entire household often leads to psychological anguish and emotional turmoil. Due of absence of enough network assistance coupled with the gruesome judgemental society, these lone mothers often suffer from traumas and severe affective disorder. The laws are still not adequate enough to cater to the needs of these families specifically. Reform of regulatory scaffold is required at the earliest which would specifically cater to their distinctive necessities. Movies are extremely potent visual mediums to create greater awareness amongst people about certain issues. Films like *Paa* and *Mrs. Chatterjee vs. Norway* sensitise the people about the entire discourse of single parenting. Just by having legislative edifice will not completely overhaul the entire narrative of single parenting. The society need to be more permeable and welcoming. The very mentality of labelling something as being deprived or sullied just because it doesn't conform to the conventional structure need to be done away with at the earliest.

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