Changes in the Family and the Elderly

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Though household organisation in India is undergoing stresses and strains, the future well-being of the multitudes of the elderly lies in their remaining in the joint household. For this a process of adjustment between the older and the younger generation needs to be encouraged so that they arrive at a new understanding of their mutual needs.

THE subject of changes in the family and their impact on the elderly in modern India has been receiving a great deal of public attention these days. We find frequent discussions of this subject in newspapers and magazines, on television and radio, and on the public platform. These discussions are most welcome because they highlight the importance of the subject. However, I am afraid I have to point out that frequently they are highly simplistic and repetitive. Social science research on the subject is also increasing, but unfortunately most of it lacks sufficient conceptual, methodological and analytical rigour and is repetitive. Moreover, most of it is confined to a small section of society, namely, the middle class, retired people in the organised sector in urban areas. The vast majority of elderly people living in rural areas and those working in the unorganised sector in urban areas are neglected. We need to develop a perspective covering all sections of the elderly in the country.

I have just now mentioned the necessity for conceptual rigour. The most fundamental concept in this regard is 'family' itself. In popular language the word 'family' has several different meanings, but scientific discourse demands precise use of words. It has now become common in social sciences all over the world to distinguish between 'household' and 'family'. For example, in India we commonly find that a son's household may be separate from that of his parents', and two or more brothers may live in separate households, but they consider themselves as belonging to a single family. In this situation it would be confusing to use the word 'family' for the household. It is common in popular discourse to say that the joint family is disintegrating, but this statement can be highly misleading because a joint household may be divided into two or more households but these new households behave as members of a single family. To understand the situation of the elderly it is absolutely essential to find out if an elderly person lives in a household or not. It is not sufficient for him or her to be a member of a family.

The distinction between 'household' and 'family' is not a matter merely of words but has a deeper meaning and substance in Indian society. I have described at considerable length in my two books on the family in India (1973, 1998) the situation in which married sons set up separate households from that of their parents'. This situation is quite complex and marked by play of emotions and sentiments. A different kind of relations develop between parents' and sons' households consequent upon separation – what I have called inter-household family relations. However, cordial these relations might be, their quality is different from that of relations in the integrated household. As time passes and parents grow in old age, they become acutely sensitive to the consequences of household separation. The sons may remain cordial from a distance. They may even provide money for parents' maintenance. But that is not sufficient. Hindu Law has ruled since the ancient times that the members of the joint family are entitled to receive maintenance from joint family property. Financial support may thus be available to old and disabled parents and it may even be enforced by law. However, law cannot enforce residence in a joint household. What is most distressing and depressing to old parents is their isolation from a joint household. It is bearable to some extent as long as both the parents are alive, because they can support one another. But when one of them passes away, isolation of the remaining parent becomes highly critical.

In any study of the elderly we have to find out their living arrangement. It is well known that since the ancient times some elderly people in India abandon their homes and go to live in pilgrim centres such as Varanasi and Mathura. And in recent times some elderly people live in the homes for the aged. However, the number of old people living in such institutions is very small. I have not yet seen any count of such old people in pilgrim centres, but their number cannot be large. As regards homes for the aged, we know that there are about 700 of them in the country as a whole, with approximately 28,000 aged people living in them (figures provided by HelpAge India, research and development division). It will readily be agreed that the number of aged people living in institutions is only a drop in the ocean of aged people in the country. The vast majority of old people live in households.

Unfortunately, the Census of India does not provide figures regarding the various types of households in which old people live. For example, we do not know how many old people live in single-member household, i e, an old man or woman living alone; how many households are composed of two old persons, most commonly, a husband-wife couple; how many households are composed of one or both of old parents and one or more young, unmarried children; how many households are composed of one or both of old parents and one married son and his children; and how many households are composed of one or both of old parents and two or more married sons. I would suggest that institutions like HelpAge India should pressurise the Census of India to provide these figures.

While we do not have direct information about the living arrangement of the aged, we should use whatever indirect information we have to get at least an approximate idea of the situation in the country. Considerable research has by now accumulated on the numerical and kinship composition of the Indian household since the beginning of the 19th century, i e, roughly since the establishment of British rule. I have discussed this research at length in my two books on the family in India (1973, 1998). I shall only summarise this discussion here.

Although the ancient ideal of the joint household was prevalent throughout Indian society – the ideal that all the sons after their marriage should continue to live together with their parents – it was basically a Sanskritic ideal, prescribed by Hindu scriptures and practised mainly in a small section of society composed of

upper castes and classes. It was practised to a lesser extent among the lower castes and classes and tribal groups which constituted the overwhelming majority of Indian society. Consequently, taking the society as a whole, the average household was small and simple or nuclear. Contrary to popular belief, every Indian did not live in a large and joint household. The average size of the household remained between four and five from about 1800 AD to about 1950 AD [see Table 1 and its discussion in Shah 1998:65-67]. Most of the joint households were also small, composed of one or both of parents and only one married son. The main reasons were three: (1) Life expectancy was low. If many members of the older generation died out before the younger generation was married, there were lower chances for joint households to survive for long, if develop at all; (2) Massive poverty meant lower level of household assets and therefore lower tendency to live in joint households. If there was not much property, how can there be much joint property to become an economic base for joint household?; and (3) The lower level of Sanskritisation among lower castes and classes and tribal groups meant a weak emphasis on joint household among the masses.

The situation has changed in several ways after 1951, i e, roughly after independence. First of all, the average size of the household has steadily increased since the Census of 1951. It was as high as 5.55 in 1981 [see Table 1 and its discussion in Shah 1998:65-67]. It declined only slightly to 5.51 in 1991 [see Census of India 1991:186, Table A-1]. In other words, the average Indian has been living in a larger household now than before 1951. This suggests larger numbers of joint households now than before.

For the first time in 1981 the Census of India provided figures of households belonging to different types of kinship composition in the country. These figures show that 45.98 per cent of the total households were joint and 54.02 per cent nuclear [see Table 2 and its discussion in Shah 1998:68-71]. From these figures we should not jump to the conclusion that the joint household has been disintegrating. A proper interpretation of these figures requires us to understand two facts. One, on an average a larger number of people live in joint households than in nuclear households. Thus, although joint households constituted 45.98 per cent, many more people lived in them compared to people living in nuclear households. Two, there is what sociologists call the developmental cycle of the household. To put it roughly, there is a cycle of development from the nuclear to the joint household and from the latter to the former. Therefore, at any point of time there are bound to be nuclear as well as joint households in the society. Unfortunately, social scientists have not yet worked out the normal distribution of nuclear and joint households in the country. All the same, 45.98 per cent joint households in 1981 is not a low percentage at all.

The Census of 1981 has also provided data about the number of married couples in a household [see Table 3 and its discussion in Shah 1998:71-72]. Of the households containing one or more couples, 23.05 per cent households contained two or more couples. What is more important, however, is the fact that about 40 per cent of married couples each lived with one or more other couples. Moreover, of the households containing one married couple each, a sizeable proportion would also contain one or more widowed members, such as the married man's widowed father, mother, brother, or sister. In my view, such households should be considered joint households. It would be a mistake to consider them as nuclear, as is frequently done in the literature on the family. All in all, this data on couples indicates a high level of joint household living.

Life expectancy has been increasing in modern India, providing greater chances than before for development of joint households, thus contributing significantly to their larger numbers. Moreover, according to a publication of the Census of India [Sharma and Xenos 1992:22-23] not only has the proportion of the aged population (60 years and above) increased from 5.50 in 1951 to 6.42 in 1981, but the ratio of the number of aged persons to the number of children, called the index of aging, has also increased from 13.7 for every 100 children in 1961 to 16.2 in 1981. In other words, it is the older people rather than children who have contributed to the increasing average size of the household. Most of these old people must be living in joint households, thus contributing to the increasing proportion of joint households in the country.

Economic development of the country after 1947 has increased the possibility of accumulating household assets, such as substantial houses, furniture, utensils, vehicles, etc, providing a better economic base than before for development of joint households.

Finally, sociological and social anthropological studies all over India suggest a wider spread of Sanskritic values, including that of emphasis on joint households, among lower castes and classes and tribal groups, i e, in the majority of Indian society.

All evidence at our disposal thus points to the conclusion that, as far as the living arrangement for the elderly is concerned, many more of them are living in joint households with their one or more married sons or some other relatives today than about 50 years ago. The only exception to this unorthodox conclusion seems to be the westernised, professional, middle class in urban centres among whom the emphasis on joint household life appears to be declining. Unfortunately, we do not have statistical evidence about households in this section of society, but circumstantial evidence seems to be unmistakable.

When I say that many more of the elderly people are now living in joint households than before, I do not wish to suggest that all elderly people now live in joint households. Indeed, many elderly people live in single-member and husband-wife households. We have to take into account what sociologists call the developmental cycle of the household in understanding family life, including the life of the elderly. Accordingly, there are bound to be some elderly people living in single-member or husband-wife households at any time in the society. We do not know whether their proportion in the society as a whole has increased or not, but their proportion seems to have increased in the professional, middle class in urban areas. This is a vulnerable section of the elderly. What seems to have aggravated their living conditions is the absence of strong neighbourhood relationships in large, modern cities compared to prevalence of such relationships in villages, small towns, and even old sectors of large towns. These elderly persons are isolated not only from their kin but also from their neighbours. This makes their life doubly miserable.

When I say that more elderly people live in joint households now than about 50 years ago, I do not wish to suggest that their quality of life in these households is better now than before. It is necessary to distinguish between the living arrangement of an elderly person in a joint household and his or her quality of life – assured food, nutrition, medical care, company, etc – in this household, leading to an overall satisfaction with it. While the living arrangement is a visible thing and can be easily observed and measured, satisfaction with this arrangement is not easily observable. The latter depends a great deal on the nature of inter-personal relations in the household which covers attitudes, emotions and sentiments. We do not have deep and rigorous studies of these relations.

In the absence of such studies we have to depend on our personal and general observations and on insights derived from a few micro-studies.

In popular discussions of the Indian family there is a tendency to glorify the past. The elderly people in particular tend to provide an idyllic picture of it. Frequently it is assumed that joint households were free from tensions and conflicts in the past. Consequently there is a tendency to paint a dismal and alarming picture of the present, as if every thing is falling apart. I think a more realistic appraisal of both past and present is required. Tensions and conflicts always exist in joint households in the past. They are not a recent development. Only their nature and intensity seem to have changed. Not only that, people are also making serious attempts to deal with them. It seems to me that a process of adjustment has been going on between the older and the younger generation in their family life in modern times, and we should try to understand this process.

A definite change has been taking place, for example, in the attitude of the older generation towards their married daughters. Traditionally, particularly in north India, the parents refused not only to stay but even to accept food and water in their married daughter's home. Normally there were very few occasions for parents to visit their daughter's home. However, as I have widely observed in Gujarat, if for some reason the parents had to visit their daughter's home, they would first go to the home of one of her neighbours, relatives or friends in the village or town, place their baggage there, and take water, tea and food there. They would go to the daughter's home afterwards. If for some reason they had to go to their daughter's home first, the daughter would offer them water or tea borrowed from her neighbour. If they had to stay overnight, they would stay any where else but not in the daughter's home. Before commencing the return journey they would give a substantial gift to her and her children. The fundamental idea guiding this behaviour was 'kanyadan'. The parents believed that a daughter at her marriage was given away as gift to her husband and his family, and therefore nothing could be received in return from her. In this ideology there was no scope for even a disabled or destitute old father or mother to shift to live in the daughter's home, however much she might want to take care of him or her at this stage of life.

All this is now changing, not only in towns but even in many villages. Parents are, of course, even now reluctant to shift to live in their daughter's home. But if the worse comes to the worst, they do not mind shifting. Nowadays we find many daughters taking care of their old father or mother.

The demographic situation is also changing, particularly in the upper and middle classes. Since these classes have accepted the small family norm – some have accepted even one-child norm – there are greater chances now than before of emergence of nuclear families of parents and one daughter. These classes have also developed a liberal attitude towards daughters, such that they are not overly unhappy for not having a son. When the daughter moves to her husband's home on marriage, the parents are left alone. As long as both of them are alive they support one another in old age. However, when one of them passes away, the remaining parent, is forced to consider the question of shifting to the daughter's home. Changes in Hindu Law have also helped transmission of parent's property to the daughter rather than to the father's patri-kin, so that she is not unduly burdened with expenses of looking after the old and disabled parent.

As regards sons, because of the small family norm in the upper and middle classes, usually the parents have only one or two sons. The new occupational structure usually forces each of these sons to leave the parental home and settle in another city in the country or abroad. Sometimes all the sons, including even the only son, are forced to move away from the parental home. In this situation the parents and sons work out a visiting arrangement. However, the visiting arrangement may become infrequent or even break down. The parents have then to live alone. As long as both of them are alive there is not a serious problem. But when one of them passes away, a crisis arises. The sons and their wives may try their best to accommodate the surviving parent, but sometimes this does not work out to everybody's satisfaction, and the parent is left alone. I have already mentioned how the life of such an elderly person becomes miserable in modern large cities without congenial neighbourhood relationships.

In the traditional set up, if an old man did not have a son to support him, he was often welcomed by one of his brothers to join him in his household. This is becoming less and less frequent, particularly in cities, partly because of the small family norm – frequently there are no brothers – and partly because of the shrinking range of joint family ties. In the case of a woman without a son, usually she was welcomed to rejoin one of her brothers. Nowadays, however, either she has no brother or, if she has one, her return to his home is becoming less and less frequent. If a daughter-in-a-law is reluctant to take care of her parents-in-law, how does one expect her to take care of her sister-in-law?

The increasing age at marriage has played a major role in aggravating tensions in joint households. In the case of child marriage the daugher used to begin her adjustment in the conjugal home at an early age when her habits, tastes and ideas were still in the formative stage, and therefore her eventual integration in the joint household was relatively easier. Nowadays, however, she enters her conjugal home when her adult personality is almost all set. She may also bring with her strong ideas of individualism. Consequently, her adjustment with her parents-in-law becomes difficult.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to recognise that the attitudes of the older generation towards the younger generation are also changing. It is particularly noticeable that the older generation is much less authoritarian now than before. Gradually a spirit of accommodation and adjustment with the younger generation is spreading in the older generation.

An important aspect of parent-child relationship in the urban professional class is that usually parents make heavy emotional and material investment in bringing up children, particularly sons. Many middle class parents sacrifice a lot for the child's career. This investment begins with putting the child in a nursery school and goes on increasing till the child gets settled in his or her profession, say, that of a doctor, engineer, technologist, business executive, chartered accountant, or government officer. Most sons and daughters reciprocate positively towards parents and repay the investment, as it were, in later phases of life.

The most critical test of this relationship comes when parents become old and disabled. As mentioned earlier, the problem is not acute as long as both the parents are alive. But it becomes acute when on of them passes away, and the other is struck by some serious ailment requiring constant nursing. In this situation, while the son's willingness to look after the parent is usually not in doubt, the daughter-in-law's willingness to co-operate is questionable. Most daughters-in-law willy-nilly come round. One thought plays a sobering role with them: "If I do not take care of my parents-in-law, my brother's wife will do the same to my parents."

I have described above various situations in which elderly persons in upper and middle classes in urban areas are left alone – not so much the old couples but widowed, divorced, and never married single elderly persons, as mentioned earlier. The increasing numbers of such elderly persons are a challenge to modern India, requiring all of us to place our heads together to find solutions. It seems to me there is no one sure solution. Different strategies need to be adopted in different situations. The ideal solution is to relocate the old persons in a suitable household. The government may offer a tax incentive or a grant to a household accepting him or her. However, care should be taken to see that such an incentive is not misused or abused.

Is the home for the aged a good solution? We have to recognise in this regard the differences between such homes set up by castes and religious groups on the one hand and by the government on the other. Some castes and sects have set up homes for their aged in pilgrim centres, thus giving a new form to the ancient idea of old persons spending the rest of their life in pilgrim centres. The community institutions seem to provide a more congenial environment than the government institutions. We may recall that our country does not have a very good record of running government institutions, apart from the fact that the government does not have sufficient money for setting them up. In any case, the homes for the aged do not offer a solution to the problem of the multitudes of aged people in the country.

Old age pensions provided by the government are frequently cited as a solution to the problem of the elderly. Similarly, arguments are made in favour of legislation to force the members of the elderly person's family to pay maintenance expenses to the elderly. Surely, monetary help is helpful. But it would be a grave mistake to view the problems of the elderly in purely monetary terms. Even if an elderly person has sufficient money but is abandoned by the family and has to live an isolated existence, particularly in inhuman urban neighbourhoods, his or her life is likely to be miserable.

It is hardly necessary to emphasise that the future well-being of the multitudes of the elderly in India lies in their remaining in the joint household. One may call it joint family if one likes, but it must be clearly understood to mean joint household. This household organisation is obviously undergoing stresses and strains in modern times. However, I have strong impression that it is also undergoing a process of adjustment so that it can survive. This process of adjustment should be encouraged by education and well informed public debate and discussion. Both the older and the younger generation need to arrive at a new understanding, for which both need a new socialisation. This is a matter of society and culture, of ideas and attitudes, not of law and force. While individual freedom should be valued, individualism as a cult does not seem to have a place in the ideas and aspirations of the vast majority of people in Indian society. Mindless, uncontrolled, rabid individualism which is often spread by the media in the younger generation these days is not likely to be conducive to the well-being of the elderly and the creation of a healthy society.

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affinity.* Can the same be said for Indian 155 foreigners among 593 killed (26 per