

FAMILY IN INDIA TODAY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Pope Francis' teachings are always positive and refreshing; because of his overarching principle of the mercy of God. Following the same train of thought, the teachings on marriage and family are proclaimed as "The Joy of Love"¹ in the Year of Mercy. Mercy and positivism go hand in hand just as anger and negativism too go together. So, if you are "merciful" you need to be positive. So, even under the thick clouds of negativism about marriage and family, the Pope would dare to state that "the Christian proclamation on family is good news indeed".² Following this positive and "merciful" approach Pope Francis begins his teaching on the family with the statement: "the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant among young people and this is an inspiration to the Church". So, we shall also begin with this positive note.

Secondly, though the purpose of this essay to speak on the situation of the family in India today in the light of

Amoris Laetitia, I do not intend to be exhaustive, not only because it would be too vast a subject, but also, I thought, it suffices to highlight for the reader a few points relevant for us today. The footnotes could help the reader for further readings on the subject.

Before we proceed, one observation may be in order. The family system in India and in other countries of Asia has proved to be positively effective, in so far as the Indian families are able to thrive overcoming the negative effects of economic poverty, difficulty for education and job opportunities, problems of migration, etc. There are so many good things to say about the family in India and Asia. But it is disappointing to see that there is no mention of it at all in the document, while there is mention of “various parts of Africa”³, “the Middle East”⁴ and “the Bishops of Mexico”.⁵ Yet we should mention that almost everything said about the situation and the challenges of family today is applicable to the families in India too. Nevertheless, it is important to see what is good about the situation of the family in India, because the Word says “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rm 12:21).

I. INCREASING TREND IN MARRIAGE RATES

“Marriage Halls” and “Wedding Spaces” are increasingly popular throughout India and from mere business perspective it is stated that “the wedding industry is on a 45% growth path.”⁶ More than One crore couples get

married in India every year.⁷This is particularly significant in the background that in Europe the rate of marriage has declined close to 50% between 1965 and 2013. So much so, weddings have become somewhat rare events. A friend of mine, who is a pastor in a parish near Genova, shared with me that for nearly two years there was no marriage ceremony at all.⁸Along the sidelines of increase in the so-called “Live-in Relationships” there has been also a rise in births outside marriage. Extramarital births occur in non-marital relationships, among co-habiting couples and for lone parents.⁹We cannot deny that even in India there have been some instances of Live-in Relationships.They are presumed to exist in cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru, New Delhi, etc., though no statistics are available, since these cohabitations are mostly temporary and therefore are not registered.

The Supreme Court of India has come out with clear definition of Live-In Relationships and has in 2006, 2010 and 2013 defended as “right to live” the freedom of the unmarried and adult persons to decide to co-habit. On 22 May 2013, the apex court asked, “If two people, man and woman, want to live together, who can oppose them?”¹⁰

What is the responsibility of those who cohabit? If an unmarried couple is living together as husband and wife, then they would be presumed to be legally married and the woman would be eligible to inherit the property after death of her partner, the Supreme Court has ruled. A bench

of Justice M. Y. Eqbal and Justice Amitava Roy said that continuous cohabitation of a couple would raise the presumption of valid marriage and it would be for the opposite party to prove that they were not legally married.”It is well settled that the law presumes in favour of marriage and against concubinage, when a man and woman have cohabited continuously for a long time. However, the presumption can be rebutted by leading unimpeachable evidence. A heavy burden lies on a party who seeks to deprive the relationship of legal origin,” the bench said.¹¹ All these clarifications and in some way “legalizations” have not encouraged co-habitation in India. The desire to marry and get settled in life is still seen as normal and a status to be desired at certain age of life because of the following reasons, among many others. These reasons are cultural, religious and social.

Family life as a stage for all: Traditionally, Hinduism proposes four stages for a person’s life in relation to the ultimate end: the period of a student (*brahamacharya*), the period of family life (*grahastha*), the period of retreat and meditation (*vanaprastha*) and the period of total renunciation (*sannyasa*). These stages are called *ashramas*, which are “Resting places during one’s journey (*yatra*) towards the ultimate goal (*moksha*).¹²The Indian religious and cultural tradition “does not hold up monasticism and eremitism as a common ideal for all; it considers, rather, the strains and straits of household management, family life and social

obligations, are a useful discipline contributing to the preparation of man to the final life of retirement and spiritual endeavour".¹³Marriage as a Sacrament: Whereas among the Christian Churches, only the Catholic Church holds marriage as one of the seven Sacraments, for over two millennia the Indian tradition teaches that *vivaha* (marriage) is a *sarirasamskara* (sacrament for the sanctification of the body).¹⁴Therefore marriage is more than a remedy against human "concupiscence"¹⁵ or a concession to human weakness. It is rather a prescription for achieving full human personality growth,¹⁶ and a means of spiritual growth.¹⁷

Marriage as a Religious Act: There are two important aspects in which the situation of marriage in India is very much different from the west or elsewhere: First marriages are considered sacred and therefore, even today most of the marriages take place in an atmosphere of religious fervor and prayer. The presence of the Hindu Pujari, or the Christian Pastor or Priest or of the Muslim Imam is considered necessary by people. "Marriages are made in heaven" is not only a dictum, but the faith of most of the Indians, irrespective of caste, creed or cult.

II. ARRANGED MARRIAGES ARE HERE TO STAY

Church in the West has always a tendency to see the practice of arranged marriage with prejudice and suspicion. We are not able to know what was reported in the synod

about arranged marriages. The mention made in the document is as an evil: It is named after the practice of polygamy and before talking about cohabitation without marriage.¹⁸It is important to view arranged marriage as something good, because Indian society and the Indian family hinge on it.

In India, arranged marriages still remain the majorly preferred way for Indians, from east to west, from north to south, to enter into matrimony. In case of an arranged marriage, three steps are usually followed:

- 1) Parents and other relatives look for a life partner suitable for their child. They keep in mind various factors, different for boys and girls, while searching for a suitable match according to the condition of their own family, their religion and their caste or sub-caste.

- 2) They ask for the consent of the son/daughter. They ensure it.

- 3) Once both families are sure of the suitability of the match and the consent of both parties, both the families go ahead in the preparation for wedding.

Many especially in the west have misgivings about the practice of arranged marriages particularly with regard to the freedom of those who marry, whether their consent is got or not. There are some studies conducted on this question. Some decades back Jyothi Barot made a study of 300 couples of 10 years of arranged marriages. 88.7% of

men and 83.7% of women felt that they were involved in the decision making and their consent had been sought. Only 9.7% of men and 16.3% of women reported that they were let out in the process of decision making about their own partners. A scanty 1.6% of men complained that marriage had been arranged against their own wish.¹⁹

Arranged marriage is a tradition Indians find hard to part with. No extent of learning or sophistication is able to reduce the viability of the system of arranged marriage. In fact the support for it has grown in recent years. In a study made by Dr. Promila Kapur in 1966, she found that 63% of women were for arranged marriage. But in 1976, their number rose to 72%.²⁰ Dr. P.N. Prabhu reports another study by which it was revealed that a whopping 83% of the urbanized workers of Mumbai favoured arranged marriages.²¹ Even in the 21st Century, around 85 % Indians prefer to marry the boy or girl chosen by their families, rather than choosing their life partners themselves. This statistics was revealed in a survey conducted by the Taj Group of Hotels. Another survey by IPSOS in 2013, revealed that 74% of young Indians, aged between 18-35 years said that they would rather let their parents choose their life partners, than choosing for themselves.²²

Another positive aspect of arranged marriages is the involvement of the family members other than the parents and the siblings. The lingering influence of the joint family is still seen in the way marriages are arranged and

celebrated throughout India. Far from the individualism that threatens to plague the entire human culture, the system of arranged marriages show that “marriage is regarded as of vital importance to the community and cannot be accepted as a personal matter between a man and a woman”.²³ Therefore the arranged marriages militate against the “overly individualistic culture, caught up with possessions and pleasures (which) leads to intolerance in families”.²⁴

Seven Merits of Arranged Marriages: Arranged marriage is one of the crucial points of India’s marriage system, probably since the end of Vedic Period and the beginning of Classical Hinduism.²⁵ Seven merits are attributed to this robust system.²⁶

1) Ensured compatibility level: Compatibility between the bride and the groom is ensured as far as possible by the parents and the family, according to the living condition of both families, their life-style, their physical appearance, psychological and mental abilities, educational and job conditions, etc. They seek the help of many persons and means for getting to know the person through exchange of photographs, contacting through telephone or mobile phone, internet and all other possible ways.

2) You marry not a person, but a family – In India marriage unites two families. For both the partners their lives blossom into new relationships and their friendship circle widens.

3) The expectation level is low and as a result the satisfaction becomes maximum.

4) Your parents and your relatives and family look after everything and they choose the best available person for you. The partners experience certain peace and tranquility and least anxiety.

5) In today's set up the courtship period is fixed by your family: they send you on date!

6) Having known your willingness to accept them, your in-laws already love you.

7) The time immediately following the wedding is called the honeymoon period and in an arranged marriage, it is the family which sends you for those exciting days of discovery, intimacy and joy which will last for a life-time.

Guarantees Pre Marital Chastity: In the above listing of the merits of arranged marriage system, *The Times of India* writer has however let out one point which is important for all who are convinced of the totality of self-gift in marriage. The arranged marriage system guarantees chastity before marriage which is surely one of the preconditions for the full savouring of the totality of self-gift in marriage. The Indian ethos sneer at love affairs which allow partial or very often even full sexual union even before marriage. In fact the practice of virginity or freedom from sexual acts before marriage is considered an ideal state and often an important ingredient for fulfilment in

marriage. Conjugal fidelity is a great virtue. It is just “another name for chastity, by which one (negatively) avoids extramarital unions, and (positively) gives oneself totally to one’s partner in marriage.²⁷ Chastity does not mean just avoidance of the use of sex, “rather it signifies spiritual energy from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness and (is) able to advance it towards its full realization (in marriage).”²⁸ We must note that the Pope Francis does not speak of chastity as psychological self-mastery or merely a mark of human faithfulness, but calls it “spiritual energy”.²⁹

Well, that takes us to another important point, the holiness of wedlock. Marriage is human reality and divine act as well! God is at work in it and therefore there is a lot sacred about it. This sacredness of marriage is enhanced to a large extent by conjugal chastity. This conjugal chastity need not be understood only as sexual continence prior to marriage but outside marriage. This “outside marriage” means also “before marriage” and the system of arranged marriage surely entails this aspect of holiness.

The Ills connected with Arranged Marriage System:

We should not be, however, impervious to some evil effects of the arranged marriage. One of the evils perpetrated by the arranged marriage is **the dowry system**, practiced by Catholics and others almost throughout India.³⁰ The proposal and the demand of dowry is part of the “arrangement” involved in the “arranged” marriage. Seeing the damage the system is doing in terms of demeaning of womanhood,

dowry deaths and the feeling of the girl child as being a burden to the family,³¹ there is a need for the entire Indian community to seek the ways of doing away with the system of the dowry as envisaged by the enactment of the *Anti-Dowry Act of 1961*, or find a beneficial substitute for it involving the families of both the bride and the groom.³²

Secondly, arranged marriage helps **caste system** perpetuate itself because marriages are usually arranged according to the principle of caste endogamy: that the members of different castes have matrimonial connections only within their own caste-group.³³ This aspect of the caste system is so important that it is called the essence of caste system.³⁴ Any violation of this rule was, until recently (and to some extent is still) punishable with ostracization from the caste group. This situation results in extreme difficulties for the family of an inter-caste marriage. Some may be pushed to commit suicide, while others may become victims of honour killing. "An honour killing or shame killing is the homicide of a member of a family, due to the perpetrators' belief that the victim has brought shame or dishonor upon the family, or has violated the principles of a community or a religion, usually for reasons such as refusing to enter an arranged marriage, being in a relationship that is disapproved by their family, having sex outside marriage, becoming the victim of rape, dressing in ways which are deemed inappropriate (to the caste or religious group), engaging in non-heterosexual

relations or renouncing a faith".³⁵ Inter-caste marriages do take place today, but very rarely, if at all and mostly they are 'love marriages'.

III. INCREASING TRENDS IN DIVORCE RATES?

In 1995, I brought out a book on the Spirituality of the Family in India³⁶. For the cover picture, we looked for the photo of an ideal family. We identified one and the picture of that family – the parents and their two children formed the cover of the first edition of the book. I was so grateful to that family for having allowed me to put their picture on the cover. But today, a lot of changes have taken place and the family is not together. "Marriages are for life" – so believes everyone who gets married and no one takes the wedding vows as, for example, "I accept you as my husband/wife as far as I can support you" or with any other condition, either of time or of health or of wealth. But as the life proceeds, things turn out to be different. That is what is happening to many families in India today.

What is the divorce rate in India? It is very difficult to answer this question, because India has perhaps the lowest divorce rate in the world, as the following table reports³⁷:

Country	Divorce rate
Sweden	54.9%
United States	54.8%

Russia	43.3%
United Kingdom	42.6%
Germany	39.4%
Singapore	17.2%
Israel	14.8%
Japan	1.9%
Sri Lanka	1.5%
India	1.1%

The divorce rate in India is indeed very low compared to other countries; nevertheless it is somewhat high for the Indian situation for two reasons: One, the increase is sudden rather than gradual; second, the majority of those who break up their wed-lock are young couples. As far as the divorce cases are concerned, they were just 5245 in 2010, but the number rose to 11667 in 2014 (until Nov. 30). Such cases were 2388 in Kolkata in the year 2003, but they grew into 8347 in 2014. Bengaluru had to face so many cases that where there were 3 marriage courts, now there are 6 of them.³⁸ The on-line article cited above gives another detail: that the rate of young couple seeking divorce has increased. For example, in Lucknow, 900 out of 2000 filed in 2014 were for couples married less than a year, whereas in 2009 such cases were just 300. It is shocking that despite the marriage preparation sessions and other occasions for the couple to meet before the wedding, there

are instances of applications for annulment in diocesan marriage tribunals.

What do these details reveal today? First of all, it is evident that one of the particularities of the Indian family is the stability of marriage in India. If not anything else, that India accounts for the lowest divorce rate in the world is indicative of this positive character of the Indian family system. This does not have any direct link to Christian or Catholic doctrine or formation. Hardly 3% of Indian population is Christian and the Catholics are just half of that number. Secondly, though Catholic religion is the most consistent group in upholding the indissolubility of marriage, the so-called Catholic countries have also high percent of divorce. Therefore it is not religion that has helped the stability of wedlock.

I propose that the culture and tradition of a place is the most important ingredient in the strengthening of the marriage bond. Though India is a vast subcontinent with many languages and divergent customs, we find a remarkable similarity in the system of marriage and family.³⁹ Why does the Indian family act in this way? How to interpret its behaviour? The answer to these questions will emerge from the analysis of the values at work in the Indian social fabric.⁴⁰

One last question should be placed and answered before we proceed further: Can the quick rise in divorce cases in India be indicative of anything positive? Such a

question was placed in an on-line discussion. Certain Prasad Udipi answered as follows: “Contrary to the popular notion, I think that the growing number of divorces is actually a positive sign. This is the biggest indicator of women empowerment. I knew many women from my previous generation who were stuck up in bad marriages. Divorce was not an option for two primary reasons:

1. How would the society react? A divorced woman was looked down upon.

2. They could not support the family (financially) themselves.

Now more and more women are independent and confident both emotionally and financially. They have realized that they don't have to be stuck in bad marriage or ever, just to please the society.”⁴¹

In the same on-line discussion, Shonee Kapur says, “People are realizing that they have to get out of the painful relationships and situations. People are not tolerating cruelties anymore for long”. But I also agree with his caution that there is nothing to be happy about the fact that family as an institution could lose its viability. Krishna Jha, a teacher writes: “that increasing rates of divorces is likely to cause social upheaval whose consequences have to be faced by the children”.⁴² It is imperative, therefore, to halt this threatening collapse of the family in India. It has to be a concerted action in collaboration with all the communities

and groups, religious, social and political. Chapter 6 of *Amoris Laetitia*, "Some Pastoral Perspectives" gives us some guidelines.

Divorce among 50+: Details about the divorce cases are posted on the internet by the lawyers. Recently a lawyer has registered on the internet this information: that divorce is high among those who are more than 50 years of age. For this he cites the example of the cases filed in Lucknow. In 2012 nearly 1500 cases of divorce were filed in Lucknow. Of these around 40% were of people older than 50. In 2000 the instances of geriatric divorce cases (clients in their 50s or older) were just two or three. There is more to this: Most of these cases have been filed by the husbands. The husband initiates the case to throw away the "old woman" because he has found a younger mate.⁴³ Another advocate has said that in the last 10 years, the geriatric divorce cases have gone up from 2% to 25%.⁴⁴ Speaking about the divorce, there is one more question, the need of counselling, as the following point would clearly indicate.

The need for counselling: In a study made by Jyoti Barot, it is found that a 96.4% married men and 95% of women consider their marriage very happy, happy or fairly happy. Only 3.6% of men and 5% of women deem it as unhappy or very unhappy.⁴⁵ The same author refers to another significant fact, that of a total of 43,633 suicides in 1969, only 8% had been caused by discord between the spouses. In 2016 there were 135445 suicides, of which 30744

- which is 22.6% - were reported to be out of family problems.⁴⁶ Of the rest, the men mostly took the fateful decision because of financial problems and the ladies because of emotional and relational problems. All these indicate the need of psychological counselling help for the families today.

In the traditional joint-family ambience, there was an inbuilt mechanism for emotion and loss management. For example, if there was a financial crunch, the man could share it when the entire joint family would together in the evening; or at least someone in the family would ask, "Hello, what is wrong? Why are you so sad or anxious today?" After all, they were all there. Now, the nuclear family is left alone and the other members of the joint family are mostly far away because of work or education or housing problems. Because of emigration due to work, often the wife is alone at home (or sometimes the wife is abroad and the husband is at home). There are so many situations in which the lonely husband or wife is put into critical situations. But there is no immediate solace for the lonely person. All these indicate an urgent need for counselling assistance.

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End notes

¹ *Amoris Laetitia*, 1 & 5. Whereas most of us are more conscious of “crises” of whatever we like to speak of, Pope Francis underlines the importance of the aspect of the “Joy”. Thus when all the media were underlining the crisis arising from crude outbreak of antichristian persecution by ISIS, the Pope had the daring proclamation of “The Joy of the Gospel”, which happens to be the title of Francis’ first document.

² *Amoris Laetitia*, 1 quoting from *Relatio Finalis* of the Synod, 24 October 2015.

³ No. 38

⁴ No. 46

⁵ No. 51

⁶ *Marriage Statistics: India* in indpaedia.com, Googled on 11 July 2017.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ For details and statics on Live-in Relationships in Europe, see Liebroeder, A.C., Dourlein, E., “*Unmarried cohabitation and union stability: testing the role of diffusion using data from 16 European countries*” in *Demography*, 2006, Vol.43, pp. 203-221.

⁹ Online article “Marriage and Divorce Statistics” in eorustat: Statistics Explained, googled on 11 July 2017.

¹⁰ “Live-in Relationships in India – a closer look” in *Vakilnol.com*. It was in 2006 that the same court termed it as a “part of right to live”.

¹¹ Ami Chaudhary, “Couple living together will be presumed married” in *Times of India*, e-magazine, April 13, 2015, Googled on 11 July 2017

¹² Pandharinath Prabhu, *Hindu Social Organization*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1961, 78, 83.

¹³ V. Raghavan, “Kama, the Third End of Man” in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, ed. WM Theodore de Bary and others. New York: Colombia University Press, 1966, p. 258.

¹⁴ P.H. Prabhu, *Social Organization*, 149.

¹⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 42, 3, 4.

¹⁶ "He only is a perfect man who consists of his wife, himself and his offspring", Manu IX, 45. Cf. the Commentary by Kulluka: "Than man who does not win a wife is really half; he is not a full man as long as he does not beget an offspring".

¹⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*. London: Unwin Books, 1965, p.60

¹⁸ *Amoris Laetitia*, 53 says, "Some societies still maintain the practice of polygamy; in other places, arranged marriages are an enduring practice... In many places, not only in the West, the practice of living together before marriage is widespread..."

¹⁹ Jyoti Barot, "Modern Trend in Family Relations" in *Indian Families in the Seventies*, p. 63.

²⁰ Promila Kapur, *Love, Marriage, Sex and Indian Women*. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1980, pp. 122-123.

²¹ The support for arranged marriage in the rural area was 93%.- P.N. Prabhu, "Social Effects of Urbanization in Industrial Workers" in *Society in India*, Vol I. , p. 156.

²² "Cultural India – Weddings – Arranged Marriage", *Online article*, Googled on 11 July 2017

²³ Mary Catherine Pereira, "The Family and the Society in Asia: Challenges, Problems and Prospectives of of the Evangelizing Mission of Religious" in *Omnis Terra*, 17th Year (1983), pp. 37-38.

²⁴ Cf. *Amoris Laetitia*, 33

²⁵ Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia, *Arranged Marriage in the Indian Sub-continent*, Downloaded 12 July 2017.

²⁶ Times of India – Life: "7 reasons that prove arranged marriages in India have their own merit", online essay dated 1 June 2017. Downloaded 12 July 2017.

²⁷ John Kulandai, *The Perfect Triangle*. Tiruchirapalli: St. Paul's Seminary Publications, 1995, p 157.

²⁸ *Familiaris Consortio*, 33 (brackets and their contents are of the author).

²⁹ Cf. Pietro Palazzini, "La *Familiaris Consortio* nel suo contenuto" in *Divinitas*, 26 (Oct. 1982), p.254, speaking about the comments of the German Journal *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (16 Dec. 1981), on

Familiaris Consortio.

³⁰ See *Ibid*, pp.78-80.

³¹ Swarna Latha Hooja, *Dowry System in India: Case Study*. New Delhi: Asia Press, 1969, p. 213.

³² The diocese of Kottar in Tamil Nadu tried a system of a security deposit for the newlyweds by both the families. This proposal is yet to take off, as the system is so wide-spread that the Catholic Community alone cannot bring about a change in this.

³³ Mariasusai Dhavamony, "A Report from India – The Caste System" in *Concilium*, 151 (Jan. 1981), p. 49. The author mentions marriage within the same caste group is the "simplest definition of the caste"

³⁴ G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, /reprinted 1979, p 18. Some practice of *hypergamy* may be allowed by the system itself: example, nambudiribrahmin cohabiting with a Nair woman.

³⁵ "Honour Killing" in Wikipedia Free encyclopedia, Googled on 11 July 2017.

³⁶ John Kulandai, *The Perfect Triangle*. Tiruchirapally: St. Paul's Seminary Publications, 1995.

³⁷ Anubhav Singh Yadav gives these details in his answer dated Oct. 8, 2015 to the question place on line, "Does India have lowest divorce rate in the world?". Downloaded on 10 July 2017

³⁸ Posted by Apoorva Dutt, "How and why number of young Indian couples getting divorced has risen sharply", updated on Jan 4, 2015, downloaded on 10 July 2017.

³⁹ John Kulandai, *The Perfect Triangle*, p. 125.

⁴⁰ B. Kuppusamy, *Social Change in India*. Sahidabad: Vikas Publishing House, 1979, p. 67.

⁴¹ *Quora*, "Divorce rates in India are increasing. Should we be happy or sad about this?", dated May 14, 2015. Googled on 10 July 2017.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Online article by Priyangi Agarwal, "*Divorce high among 50-plus*" on July 13, 2013 by The Times of India.

⁴⁴ Online article by Gitanjali Chandrasekara Rani, Posted on June 20, 2013. The author mentions the divorce between Russian Valdimir Putin (60) and his ex wife Lyudmila (55).

⁴⁵ Jyoti Barot, "Modern Trends in Marital Relations", *Indian Family in the Change and Challenges of the Seventies*, p. 64. See also "Indian Families and Secret of happiness" 18 January 2017, online article posted by Familybirdz Team, downloaded on 12 July 2017. The article makes a very refreshing reading.

⁴⁶ Posted by Ignatius Pereira on Internet. "*Suicides in India in 2016*" June 07, 2017.