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Mayank Agarwal's (right) family, together and happy

'Never a dull moment in a joint family'

Mayank Agarwal, 40,
Family structure: Joint family
with 11 members

THE first time software engineer Mayank Agarwal lived away from his family was when he was in the US for three-and-a-half years, from 2008 to 2010. "When I was away, I realised the importance of being close to family. That's why I chose to move back to India," he tells us.

Agarwal, his wife (a senior HR executive) and their two daughters (aged seven and 10) live in a 4Bhk in Mulund that they share with his parents, as well as his elder brother's family (husband, wife and their two daughters). "In total, 11 of us—including our full-time domestic worker, whom we count as a family member—live together," says Agarwal.

It can get noisy, "but that's what we want", he says. "There's never a dull moment; there's always someone else I can strike

up a conversation with. I don't see such frequent conversations happening in nuclear families, where couples may be tied up just balancing their careers and managing the household."

Joint families get a bad rap over a lack of privacy, and the higher likelihood of clashes with so many different voices under one roof. But it's a matter of perspective, says Agarwal, "People these days look down upon joint families. But disagreements happen in all families. In a nuclear family, would your first response be to tell the couple to split up?"

It's important to him to be there for his parents, "who have taken care of us all our lives", but he also ensures to set aside time and attention for his personal equation with his wife and children. "The four of us go on holiday every three to four months to not just rejuvenate ourselves, but also keep our one-on-one bonds strong," he says.

Joint families get a bad rap over a lack of privacy, and the higher likelihood of clashes... It's a matter of perspective

'I hope more people find the courage to walk out of toxic homes'

Ketki Lohakare, 28,
Family structure: Disowned
parents, in contact with sister

"I was 23 when I cut my parents out of my life and moved to Mumbai," says Ketki Lohakare, an advertising professional who is now 28.

Her childhood years were marked with "emotional abuse and micro-doses of toxicity" from her parents over the smallest to biggest issues, from violent fights over what TV show to watch, to a complete refusal to acknowledge her pain when she confided how she had been sexually assaulted by her cousin when she was just nine. "They said I was lying. That was when I realised that I had no one to rely on but myself."

The breaking point came when she realised she was bisexual. "When my parents found out I was dating a girl, they said, 'We wish we had left you on the road when you

were a baby'. My father told me never to contact him again," she recalls.

Lohakare walked into a life of freedom, but paid a huge cost for it. "That price is being alone, having no home, no one to rely on," says Lohakare, who initially struggled to make it alone in Mumbai on a fresher's salary of ₹18,000. "There were days when I had to choose whether to spend my last ₹10 on the train home or a vada pav for dinner. I would go home, drink water and go to sleep."

With time, she found her own support system, her "chosen family"—her close friend Divya, and childhood confidante Nilay, as well as her partner, with whom she recently moved to Delhi. They are her 1 am ride-or-die call, her medical emergency contacts. Advancing in the advertising field has also brought financial stability.

The emotional scars will take longer to heal though. "My parents took away my ability to trust



When Ketki Lohakare revealed she had disowned her parents, she was inundated with death threats, she says.

PIC/NISHAD ALAM

people. Everyone says your parents will always be there for you. But I didn't even have that. Now I have a hard time accepting that others won't abandon me too," she says.

Being transparent about her family situation has exposed her to censure from society, and even death threats. "I wrote about this on social media once and people threatened to kill me. They said, 'This is not Indian culture, how can you talk about your parents like this?' But parents are also humans, they can make mistakes," says Lohakare, adding that she hopes her story "gives courage to others thinking of leaving toxic homes".

'Wanted to be close to my parents, but needed our personal space too'

Dhruvi Shah Mota, 37,
Family structure: Lives with husband
in same building as her parents

RIGHT after writer-poet Dhruvi Shah Mota and her husband, Prateek, got married in 2018, they lived with her parents in Vile Parle for a couple of months. "My mum had just been diagnosed with cancer [she is now cancer-free]. So, I was keen on being close to her," she recalls.

But the couple quickly realised the need for their own space. "Prateek [voiceover artiste, actor and choreographer] has odd working hours. Sometimes he goes to work at 2 am and returns in the morning. The erratic schedule is not easy on the rest of the household. The two of us also en-

joy entertaining at home, but didn't want to disturb my parents," says Mota, adding that her in-laws live in Bhopal.

At first, they moved to a flat five minutes' driving distance from her parents. During the COVID-induced lockdown, though, even this distance proved to be a challenge. "In 2020, when a flat became available in my parents' building, we moved in. Now my husband and I live on the third storey, just one floor above my parents. I have the mental security of knowing that we can be there for them. There are days when my mum or I run out of groceries and we just climb the staircase and trade vegetables," she quips.

She's glad to have the proximity to her parents, even as she and



When Mota (right) runs out of groceries, she can simply borrow some from her mum. PIC/ASHISH RAJE

her spouse have their own space. "We can do what we like, maintain our schedule and work when we want, sleep when we want. We have friends over a lot. I work from home and it's also nice having a quiet space for writing," Mota says.

Same fight, new ring

As WWE's 23-year broadcasting relationship with Sony India ends, and it heads to Netflix, we dive deep into the fandom, asking why the US-based pro-wrestling outfit's appeal has endured in the country since the '90s

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

WWE stars Liv Morgan (right) and Dominik Mysterio were in Mumbai recently to mark WWE's debut on Netflix starting April 1. PIC/KIRTI SURVE PARADE



I'M A THIRD generation [wrestler]. My great uncle was the original Rey Mysterio. Then you have my 'deadbeat dad' and then, me. It was kind of a no-brainer to step into the family business and just see what I could do to hopefully take the Mysterio name to a different level," Dominik Mysterio, known in wrestling circles as "Dirty Dom" and touted as one of the best Heels (a wrestler who portrays a villain) in the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) universe, tells us at Netflix's office in Mumbai this week.

Sitting next to him is Liv Morgan, a two-time Women's World Champion and Dom's on-screen girlfriend. She grew up with four older brothers who introduced her to WWE. "I loved women's wrestling, the characters, the physicality, the competitiveness, the story and glamour of it all. It just became very much a safe space for me no matter what was going on. I knew I had Monday Night Raw and

SmackDown to look forward to throughout the week"

The pro-wrestlers were in India this week as part of a promotional campaign to mark WWE's move to Netflix in India starting April 1. The US-based wrestling promotion's more than two-decade-long partnership with Sony ended last month, as it transferred its media rights in India to Netflix through a \$5 billion, 10-year deal. WWE's weekly flagship shows (Raw, NXT, and SmackDown) as well as WWE's Premium Live Events including SummerSlam, Money in the Bank, Royal Rumble and the upcoming WrestleMania will now be available for streaming to Indian fans with a Netflix subscription.

WWE, which has one of its largest international markets in India and a thriving subculture and fanbase in the country, first entered Indian homes in the 1990s with the advent of cable television in India as the government

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opened the market to private broadcasters. Mohammed Nedal, who grew up in Dubai, fondly remembers his summer vacations in India which were spent huddled around the television with cousins watching WWE matches on Ten Sports. The element of drama, the detailed storylines and the wrestlers' ability to put on a show were a constant draw. "Wrestlers are able to tell a story and generate a reaction from the crowd through their roles. You see the good guy go down, and then everyone's hoping for him to come out on top. And just when you feel that all's lost, they gather the courage, and that's what really pumps up the crowd. At its core, it's a story of good versus evil," Nedal, a Senior Community Manager at Zolostays, tells us. He remembers wrestler Eddie Guerrero, who "would lie, cheat and steal, and yet had such heart", his matches with the much bigger Brock Lesnar in a "sort of David and Goliath battle", and his famous rivalry with Rey Mysterio which culminated in a storyline where Guerrero claimed to be Dominik Mysterio's "real" father, leading to a ladder match for Dominik's custody as particularly exciting. "If you look at Eddie Guerrero's early pictures and mannerisms, you'll realise that what they are trying to do now is make Dominik look more and more like him," notes the fan.

There were also the electric catchphrases that the wrestlers used to spar with one another that naturally appealed to the then teenager. He recalls Stone Cold Steve Austin's "Austin 3:16" and "And that's the bottom line 'cause Stone Cold said so" and The Rock's "Lay the Smacketh Down" among his favourites. "There was one thing that The Rock would do," Nedal adds. "He would ask someone a question and as they were responding, he would cut them off halfway with 'it doesn't matter what you think'. And then the whole crowd would erupt!"

Screenwriter and comedian Aseem Chandaver remembers the trump cards that were available in India in the mid-'90s listing the wrestlers' stats which players would compare to win cards from opponents. "We couldn't believe how many characters existed beyond the normal canon on Star TV where we saw only about 20-25 wrestlers. We never saw The Iron Sheik, for instance, or a wrestler called Akeem." But boys were hooked nonetheless and Chandaver recalls practising the Generation X signature "suck it" hand gesture with friends in school. "If your sir saw you doing that, you were going to be punished." The match Chandaver remembers most prominently was one he had on VHS, of Yokozuna versus The Undertaker where the latter dies. "The Undertaker had all his power in his urn and when Yokozuna broke that, we saw green smoke coming out of it. I remember crying," he giggles.

One sure sign that validated WWE's widespread popularity in India was when Bollywood films of the '90s started featuring pro wrestling matches and fan favourites. Chandaver

MOHAMMED
NEDALASEEM
CHANDAVER

Wrestler Roman Reigns holding up the Championship Belt during the WWE Live India Tour in New Delhi in 2016. PIC/GETTY IMAGES

remembers a scene in 1997's Aar Ya Paar where Jackie Shroff and the heroine watch a match featuring Doink the Clown, a professional wrestling gimmick. There was also the Akshay Kumar-starring Sabse Bada Khiladi (1995) which had Kumar fight The Undertaker. "I remember begging my mom to take me to the theatre just so that I could watch the match in the movie. But then we realised that The Undertaker in the film was a fake. Everyone in the theatre was very disappointed!"

For Riju Dasgupta, journalist and senior content manager for Sport-keeda, what has ensured WWE's ongoing appeal has been their willingness to evolve with the times. "The whole presentation changes with the era that it is in; it mirrors society," he observes. Hulk Hogan who was the biggest pro wrestling star of the '80s was "loud, boisterous, and all roided up, and that was in conjunction with that era," he says, pointing to films like Conan the Barbarian or the Rocky films, all of which like Hogan, mirrored the sensibilities of the '80s. In the late '90s which was the era of reality television, Dasgupta points out how stars like Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Rock and Triple H who were pivotal figures during what was then the World Wrestling Federation's "Attitude Era" represented a more aggressive aesthetic, aimed towards an adult audience. "WWE has always been mirrored by profitability and they're very open about it. And for that, one has to evolve." An essential facet of this evolution is the way women's wrestling has grown within the WWE landscape. Dasgupta remembers a pro wrestling manager known as Miss Elizabeth whose only job was to accompany her husband, the wrestler Macho Man, to the ring.

"Fast forward to now when the women's division is one of the centrepieces of the show. The women are putting on matches in the same league as the men. You can see a lot more girls in the arena as a result." Liv Morgan herself attested to this evolution dur-

ing our conversation this week. "It's really progressed with the times," she agreed. "Back then, women were just eye candy, they had a very limited role as opposed to being seen as legitimate competitors. The way the women are represented, what the women are allowed and encouraged to do now [is very different]. We've had our very first all-female Premium Live Events. The women get to do all the same stipulations that the boys do, which wasn't allowed: 15-minute matches, 20-minute matches, main events... there are multiple women's matches on the show."

For Jonathan Selvaraj, Reporter at Sportstar Magazine, the millennial attachment to WWE is due to it being their first taste of a global "crazy" kind of entertainment.

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Liv Morgan

"We grew up watching that. It's why other wrestling promotions like TNA or AEW didn't have the same impact because unlike WWF, they weren't the first." Not just viewers, but athletes and sports entertainment at large, he points out, has been affected by WWE theatrics and fandom. He remembers Indian cricket captain Rohit Sharma's celebratory walk towards his team after India's T20 World Cup win last year. "He was walking like an old man. That celebration comes from Ric Flair in the '90s. The modern culture of sports entertainment with its brash, flamboyant nature and trash talking promos is massively inspired by WWE and the characters in it. It's fascinating how it's had an oversized impact on how regular sporting formats present themselves."

But in spite of WWE's popularity in India, the country's own pro-wrestling culture hasn't grown in conjunction. "In the US, WWE is the pinnacle, but they also have regional competitions and events which are held in venues like school auditoriums or shopping malls. There isn't a proper ecosystem for pro-wrestling in India the way there is for cricket for instance," Selvaraj, who has visited Continental Wrestling Entertainment, one-time WWE wrestler The Great Khali's training academy in

Jalandhar, observes. "Most people getting into it are doing so because they're passionate about pro-wrestling. They've seen it on TV. But you can't run your life on passion alone. Ultimately, you have to make something out of it. Khali puts on shows every once in a while, but it's not sustainable. One guy's shows can't fulfil a country's pro-wrestling dreams."

Ishan Chavan has been a Hindi commentator for WWE for four years with 166 live shows under his belt, and like the wrestlers, has been used to commentating in character. When he started, he was the baby face, transitioning later to a heel. "Initially, I was the good guy supporting the good guys and calling out the bad guys. When I expressed helplessness as a commentator, my audience felt helpless too. Later, I began saying things about their favourites on purpose to trigger the audience." As part of Sony's 23-year relationship with WWE, Chavan mentions memorable superstar visits—John Cena, Big Show, Kane, Jinder Mahal, Charlotte Flair, Braun Strowman—along with live events and 2023's Superstar Spectacle in Hyderabad. The difference that the switch to Netflix will bring, he tells us, is that the exclusive content that Sony made for Indian audiences like the weekly recap show WWE Super Dhamaal, Namaste Drew and Namaste India, or Mami Talks, a separate show made for the Tamil audience with Rhea Ripley will not be available.

"Netflix hasn't bought broadcast rights for any major sports event like cricket, or football. Instead they are trying to create programming around sports, like behind-the-scenes Formula One (Formula One: Drive to Survive) or behind-the-scenes tennis (Break Point), and alternative events, and other kinds of documentaries (The Greatest Rivalry: India Vs Pakistan). So they seem to have some sports strategy but not directly getting into the bidding of big sports events like IPL, World Cups, etc," economist Rahul De, whose podcast Economies of Khel dives deep into sporting subcultures, tells us. De speculates that it's possible that Netflix might have more WWE content in the coming years. "There could be a behind-the-scenes show. Maybe there will be merchandise too."

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RIJU
DASGUPTAISHAN
CHAVANRAHUL
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WWE entertainer Rey Mysterio signs autographs as he met schoolchildren in Mumbai in 2007. PIC/GETTY IMAGES