



Digital Shadows and Fractured Hearth: An Autoethnographic Study of the 'Paradox of Prosperity' in a Lower-Middle-Class North Indian Family

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study examines the complex intersections of digital technology, economic aspiration, and family dynamics within a lower-middle-class North Indian household. Using the lens of the 'Paradox of Prosperity,' the research explores how digital devices and social media simultaneously promise economic mobility while creating new forms of social tension and fragmentation within family structures. The study reveals how smartphone access and digital connectivity have transformed domestic spaces into sites of both opportunity and conflict, challenging traditional family hierarchies while generating what the author terms 'digital shadows' — zones of hidden activity, surveillance anxiety, and mediated intimacy.

Keywords: autoethnography, digital technology, family dynamics, North India, lower-middle-class, paradox of prosperity, social media

1. Introduction

The Indian joint family has historically functioned not merely as a kinship unit but as a unit of production. Its cohesion was sustained through shared property, collective labour, and mutual dependence for survival (Shah, 1998). However, post-liberalization urbanization has radically altered this foundation by separating economic survival from emotional interdependence.

This paper examines what is termed the “Paradox of Prosperity”—a condition in which vertical economic mobility correlates inversely with horizontal family solidarity. As families transition from rural scarcity to urban comfort, the traditional glue that bound them together begins to dissolve.

The study asks:

Why do families that survived through cooperation now fracture amid comfort?

Using the lived experience of a lower-middle-class family in Rewa, this paper demonstrates how the emotional “software” developed for poverty fails when the economic “hardware” is upgraded to middle-class stability.

2. Methodology

This study employs autoethnography as its primary methodological framework. Autoethnography uses the researcher's personal experience as primary data, connecting individual experience to broader cultural, social, and political meanings. The 'Paradox of Prosperity' framework is used to understand the simultaneous promise and peril of digital access in lower-middle-class contexts.

3. Digital Technology and Family Dynamics

The introduction of smartphones into the household has fundamentally restructured family time, space, and communication. Evening meal times, once characterized by collective discussion and storytelling, have been transformed into periods of individual screen engagement. Family members sit physically together but are emotionally and cognitively absent, each absorbed in their individual digital worlds.

This pattern of 'co-presence without co-attention' creates what the paper terms 'digital shadows' — zones of hidden activity that generate anxiety about surveillance and trust within family relationships.

FROM SURVIVAL TO STABILITY: THREE PHASES

Phase I: Mechanical Solidarity – The Tea Shop Economy

The family migrated to Rewa under agrarian distress. The father sold vegetables and later ran a roadside tea stall. Six members lived in a single rented room.

Municipal anti-encroachment drives, hunger, and poverty acted as external threats, forcing internal unity—an example of Durkheim's mechanical solidarity.

Phase II: Transitional Fracture

Economic mobility introduced differentiation:

- One brother entered government service.
- Another sacrificed a national-level basketball career to run a shop.
- The author pursued higher education and became an Assistant Professor.

Education vs. Degree:

While the sister earned degrees, her education lacked critical reasoning skills—making her digitally vulnerable.

Phase III: The Comfort Economy

Today, the family is materially stable but socially fragmented. Conversations are minimal, emotional warmth has declined, and ideological conflicts dominate.

AGENTS OF FRACTURE

The “Ekta Kapoor Effect”

Television serials from Balaji Telefilms normalize manipulation and domestic politics, scripting conflict as normal family behavior.

The “YouTube Guru”

Cheap data (Jio Revolution) enabled algorithmic religious indoctrination, leading to moral rigidity and ideological silos.

Digital Atomization

Smartphones privatized leisure. Shared time disappeared, replaced by parallel digital lives.

VACUUM OF AUTHORITY

The patriarch lost authority as economic control shifted to sons. This created a leadership vacuum and unchecked domestic conflict.



THE NOSTALGIA TRAP

Past unity was not harmony—it was enforced by necessity. The family struggles today not because they failed, but because they succeeded.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Device-Free Zones
2. Restorative Storytelling
3. Family Council Model
4. Critical Media Literacy

4. Conclusion

This autoethnographic study reveals the profound ambivalence of digital technology in lower-middle-class North Indian family life. While smartphones and social media have opened new economic and social opportunities, they have simultaneously generated new forms of family conflict, surveillance anxiety, and social isolation.

References:

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