

# Changes in the Indian Family

## An Examination of Some Assumptions

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The belief that large and joint households were widely prevalent in pre-British India is probably false. The average size of the household in the early decades of the 19th century was more or less the same as it is now.

The assumption of large households in the past has been based on confusion between the household, as a residential unity of patri-kin and their wives, and the family, conceived as an ideal or a legal and emotional entity. Such residential unity was greater in towns than in villages, and in the higher and Sanskritised castes than among others.

It is possible that Sanskritisation of lower castes and Adivasi tribes tends to increase and Westernisation to diminish the size of, and the number of relationships in, a household.

The author pleads against the assumption that there has been an inevitable trend from large and complex to small and simple households. There is need to have a fresh look at the problems of the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on the household.

"FROM joint family to elementary (or nuclear or individual) family". This has been a slogan to summarise changes in the family in India during modern times. Recently, some sociologists have pointed out that the change implied by the slogan is not taking place. What is emerging, they say, is not the elementary family but a new form of the joint family. Even these sociologists, however, do not question the correctness of describing the traditional family system of India as the joint family system. This belief about the traditional Indian family subsumes a set of some other beliefs:

(a) traditional India was village India, and the joint family was therefore a characteristic of village India;

(b) contrari-wise, urban areas are new and characterised by the elementary family;

(c) urbanisation, therefore, leads to disintegration of the joint family.

Some sociologists have pointed out that urbanisation does not lead to disintegration but only to transformation of the joint family. They do not, however, question the belief that the joint family was always a characteristic of village India. This paper attempts to examine these beliefs about the traditional Indian family because a proper understanding of social change requires a proper understanding of the past. It is concerned with the beliefs about the traditional family only insofar as they refer to its household aspect. It has now become commonplace in

sociology and social anthropology to distinguish between 'household' and 'family'. In common English parlance the word 'family' has several different meanings, including 'household'; the common Indian word for the family, viz, kutumb, has likewise several different meanings but, for the sake of technical analysis, 'household' should be distinguished from the other referents of 'family'. For example, two brothers and their wives and children may live in two separate households, but they may be bound by a number of relationships of many kinds. For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to consider such inter-household relationships as distinct from relationships within the household. Although the aim of the study of the family should be to study it in all its aspects, a beginning has to be made with the study of the household. An examination of ideas about the past of the Indian household is, therefore, crucial in a comprehensive study of changes in the Indian family.

### II

If we take a census of households in any section of Indian society — a village, town, or caste — and examine their numerical and kinship composition, we find a number of types of composition, ranging from the most simple single-member household to a very complex household of many members. A 'simple' household is composed of a complete elementary family or a part of an elementary family. A 'complex' or

'joint' household is composed of two or more elementary families, or of parts of two or more elementary families, or of one elementary family and parts of one or more other elementary families<sup>1</sup>.

### Types of Composition

One of the first tasks in an analysis of households is to formulate the types of composition. The structure of the household becomes more complex as more categories of relatives are included. In a one-member household there is no relationship; in a two-member household there is one relationship; but beyond this the addition of one relative means an addition of more than one relationship. For example, the addition of a son's wife to a household of father, mother and son, means the addition of relationships not only between the son and his wife but also between father-in-law and daughter-in-law and between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Addition of relationships tends to create conflict between roles. For example, the conflict between a man's loyalty to his wife and loyalty to his parents is proverbial. Each person in a household is involved in a complex pattern of behaviour with every other member. Everyone in a household has his own likes and dislikes, habits, tastes and idiosyncracies. Life in a household is marked by sentiments and emotions, and co-operation as well as conflict. Therefore, if our aim is to understand household life in its entirety, the formulation of types of

household composition should take into account all the various members of a household. After the types have been formulated, it is necessary to examine the frequencies of households of various types.

Classification of households according to types of composition is not, however, an end in itself. The types are not discrete and haphazard but are interrelated in a developmental process. This process may be in progression or in regression. Progressive development of a household takes place due to increase in membership, mainly by birth and marriage, while regressive development takes place due to decrease in membership, mainly by marriage, death and partition. It may be mentioned in passing that there is always some pattern in the developmental process, but it is not cyclical in nature as considered by Fortes and his associates.<sup>2</sup>

### Principles of Aggregation

One of the determinants of the developmental process is a set of explicitly stated rules or norms governing the formation of households. In most sections of Indian society, the bride after marriage leaves her parental home and goes to live in her conjugal home. A son and his wife are required not only to start their married life in his parental home but also to continue to live there afterwards. This norm has a number of implications. For instance, if a man has more than one son, each of the junior sons and his wife will have to live not only with his parents but also with his senior brothers and their wives and children. In fact, frequently people state that a man and his wife should live with his brothers and their wives. Furthermore, they say that brothers and their wives should live together not only during the lifetime of the (brothers') parents but also after their death, and the brothers' sons and their wives should also live in the same household. Sometimes the norm is extended still further.

Taking all these norms together, the central idea is that while female patrilineal descendants of a male ancestor go away to live with their husbands, the male patrilineal descendants and their wives should live

together. The wives should be so completely incorporated into their husbands' kin-group that they should not be divorced and that even after their husbands' death they should stay on in the same household. Unmarried children should be with their parents; in the event of divorce or death of their mother, they should stay with their father or his male patri-kin. I would call the central idea behind these norms briefly the principle of residential unity of patri-kin and their wives. It is necessary to clarify that this principle is normative in nature, and that there are always deviations from it as in the case of all norms. The measurement of conformity to and deviation from the principle is therefore, an important problem of inquiry.

### Variations from Norms

While the principle is common to almost the entire Hindu society, there are differences between different sections of the society in the extent to which it is observed. First of all, there are differences in the maximum extent to which the developmental process goes in progression along the path set by the principle. For example, in a Gujarat village I have studied, there is no case of two or more married brothers living in a single household after the death of their parents. In a nearby village, on the other hand, there is a considerable number of households of this type. Such differences in the maximum extent may also exist between villages and towns, between one caste and another caste, and between one region and another region.

Secondly, while the maximum extent of the developmental process may be the same in two sections of the society, there may be differences in the frequencies of the cases in which the norm is observed within this extent. For example, in the Gujarat village just cited, only about 5 per cent of the total number of households are composed of one or both parents and two or more married sons and their wives and children, while 19 per cent of the households are composed of one or both parents and one married son. This is mainly due to the fact that married sons tend to live separately from

parents even before the death of parents. Out of 41 cases of parents having two or more married sons, only in 12 cases (29.26 per cent) all the sons live with the parents in a single household, while in 29 cases (70.73 per cent) all or some of the sons live in separate households (in the village itself). And out of 50 cases of parents having one married son each, in 38 cases (76 per cent) the parents and the son form a joint household, while in 12 cases (24 per cent) the parents and the son live in separate households.

One of the factors affecting the degree of extension of the principle of residential unity of patri-kin and their wives appears to be the degree of Sanskritisation of a caste. This is due to the great emphasis which the Hindu scriptures lay on the high degree of observance of this principle. The ritually higher castes, who are under the greater impact of the scriptures, tend to have a higher degree of extension of the principle. Another factor affecting the degree of extension of the principle appears to be the institution of cross-cousin and uncle-niece marriages.

### Family Beyond Household

Whatever be the maximum extent to which the principle goes in progression in a particular section of the society, it is important to note that the processes of progressive and regressive developments go on simultaneously in the society taken as a whole. One household may be undergoing progression, another may be undergoing regression. As a result, there are always households in the society which are small and simple in composition, along with households which are large and complex in composition.

When a complex household, say, of two or more married brothers, is partitioned, two or more separate households come into existence, but at the same time a number of other relationships continue to operate. They would co-operate in economic pursuits, hold and manage property jointly, help each other on many occasions, celebrate festivals, rituals and ceremonies jointly, and so on. This is also a normal process, which highlights the importance of tech-

nical distinction between 'household' and 'family' mentioned at the outset. Thus, two or more households may be separate but they may constitute one family.

### III

For a long time, students of the Indian family have used ancient Indian literature for information about its past. This information is of two main kinds: (a) pertaining to the property aspect of the family, which is generally included in the study of Hindu Law, and (b) pertaining to certain family rituals, such as the Shradha.<sup>3</sup>

#### Definition of Joint Family

The Hindu legal text *Mitaksara* first defines a coparcenary: it comprises only those males who are entitled by birth to an interest in the joint or coparcenary property, i.e., a person himself and his sons, son's sons, and son's grandsons. As each son acquires by birth an interest in coparcenary property, even a father and his unmarried son are sufficient to constitute a coparcenary. Under the *Dayabhaga*, there is no coparcenary between a man and his son(s), married or unmarried, even though they may be living in a single household. The legal definition of the joint family is based on that of the coparcenary: it consists of all males included in the coparcenary, plus their wives and unmarried daughters. The latter are not coparceners but have only a right to maintenance.

The main points here are two: (i) The legal definition of the joint family is a highly specialised one and has nothing to do with the sociological distinction between elementary family and joint family. A joint family of the legal conception can exist even within an elementary family of the sociological conception. For example, a father and an unmarried son, or a widow and her unmarried son, are sufficient to constitute a joint family according to law. (ii) The law does not lay down the rule that the joint family of the legal conception should always be a joint household. A son may live separately from his father, and one brother from another, but they continue to be members of their res-

pective joint property group. In brief, the law is concerned primarily with the rights of constituting a property-holding group and of maintenance therefrom, but not with the constitution of the household group.

In the sacred texts (Shastras), the question as to who should hold and inherit property is discussed usually in relation to the question as to who should perform the shradha ritual for whom. In other words, the legal definition of the constitution of the joint family tends to coincide with and is sanctioned by the definition of the circle of persons required to perform the Shradha. This circle of persons need not live in a single household, just as the persons constituting the joint property group need not live in a single household. It seems to me that it was because of the coincidence of the legal and the ritual definitions of the joint family that the definition given in the Shastras came to be accepted as the general definition of the Hindu joint family. I shall call it the Indological definition. As most of the early studies were carried out by Indologists (including historians, Sanskritists, and Orientalists) on the basis of sacred literature, and as both Indologists and lawyers were dominant in the academic field in India, the Indological idea of the joint family carried a lot of weight and gained popularity.

The Indological-cum-legal material on the Indian family was used by Henry Maine in his general theory of the evolution of the family. He compared and contrasted the joint family of India with the individual family of the West, and considered the latter as later in evolution than the former. He thus laid the foundation of the sociological study of the Indian family, and through him the Indological view of the Indian family came to be accepted in sociology.

I just now pointed out the fact that the Indological definition is not concerned primarily with the composition of the household. Insofar as it was concerned with the household, it laid down only the definition of the ideal household, or in my terms, only the maximum ex-

tent of progression of the developmental process of households. The Indological literature does not provide any information on the various types of households, nor on the frequency of households of each type. Obviously there was no census of households, in any section of Hindu society, at any period of time. Furthermore, the literature provides information more about the Brahmins and a few other higher castes whose property relations and rituals were governed by the sacred texts. With regard to the household also, the ideal that the texts emphasised was high — a household of four generations<sup>4</sup> — and it seems only the higher castes tried to emulate the ideal to a higher degree. The texts do not provide any idea of differences in the family life of different sections of the society.<sup>5</sup>

### IV

We begin to get more precise data on the household only with the beginning of the British administration in India. The Office of the Census Commissioner of India has planned to publish a series of volumes on population estimates for the period from the 18th century to 1871 on the basis of censuses conducted in different parts of India during the period. The first volume in this series, dealing with the decade 1820-30, was published recently.<sup>6</sup> It seems to me that it will be extremely useful if attempts are made to find and then analyse the original schedules of all these censuses. My experience in Gujarat indicates that such attempts are likely to be fruitful. During my search for sources for the study of social history of villages in central Gujarat, I found in the taluka headquarters the original schedules of a census carried out by Captain Cruikshank and his associates,<sup>7</sup> the same schedules that he used in compiling general reports on different parts of Gujarat, which have in turn been used by the Bhattacharyas in their volume on population estimates for 1820-30 mentioned above. In this census of Gujarat, a Census Register was prepared for every village, in which were listed the names of heads of households in the village according to their religion and caste, and against each name were



given the following details: (i) houses and huts, (ii) men, (iii) women, (iv) servants and slaves, and (v) total number of persons.

### Households in Gujarat

I have made a detailed analysis of the 1820-30 census data on the household composition in a Gujarat village.<sup>8</sup> It shows (a) that the average size of the household was 4.5, and (b) that progressive development of households rarely, if ever, went beyond the phase of co-residence of two or more married sons during the lifetime of their parents. It is significant that census data of a village in Maharashtra of the same period, which Professor Ghurye has presented in his book "After a Century and a Quarter",<sup>9</sup> shows the same average size of the household as in the Gujarat village. The early nineteenth century data, thus, indicate that we cannot start the study of changes in the family in India with the assumption that villagers in traditional India always lived in large and complex households of three or four generations. We need a more realistic base line, and the early nineteenth century census data are a very useful source for reconstructing such a base line.

As regards differences in the family between rural and urban areas also, it is important to keep in view the position at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The early nineteenth century census data indicate that there was a higher proportion of the population of higher and more Sanskritised castes in towns than in villages. The bulk of the population in villages consisted of lower and less Sanskritised castes. If this point is related to my earlier point that the higher castes were under the greater impact of scriptures and there was, therefore, a higher degree of observance of the principle of residential unity of patri-kin and their wives among higher castes, it follows that there was a higher degree of observance of this principle in towns than in villages. The reality was, thus, quite the reverse of the widely prevalent belief that there was a greater emphasis on joint households (i.e., on the principle of residential unity of patri-kin and their wives) in villages than in

towns in traditional India.

### V

Although the censuses upto 1871 had certain obvious drawbacks — they covered only small areas in the country, and even within a small area the census was not taken simultaneously in all the villages and towns — it is remarkable that they collected and recorded a great deal of information of demographic and sociological value. The later censuses covered wider areas and became uniform in techniques, terminology and classification, but there was retrogression in the case of information concerning the household. In all the censuses from 1867 upto 1941, the distinction between 'household', 'house' and 'building' was not followed uniformly in all the Provinces and States and sometimes even in all the parts of a single Province or State, and hardly any attempt was made to collect information either on the kinship or on the numerical composition of households. Nevertheless, even the meagre information they provided is highly suggestive.

### False Belief

All of them show that the average size of the household was rather low, between 4.5 and 5. E A Gait, the Census Commissioner for 1911, stated the position very succinctly: "the average population per house is 4.9 or much the same as in European countries. In the British Isles it ranges from 4.8 in Scotland to 5.2 in England and Wales."<sup>10</sup> This suggests that the people in India lived mostly in small and simple households. It is noteworthy, however, that almost all the census officials interpreted their figures unrealistically. They assumed that Indians in pre-British days always lived in large households, and therefore, they concluded from their figures that the traditional household system was disintegrating due to modernisation. The assumption about the past was a great obstacle in a realistic interpretation of the figures before them.

In a recent paper, Henry Orenstein<sup>11</sup> has used the census data to examine the usual general idea about changes in the Indian household. He has posed the problem as follows: If the widespread belief that the

modern processes of industrialisation, Westernisation, etc., of traditional societies such as India lead to smaller households, then the increasing industrialisation, Westernisation, etc., should be reflected in a decreasing average size of the household. He presents figures to show that the average size of the household has not only not decreased from the 1867 to the 1951 census, but there has been on the contrary a slight tendency — very slight indeed — towards increase. This suggests that the modern processes of industrialisation, Westernisation, etc., have not brought about the so-called disintegration of large and joint households. Orenstein conjectures, I think quite rightly, that the belief about the wide prevalence of large and joint households in pre-British India is false.

### VI

During the last thirty years or so, professional sociologists and social anthropologists have studied the problem of changes in the family in India. Some of these studies are concerned only with the household and some with the household as well as other aspects of the family. I would refrain from commenting here upon those studies which are not concerned with the household, as well as upon those studies of the household which are not concerned with the problem of change.<sup>12</sup> As far as the studies of changes in the household are concerned, I submit that most of them have suffered from the assumptions I have examined in this paper. It seems to me that we need a new and more sophisticated framework for our study.

First of all, we have to distinguish the normal developmental process from change. This is a difficult task, but we have to face it. Studies of the early nineteenth century data on the household seem to me to be very necessary for this purpose.

Secondly, there is no point in postulating a single line of change for the entire Indian society. I suggest that it would be profitable to bring into the study of the household Srinivas's ideas on Sanskritisation and Westernisation. In this context it is worthwhile to recall the slight increase in the average size of the household indi-

cated by Orenstein. It is possible that this increase may be due to some demographic factor. Orenstein himself has suggested that it may be due to a rise in the average number of children or in the average number of adults per household. (If the latter is true, it strengthens the argument in favour of an increasing overall emphasis on large and joint households.) Notwithstanding the influence of demographic factors, it seems worth inquiring whether the Sanskritisation of lower castes and Adivasi tribes that has been going on on a massive scale in the country has contributed anything to an overall greater emphasis on the principle of residential unity of patri-kin and their wives. It cannot be denied that Westernisation of the higher castes has contributed to a lesser emphasis on the principle, but the countervailing influence of Sanskritisation might have led to an overall tendency in favour of greater emphasis on it. What I plead is that let us not assume that there has been an inevitable trend from large and complex (or joint) to small and simple households.

Finally, we need to have a fresh look at the problem of the impact of industrialisation and urbanisation on the household. It has already been pointed out that the situation in the past was possibly quite the reverse of what we have been assuming it to be. That is to say, there was greater emphasis on large and joint households in towns than in villages. Migration of rural people to towns, therefore, does not necessarily mean migration from a social environment of large and joint households to that of small and simple households. It seems to me that the study of the long-established population of older towns and cities is extremely important. I have in mind for example the walled cities of Delhi, Agra and Ahmedabad, certain sections of the population of even Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, and the large number of small towns. We should also examine the extent to which migrants to a town tend to be its permanent residents, and whether they practise the old norms when they are permanently settled. The whole question of relation between migration and the

household in India seems to be complicated. In any case, we begin to understand it better if we get rid of the old established assumptions.<sup>13</sup>

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The terms 'simple household' and 'complex household' are not discussed here in detail for want of space. However, it may be noted that (i) 'elementary family' is not the same as 'simple household'; actually, a household composed of a complete elementary family is only one of the several types of 'simple households'; and (ii) 'joint household' is only a convenient alternative of 'complex household'. The background for discarding the usual dichotomy of elementary and joint family is provided in my paper "Basic Terms and Concepts in the Study of Family in India", "Indian Economic and Social History Review", Vol 1, No 3, January-March 1964, pp 1-36. I have dealt with most of the points of this paper at length in my forthcoming book on the family in India.
- <sup>2</sup> See Jack Goody (ed), "The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1958.
- <sup>3</sup> For a fuller discussion of this literature as well as for citations, see my paper, op cit, pp 10-14.
- <sup>4</sup> The definition of the household composition on the basis of generations is also confusing. For a discussion of this point, see my paper, op cit, pp 5-6.
- <sup>5</sup> The Indological literature is wider than the literature I have considered here, but I doubt if the other literature also provides the kind of data the sociologist needs for the study of the household.
- <sup>6</sup> D Bhattacharya and B Bhattacharya (eds), Census of India 1961, Report on the Population Estimates of India (1820-30), Office of Registrar General, Delhi, 1965.
- <sup>7</sup> For a detailed description of these records, see A M Shah, R G Shroff, and A R Shah, "Early Nineteenth Century Village Records in Gujarat", in Tapan Raychaudhuri (ed), "Contributions in Indian Economic History", Vol II, Firma K L Mukhopadhyaya, Calcutta, 1963, pp 89-100.
- <sup>8</sup> See my Ph D dissertation "Social Structure and Change in a Gujarat Village", in the library of the University of Baroda, Baroda, 1964, pp 76-86.

- <sup>9</sup> Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1960, p 14.
- <sup>10</sup> "Census of India 1911", Vol 1 (India), Part I (Report), Government Printing, Calcutta, p 47.
- <sup>11</sup> "The Recent History of the Extended Family in India", "Social Problems", Vol 8, No 4, Spring 1961, pp 41-50.
- <sup>12</sup> I have dealt with the terminological and conceptual aspects of some of the other studies in my paper, op cit, and my forthcoming book on the Indian family includes a rather lengthy review of the literature on the subject.
- <sup>13</sup> I thank all those who commented upon my paper at the seminar on "Trends of Socio-economic Change in India—1871-1961", Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla; a seminar in the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi; and a panel discussion on "Industrialisation and Its Social Consequences: The Family", Conference of Indian Sociologists—1967, Bombay. I thank Dr R D Sanwal for his comments on the penultimate draft of the paper.

### Research Development

THE National Research Development Corporation claims in its annual report for 1966-67 that during the year the country saved foreign exchange worth Rs 3.20 crores as a result of commercial exploitation of various processes licensed by the Corporation. The value of production based on use of these processes was Rs 4 crores.

During the year 62 inventions were reported for development by 17 research institutes bringing the total number of inventions upto March 31, 1967 to 808. Of these, 287 were dropped or withdrawn leaving 521 effective inventions in hand. Upto March 31, 1967, of 444 licenses negotiated, 126 had expired, leaving 318 effective licenses in force.

The Corporation showed a deficit of Rs 3.39 lakhs in 1966-67 as against Rs 5.75 lakhs in the previous year. The Corporation's accumulated deficit upto the end of 1966-67 was Rs 30.74 lakhs. Against this cumulative deficit, disbursements by the Corporation to research organisations upto March 31, 1967 amounted to Rs 31.75 lakhs and expenditure on research development projects to Rs 15.89 lakhs.