

THE PHENOMENON OF PARENTIFICATION: NARRATIVES
FROM URBAN INDIA

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DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY DELHI

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NARRATIVES FROM URBAN INDIA

by

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DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, '**The phenomenon of parentification: Narratives from urban India**' submitted by **Ms. Nivida Chandra** to the Department of Humanities and social sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is a record of the bona fide research work carried out by her. Ms. Nivida Chandra has worked under my supervision and the accompanying thesis is her genuine and original work. She has completed the necessary course to the requisite standard.

This thesis has not been submitted, in part or full, to any other university or institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rukmini Bhaya Nair". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter 'r'.

Prof. Rukmini Bhaya Nair

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Abstract

This study problematizes the parent-child relationship in India, which is often considered sacrosanct, and has thus been left substantially unexamined in research. The idea that parents can emotionally harm their children is neither a popular notion, nor well received. Families are often perceived to be governed by laws of obedience and duty. It is therefore hard for persons from such cultural contexts to identify and accept that their emotional hurts in childhood might be caused by the very agents who are duty bound to protect them, namely, their parents. This study investigates the idea that parents can indeed hurt their children emotionally in ways that have lasting deleterious effects on the adult. One little noticed aberration of this nature occurs when parents lean too often and too heavily on their child for support, attention, protection and care. Such a reliance takes a toll on the child since it is for the benefit of the parent and sometimes by extension, even the family. This phenomenon is known in the literature as parentification. Widely understood as role-reversal between parent and child globally, research on parentification or related concepts is scant in India. This thesis opens up inquiry into the lives of Indian adults who might identify as parentified. It aims to understand, through a detailed analysis of the first-hand narratives of five female participants, how their childhood experiences led them to be the people, partners and parents they are today. The goal is to derive a contextually sensitive definition and description of parentification based on narratives from India. Multiple interviews were conducted with the participants, who are from middle class homes in urban Indian cities, who self-selected into the current research. The analysis focused on the participants' experiences over their life course and

their own meaning making processes in answering the question: ‘am I parentified?’ The analysis yielded paired concepts of the parentified child and parentified adult which were used to indicate the narrative trajectory of the participants. The parentified children’s homes were fraught with distress and violence and they experienced helplessness, anxiety, fear and sadness. They felt guilty, burdened and invisible in being pitted against large problems. With age and experience, however, they became experts at ‘fixing’, gaining ‘mastery’ over their environments. As parentified adults, they continued to be ‘good’ caregivers and fixers in their personal and professional lives. Eventually, they experienced an emotional exhaustion which led to a necessary reexamination of their inherited narratives and life stories. They consequently took several steps towards recognizing and healing their past hurt and present repercussions. The experience and expression of parentification is further influenced by the changing identities of women in modern society and the newly available lexicon of psychology to talk about themselves. With progressive analysis, it became clear that the idea of role-reversal was not a sufficient concept to encapsulate their experiences. Instead, in this thesis, parentification was defined as a grave imbalance of care between the parent and child. Three necessary conditions and twelve determinants were additionally noted. The benefits of using the language of care are discussed. The study ends by discussing directions for future research in the field of parentification.

Keywords: parentification, emotional neglect, urban India, motherhood, role reversal, narrative, parent-child relationship, imbalanced care, childhood

पेरेंटिफिकेशन का अनुभव: भारतीय शहरों से कहानियां

यह अनुसंधान भारतीय माता-पिता और उनके बच्चों के रिश्तों के बीच आनेवाली समस्याओं को एक ठोस रूप देने का प्रयास करता है। पालक-संतान के नाते को समाज में उच्च स्थान प्राप्त है। इस वजह से इस विषय पर अधिक शोधकार्य नहीं हुआ है। यह सोच, कि माता-पिता अपने बच्चों को भावात्मक हानि पहुंचा सकते हैं, एक अप्रिय और अमान्य धारणा है। परिवारों में आज्ञापालन और कर्तव्यनिष्ठा के नियमों का चलन रहा है। इनके विरोध में कुछ कहना भी अकल्पनीय है। ऐसे सांस्कृतिक वातावरण में पले-बढ़े लोगों के लिए बचपन में भुगती भावात्मक पीड़ाओं की पहचान करना और उन्हें स्वीकार करना मुश्किल है। यह अधिक कठिन इसलिए भी है क्योंकि यह चोट उन्हें अक्सर वही लोग पहुंचाते हैं जिनका कर्तव्य है बच्चों को किसी भी प्रकार के दुःख से बचाना, यानि के उनके माता-पिता। रक्षक ही भक्षक बन जाते हैं। यह अनुसंधान इस मत की जांच करता है कि माता-पिता वाकई अपने बच्चों को स्थायी और पीड़ादायक भावात्मक घाव दे सकते हैं। इस घटनाक्रम में एक अनियमित मोड़ तब देखा जाता है जब पालक अपने बच्चों पर समर्थन, ध्यान, संरक्षण और देखभाल के लिए निर्भर होने लगते हैं। यह बच्चों के लिए बहुत हानिकारक है क्योंकि उन्हें न सिर्फ अपने माता-पिता बल्कि कभी-कभी पूरे परिवार की ज़िम्मेदारियों का बोझ भी उठाना पड़ता है। इस परिस्थिति को विषय शास्त्र में पेरेंटिफिकेशन/ बाल-पालकीकरण कहते हैं। आम तौर पर विश्व में इसे पालकों और बच्चों की मूल भूमिका की अदला-बदली के रूप में जाना जाता है किन्तु भारत में पेरेंटिफिकेशन/ बाल-पालकीकरण और उस से संबंधित अन्य धारणाओं पर बहुत कम शोधकार्य हुआ है। यह अनुसंधान ऐसे भारतीय पालकों के जीवन पर प्रकाश डालता है जो स्वयं को पेरेंटिफ़ाईड/ बाल-पालकीकृत मानते हैं। पांच महिला सहभागियों के जीवन में घटी प्रत्यक्ष घटनाओं के आधार पर, एक विस्तृत विश्लेषण द्वारा, यह समझने का प्रयत्न किया गया है कि उनके बचपन के अनुभवों का उन के प्रेम-संबंधों, बच्चों की परवरिश और खुद की मानसिकता पर क्या असर पड़ा है। इस अनुसंधान का ध्येय है इन भारतीय वृत्तांतों की बुनियाद पर पेरेंटिफिकेशन/ बाल-पालकीकरण से संबंधित उपयुक्त परिभाषा और विवरण को निर्धारित करना। सदस्यों के साथ कई साक्षात्कारों में खुलकर बातचीत

की गई। सभी सहभागी भारतीय शहरों के मध्यम-वर्गीय परिवारों से हैं और उन्होंने इस शोधकार्य के लिए अपना चयन स्वयं किया है। यह विश्लेषण केंद्रित है उनके जीवन के अनुभवों और निष्कर्षों पर जहां वे स्वयं इस प्रश्न का उत्तर देते हैं: क्या मैं पेरेंटिफ़ाईड/ बाल-पालकीकृत हूँ? इस जांच से पेरेंटिफ़ाईड/ बाल-पालकीकृत बच्चों और पेरेंटिफ़ाईड/ बाल-पालकीकृत वयस्कों जैसी युग्मित अवधारणाओं के बारे में पता चला है। इन दोनों अवधारणाओं का उपयोग सहभागियों की कहानियों की दिशा और उनमें आए मोड़ को निर्धारित करने के लिए किया गया। पेरेंटिफ़ाईड/ बाल-पालकीकृत बच्चों के घरों में तनाव और हिंसा देखी गई। उन्हें याद है कि वे बचपन में असहाय, चिंताग्रस्त, भयभीत और उदास रहते थे। मुश्किलों का सामना करते समय उन्हें अपराधबोध, बोझ और अनदेखा होने के एहसास से जूझता देखा गया। समय के साथ उनमें मुसीबतों की 'मरम्मत' करने का गुण आया और वो अपने वातावरण से जीतने के तरीकों में निपुण हो गए। पेरेंटिफ़ाईड/ बाल-पालकीकृत वयस्कों के रूप में वे 'अच्छे' पालक, देख-रेख करने वाले और निजी एवं व्यावसायिक जीवन के जुगाड़ में माहिर रहे। कुछ वर्षों बाद एक समय ऐसा आया जब वो भावात्मक रूप से पूरी तरह से थक गए। उस समय उन्होंने अपने जीवन और विरासत में मिली घटनाओं का फिर से मूल्यांकन किया। परिणामस्वरूप उन्होंने अपने गुज़रे हुए कल के दुःख एवं बिगड़े हुए वर्तमान को पहचानने और उसे ठीक करने के लिए कदम उठाए। पेरेंटिफ़िकेशन/ बाल-पालकीकरण के अनुभव और उसकी अभिव्यक्ति पर दो बातों का बहुत का बहुत असर पड़ा है - समाज में नारी का आधुनिक स्वरूप और अपने बारे में बात करने के लिए उपलब्ध मनोविज्ञान संबंधित नया शब्दकोष। प्रगतिशील विश्लेषण से यह स्पष्ट होता है कि उनकी परिस्थितियों और अनुभवों का सारांश सिर्फ भूमिकाओं की अदला-बदली की अवधारणा नहीं है। इसके विपरीत, इस थीसिस (निबंध) में, पेरेंटिफ़िकेशन/ बाल-पालकीकरण की परिभाषा है - यह पालकों और उनके बच्चों के बीच मौजूद एक चिंताजनक असंतुलन है। कथित तथ्यों के अतिरिक्त तीन आवश्यक परिस्थितियां और बारह सिद्ध करने वाले निर्धारक भी पाए गए। दायित्व और देख-रेख की भाषा के उपयोग का महत्व भी दर्शाया। यह अनुसंधान, अपने अंतिम चरण में, पेरेंटिफ़िकेशन/ बाल-पालकीकरण के विषय में भविष्य में होनेवाले शोधकार्य के दिशा-निर्देशों पर चर्चा करता है।

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