

Household Versus Family

The major question that anyone seems to want to ask of the Indian Family is that is the joint family disintegrating? Two sociologists A.M Shah and Pauline Kolenda working independently along rather similar lines have contributed significantly to clarify the conceptual issues involved in assessing in the composition of the Indian family. In *The Family in India* (1998) and in his early monograph on *The Household Dimension of the Family in India* (1973) A.M Shah had sought to spell out the features of what he considered a properly 'sociological' approach to the Indian family. Shah's clarification has two distinct aspects. First following M.N Srinivas's emphasis on field based as against text based approaches to the study of Indian society, he stressed the importance of empirical observations of kinship behaviour (in the field) as the proper basis of sociological generalization. Second, in line with current sociological usage, Shah recommended that the object of study should be what he called the 'household dimension of the family'. He defined household as strictly commensal and co residential group.

Pauline Kolenda in her pioneering 'Region, Caste and Family Structure: A Comparative Study of the Indian Joint Family' proposed a twelve type classificatory scheme. The scheme has proved useful for highlighting aspects of household composition that tend to be obscured in the dichotomous classification of households into either joint/extended or nuclear/elementary types.

The empirical research that has been conducted on patterns of household composition and change in India can be summed up in the following way-

- a) The joint household is rarely the statistically predominant form of household; nuclear households are predominantly more numerous. However, even with the majority of households being nuclear in composition, the majority of persons in a population might still reside in joint or supplemented nuclear families.
- 2) Overall the proportion of joint over nuclear households does not appear to be decreasing. The average size of the household has actually been increasing over the last century and a half and while there is no direct correlation between household size and household type, there is every likelihood that proportions of joint households have increasing as well.
- 3) Despite the predominance of nuclear households many or most people would experience several different types of households. Households like individuals have a 'life cycle' of development as individual life courses web in complex ways with trajectories of household expansion, fission and replacement, and with wider socio economic forces.
- 4) A 'stem family' form may be an emerging pattern of family organization and an important social mechanism for care of the elderly.
- 5) Rural households tend on average to be larger than urban households, parallelly joint households are more numerous in rural than urban areas. However it would be premature to accept these findings as supporting the proposition that urbanization leads to nuclearization.
- 6) There appear to be significant regional differences in the prevalence of joint households. Pauline Kolenda had shown that the joint household is strongest through a contiguous belt across north India, and weakest in South India. This mapping coincides in its broad outlines with the distinctions

that have been made between north and south Indian kinship systems centring around marriage practices. In sum, Kolenda's work suggested that regional patterns may be more consistent than some of the other factors that have been hypothesized to correlate with preference for joint or nuclear households, for instance caste status or landownership.

7) Notwithstanding nuclear household residence, there is strong generalized commitment to joint family values and norms of kinship behaviour. While urban nuclear families may be relatively isolated from close kin, perhaps translating neighbourhood relations into a kinship idiom instead, in the village context individual households may well live under the same roof as close kin or in adjacent houses.

Uberoi's critique of the Household dimension of family: Privileging the concept of 'household' over that of 'family' has no doubt introduced a precision in scholarly discussion on the Indian family and has enabled more rigorous comparative studies of household across cultures. At the same time the exercise has also been self limiting. The focus has been largely restricted to quantitative or morphological aspects of household form/composition at the expense of the more ineffable (indescribable) dimensions of family life and relationships. It has excluded address to the other reality of the family as a property sharing or ritual unit distinct from the strictly co resident or commensal group, as well as investigation of the economics of the household as a unit of production, distribution and consumption. Overemphasis on the household does not allow speculation on the role of the family in the organization of human reproduction, in the socialization of citizens, or in the provision of welfare. Time has now come to begin more broad based reconstruction of the field of Indian family and kinship studies.