

P2 Project Report

Comic Series on Insidious Parenting Beliefs and Practices

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Guide: Prof. Prasad Bokil

Declaration

I declare that this project report is based on my own work, carried out during the course of the Spring Semester, 2020, at the IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay, under the supervision of Prof. Prasad Bokil

I declare that this written report represents my own ideas, communicated in my own words and where others ideas or words have been borrowed, I have mentioned the original source. I Also declare

that i have adhered to all the principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not falsified, misinterpreted or fabricated any idea, data, facts or source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause of disciplinary action by the Institute and penal action from the source in the case the work has not been incorrectly cited or if permissions have not been taken where necessary.

Aarcha Suresh

Acknowledgement

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I am thankful to my mother and sister who kept my spirits high during the lockdown and thereby helped me complete the project without fail.

Aarcha Suresh

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Introduction

In a country like India where family values and cultural beliefs are held high, at a time when questioning the years old traditions in any way brings out violent riots, I find it important to talk about certain toxic, unhealthy traits of parenting that are widely normalised.

I can only assume the immense challenges and difficulties that accompanies the excitement of birthing and nurturing a human being. Especially when the world around is so rapidly changing, keeping up with the unfamiliar environment to bridge the gap between having grown up as a human being and having to cater to the growth of another human being must be extremely daring. Indian mythology has taught us to consider parents to be god-like. But in the whole act of trying to teach values of respect towards our nurturers, the very fact that they are also fellow humans who are entitled to make mistakes and learn from them as

they pave their way through parenting, is often forgotten to emphasise on. Painting unrealistic, godly pictures of an ideal parent who cannot and does not go wrong is equally unhealthy and stressful.

All parents have a sense of how their children should be raised; About the goals, priorities and values they should hold high in life. These culturally shared ideas on child development, termed belief, that include parental explanations to everyday events, childcare customs and choices are often implicit, taken for granted ideas about the right way to think or act. In the subconscious process of following these cultural scripts for parenting¹, what is effective at an individual level could often be compromised. “Beliefs as parts of the parents’ psychological system are systematically linked to parental action and different forms of that link may have different consequences for the life-world of developing children” (Lightfoot and Valsiner,

1. As coined by Super and Harness in 1986 in reference to the culturally determined customs and practices followed by parents.

1992). And these beliefs instigated in us as children are powerful, because they are planted before we develop an ability to question or challenge them. If left unchecked and unrevised, it could lead to a never ending loop of similar mistakes.

In a study conducted by a group based on observing and interviewing 30 families from varying backgrounds in Delhi to construct an ethnography of parental beliefs, it was concluded that the “beliefs about parenting do not necessarily consist of a clearly articulated, consistent and uniform understanding about children. The beliefs held by parents are likely to be complex, heterogeneous and domain specific.”² Living in urban circumstances creates specific demands for children, parents and families. These shifting priorities coupled with the rapid changes in Indian culture indicate the need to renew ideas about parenting and childhood in India, without losing sight of the persistent patterns.

2. Beliefs on parenting: An ethnographic study of Indian families (Tuli, 2008; Tuli and Chaudhary, 2010)

Insidious parenting beliefs and practices

Having grown up in a very conservative family in Kerala, I was conditioned to follow what I was taught as a child and was constantly told it is wrong to question the beliefs that were passed on to me from my parents. Any interest in knowing 'why' would typically be dismissed through statements like "you listen to me because i am your father and i know better." or, "mothers are never wrong". Although I understand these are harmless words with the right intentions, at least in some cases, it shunts the ability to ask the question how or why. I believe children need to be taught how to think and not forcefully told what to think. This led to me reading up on various parenting styles, to understand what is healthy and what is not.

In her book 'Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life', psychologist Dr Susan Forward defines toxic families as the ones where "rules are based on a bizarre and

distorted perception of reality, putting children in a place where they can be easily abused." A few examples of such rules mentioned in the book are³:

- Children should respect their parents irrespective of everything.
- There are only two ways to do things – my way and the wrong way.
- Children should be seen but not heard.
- It's wrong for children to be mad at their parents.

According to the existing literature, the majority of reported incidents of child abuse are the result of parents' attempt to discipline or control the behavior of their child. Because very few parents receive information on how to use positive discipline techniques, many repeat the maladaptive responses that they experienced as a child, which further perpetuates the cycle of child maltreatment.⁴ When children have little frame of reference outside their own family system, it is easy to be convinced that what

3. Forward, S., & Buck, C. F. (2002). Toxic parents: overcoming their hurtful legacy and reclaiming your life. New York: Toronto.

4. <http://scholarworks.csun.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.3/183867/Yaghoobzadeh-Youna-thesis-2017.pdf?sequence=1>

they have experienced is normal and healthy. There are several ways in which these beliefs get handed down, a few of which are mentioned below:

- Repetition compulsion: We are driven towards things that are familiar to us, even bad ones. Familiarity provides a sense of comfort and structure. We expect from other people to behave towards us as our parents did. In practical terms that means that we seek the same intimate relationships in our adult lives as we had with our parents.
- Rage outlets: Rage is quite a common characteristic of children raised by toxic parents. Abused children have a lot of accumulated rage. You can't be battered, humiliated, terrified and denigrated without being angry. Since a child has no way of releasing all the anger, it gets accumulated, and has to find an outlet in adulthood, usually in the form of violent behavior,

crime, manipulation (external outlet) or headaches, depression, illness (internal outlet).

- The abused becomes the abuser: Sometimes a child assumes that if they possessed the same qualities as the abusive parent, they could protect themselves. Victimized children thus fantasize how they could protect themselves by acting the same way as the abuser. In the end, they develop the same damaging traits as the toxic parents.

In conversation with psychologist Mrs. Smitha Oommen, I tried to understand the different types of clinically identified toxic parenting styles. Listing them down gave a clearer knowledge on what definitive traits could end up being toxic to the children in the longer run. A few styles like helicopter parenting, for example, were found to be widely practiced in India.⁵

5. Bapat, R. (2017, January 18). Helicopter parenting is trending in India. Here's why. Retrieved June 13, 2020, from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/between-the-lines/helicopter-parenting-is-trending-in-india-heres-why/articleshow/56643913.cms>

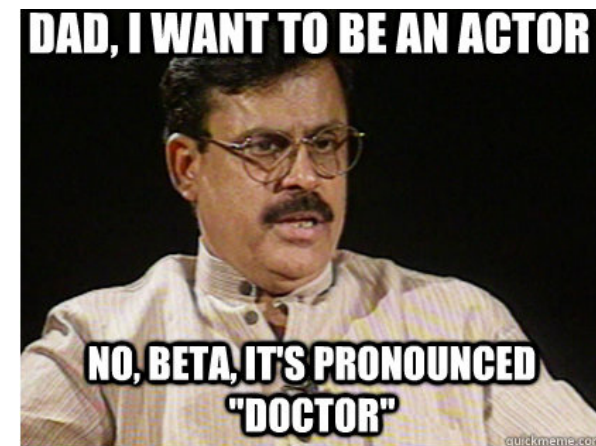
Existing portrayal in various visual media



Source: Ahseeit
<https://ahseeit.com/hindi/?qa=204/indian-parents-when-you-do-something-stupid-meme>

1. Memes

Memes are a major means of communication shared across various social media platforms. It is interesting to note that there is a separate chunk of memes tagged 'Asian parents' and 'Indian parents'. Though these are in tones of humour, they play an important role in initiating discussions.

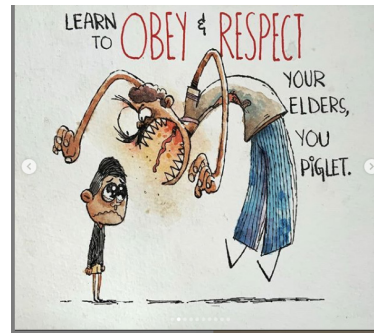


Source: Quickmeme
<http://www.quickmeme.com/meme/3rrt4v>



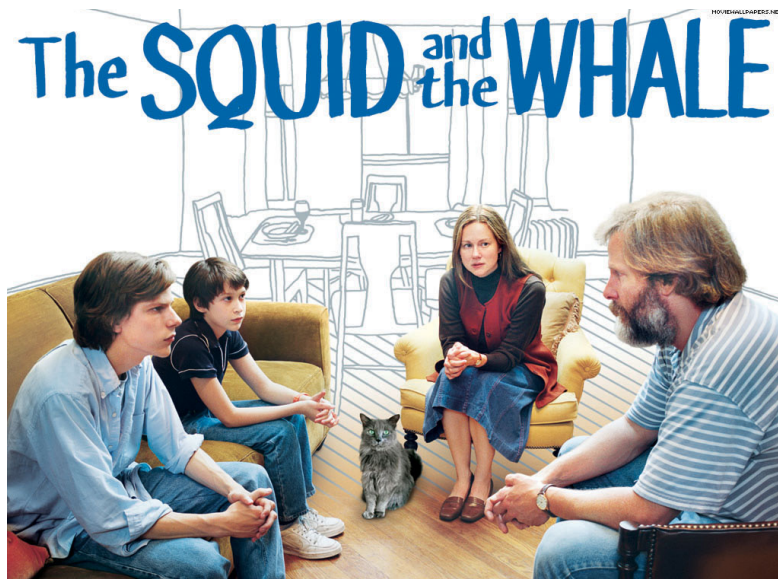
2. Webcomics

A lot of comics, like Brown Paper Bag Comics that specifically tell stories of Indian flavour, addresses multiple instances of unhealthy parenting practices. This one, on the left, for examples talks about why most kids in India refuse to share secrets with their parents.



There are also serious takes on the subject. On the left is an excerpt from a short comic by Preetam Dhar, that brings to light the possible consequences of forcefully teaching kids anything, thereby curbing the ability to think, reason and ask questions

The already mentioned examples primarily target teenagers and young adults, who are yet to become a parent. There are various communities like the subreddit r/asianparents, r/narcissisticparents where members share personal experiences of unhealthy parenting. Such platforms help 'victims' open up and encourage discussions.



3. Films

The squid and the whale | Noah Baumbach (2005)

The squid and the whale tells the story of two brothers struggling to cope with the contrasting parenting styles of their divorced parents. We see them slowly picking up traits from their parents, and acting on them.



**Taare Zameen Par |
Aamir Khan, Amole Gupte (2007)**

A dyslexic boy named Ishaan is punished and pushed by his father who refuses to admit he has a learning disability. He is an excellent artist, but the father threatens to send him to a strict boarding school when he keeps underperforming in school.

Aim of the project

I'm more interested in the day-to-day interactions between parents and children that are normalised, but could possibly be subtle instances of unhealthy beliefs. My intention is to create a compelling, self reflective visual narrative snippets that questions the unrealistic portrayal of parenthood and helps break the vicious cycle by identifying insidious beliefs.

One of the major challenges I had moving ahead with the topic was that my judgement of situations had a high chance of being biased; I have been a daughter, but not a mother. I did not wish to assume the side of parents. Rather, I intended to communicate through powerful imagery, some instances where parenting has left scars in grown children. To aptly bring out the problem that exists, it was important that I tell stories of real life experiences.

Collecting stories was the most crucial part of the process. The fact that I was handling such a sensitive

and intimate topic meant not many people would be comfortable talking. Prof. Prasad Bokil suggested I initiate conversations by narrating to them a small instance from my personal experience as a child. After sketching out a very short, 6 frame comic on a personal experience, I approached people and had discussions on their thoughts.

In the conversations I had with some friends and family members in the following weeks, I tried including a few enquiries about their childhood. The exchanges typically started off with questions like, but not limited to;

- What are the saddest and the happiest memories from your childhood? Why do you think you recalled these particular incidents when asked?
- How did you parents react to it?
- What is something you wish your parents had not done? What is something you are glad they did?
- Is there something your mother or father said

that still sticks with you?

- Has talking to a lot of people and being more exposed to the world affected certain things you learned as a child?
- Has there been a time when your interests and your parents' interests clashed? How was it resolved and how has it affected your relationship with them?

The following are a few short accounts made after the conversations. I have changed the names to respect the privacy of the participants.

My story:

Having grown up with a single mother, I have always had a compulsion to perform well in everything I took part in. Naturally, expectations poured in and I was pressured into choosing a career that abided by the social conventions of success. I was constantly faced with questions like “what would

i tell our relatives? What will they say about you not earning as much as xyz?”, that pushed me into saying “I am not a trophy to just show around”.

Story of Riya:

Riya is a 21 years old girl, who is very close to her family consisting of her father, mother, an elder sister and a younger brother. Though her parents have always been a constant support, she says she wished they were more appreciative of her endeavours. Riya has always felt the need to ‘earn’ the things she wanted. She spent her childhood in a small society in Gujarat, where there existed this odd tradition; When a kid performs well in school, his or her mother would treat the other kids with ice-candies from the local vendor. Since Riya was not very academically well-performing, her mother never bought the candies for anyone. This fact bothered her for a long time, as she felt she was inadequate.

Story of Unni:

Unni is 22 years old, and is a single child. He grew up with his grandmother, as his parents were constantly working. Having had no siblings to play with, he would get creative to keep himself entertained. Unni was always showered with gifts by his parents, that he now believes was to compensate for their absence in his growing up. He still has a toy character he made as a child out of lego blocks on his desk. Unni also remembers running around the house with his crayons scraping against the wall, leaving long scribbles.

Story of Kunal:

Kunal lives in Mumbai in a small apartment with his father and mother, who he is not very close to. There is barely any interaction between the family, and he hopes to move out soon. Kunal's father used to run a business and never spent much

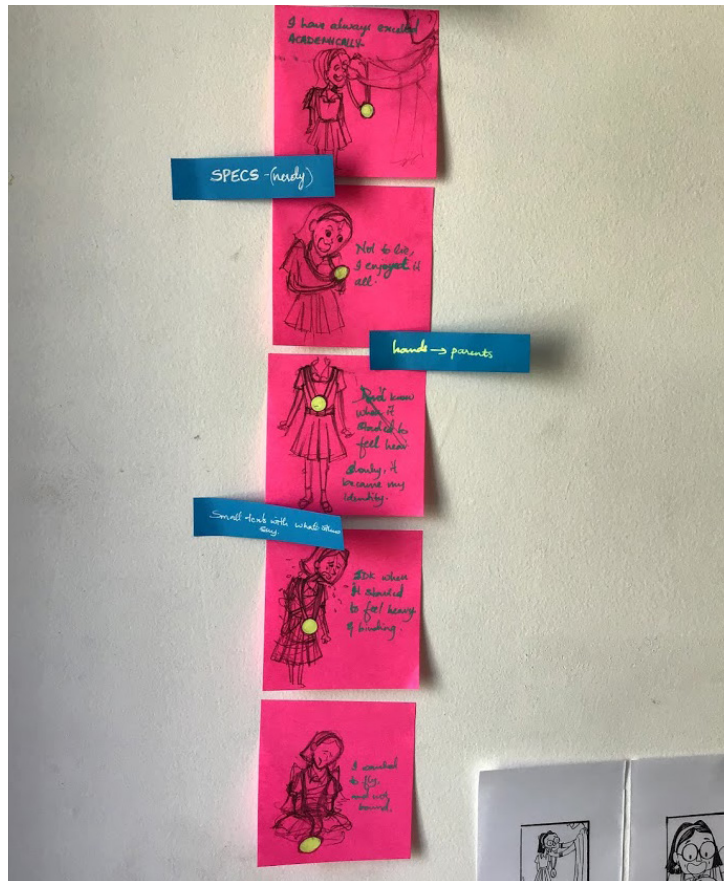
time with him as a kid. In the hope to improve their relationship, Kunal would make small gifts for him, but he says they were never received well. His father being short tempered, he slowly gave up trying. Having received little to no affection, Kunal believes he has become completely apathetic towards his family.

Ideation and process

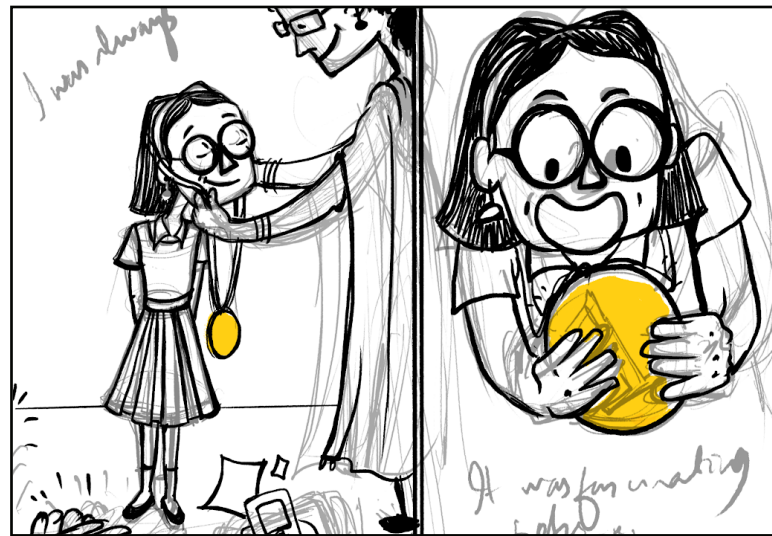


I was keen on maintaining the simple and real nature of the anecdotes. So I restrained myself from adding anything that over dramatized it, and to achieve that, I restricted the comics to six panels. The short and direct nature of a series of comics called DeepDarkFears where the artist illustrates the darkest fears people send them, proved to be an inspiration.

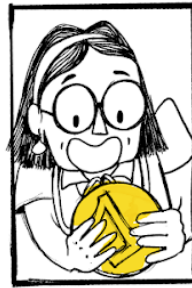




Roughs for the stories were planned out on paper, and were refined in Procreate. Since the narratives were rather small anecdotes, I decided on making minimal illustrations accompanied with text, as narrated by the people I interviewed, to avoid unfair assumptions on what could have happened from another point of view. It was important to have innocent undertones in the narrative. Since struggling to come in terms with an unpleasant situation and/or growing out of it formed an integral part of all the stories I collected, it was essential to represent them visually as well; Hence the rectangular boxes binding the illustrations, whose purpose adapts according to the progress of the narratives.



The shared anecdotes seemed to revolve around an object of importance. Identifying these helped highlight how certain seemingly harmless acts affect a child's mind. To visually emphasize on these, colours were added to selected parts of the otherwise black lined illustrations.





My childhood was very rewarding. Quite literally.



I would be lying if I said it was overwhelming. I was happy, amma was proud and that was all that mattered.



But somewhere in the process of growing up, I lost my identity, to that image.



When it all came down to keeping me bound and put,



I just really wanted to fly.



And now I just feel distant from everything I once held close. Sorry, Amma.



Feedback

After completion I sent around the copies in the form of a digital booklet with 4 comics titled 'It's Just a Little Thing' to gather feedback:

- There seemed to be a general discomfort about the narratives being too open ended. I had not offered a closure of any kind, as they were just events from life.
- The comics seem to be very disconnected and scattered. It needed more elements to it that held it together.
- It lacked a definitive end point, to call it a collection of comics.
- A few stories seemed to be more well articulated than the others. This created a disparity.

The Output

The lack of physical copies and presence, I believe, might have come in the way of getting first hand feedback. And the fact that I did not intend to make a book for casual reading required it to be followed by discussions and debates, which was not possible with distant reading. However I did try my hand at making the intention more apparent by adding a few more stories to the set for better contextualisation. I wish to create more such short narratives in future, by collecting stories through various online platforms keeping the already made set as reference.

Appendix



An experimentation

A lot of time during ideation was spent trying to bring the comics together and contextualising them. I made an attempt to put to good use a few interesting elements from the conversations I happened to have with people on the idea of 'Toxic Parenting' for the same.

The narrative

A group of students in their early twenties are travelling in a train. These characters are grown up versions of the kids in the comics made priorly. Following the event of a father shouting at his son for something small, they end up in a discussion and slowly, one after the other share the most vivid memories from childhood. After each story, one of the friends who is the most invested in the conversation starts doubting if anyone could ever be a good parent, because it demands perfection;

Even minor mistakes seem to leave prolonged scars in kids. When the father apologizes to his son for shouting at him for little to no reason, the girl feels at ease, as she realises parenthood is not about perfection, and good parenting calls for having a heart to own up to mistakes and correcting them.

Articulation of decisions

- Discussions are the best ways to bring about different viewpoints. Trains are an excellent space where we meet new people, and catch glimpses of their lives. Together, they seemed to offer a near perfect situation for a bunch of friends to exchange stories.
- The story is carefully structured to not seem like a young adult making judgements on what is good or bad parenting. Rather it is expressed as a girl's concerns and fears.
- It felt important to deconstruct the unrealistic

image of a perfect parent and show a father who is not reluctant to apologize to his son for his rash behaviour.

This idea was discarded as it required me to possess a separate skill set and research which was unrealistic to achieve within the approaching deadline. I wish to develop it further, outside the scope of this project.

