the economic weekly

September 21, 1957

Joint Family System—Its Present and Future
R Datta Choudhury

THE future of the joint family system in India has been a subject of much speculation in recent years; pronouncements ranging from its gradual decay to its slowly regaining fresh strength and vigour have equally forcefully been made by contending schools of thought. But neither side has supported its pronouncements on the trends in the joint family system with sufficient evidence. Before the last Census, though an effort was made to assess the position of the joint family, no systematic information was collected with that end in view. The observations had, therefore, to be made partly on the basis of directly relevant facts as they came to notice and partly on the basis of information collected for other purposes. In the 1951 Census an attempt at systematic collection of relevant statistics was made in all the States, excepting West Bengal, and the various Census Commissioners in their reports tried to assess the position of the joint family in their respective States.

Size of the Family

The average size of a family in India works out to between 4 and 5 persons. In 100 rural families there are about 491 persons, while the corresponding figure for urban areas is about 471 persons. In the different Census zones of India the distribution of the size of rural families (average number of persons per 100 rural households) is: Central India—473; North-West India 511; North India—511; South India 483; and West India 500.

Except in South India, the size of urban households in every zone is smaller than that of rural households. In South India there is practically no difference between the sizes of rural and urban households. This is also reflected in the figures for the three States shown in Table I. Of these three States, Uttar Pradesh has the largest size of family and Madras the lowest. But in the Punjab region the average size of a family in most of the districts exceeds five members. In the case of West Bengal these figures are not comparable because the State adopted a different definition of 'house' and 'household' in the 1951 census. For this reason the Registrar General in his all-India review of the Census figures has left out Western Bengal. However, West Bengal's figures per Census 'house' are roughly comparable with the figures of 'households' of other States. The average number of persons per census house in West Bengal ranges between 5.12 in Malda and 4.21 in Calcutta. It is significant that as in the case of Madras there is no substantial difference between the sizes of rural and urban households in West Bengal, and in many districts the latter is significantly larger; this is in sharp contrast with the all-India figures which show almost a uniformly bigger size of rural families than of the urban.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Whole</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U P</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombay</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>4.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madras</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>4.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The West Bengal Census Commissioner has explained this phenomenon by saying that many of the rural households have left their rural homes with their families to live in towns and cities; that in many places the figure has been inflated by the number of refugee households most of whom are now settled in urban camps; and that the urban households tend to draw away more and more rural members by their greater facility to provide occupation to the residents. While it is difficult to say how far the above explanation is applicable it is almost certain that part at least of the explanation of the bigger size of urban households in West Bengal lies in the manner of Census count of houses and households in that State.

Definition of House

A 'house' was defined as a building or part of a building in which at least one commensal family lives together; but in the congested conditions of West Bengal there might be more than one family living in a single 'house' in which case the definition of a 'house' rested on the 'rock-bottom foundation' of a room. It is only to be expected that in this circumstance the average size of a household could not be ascertained, since two families living in a single room might be treated as a single 'house'. Nevertheless the trend in the average number of persons per census 'house' in West Bengal is significant for purposes of comparison.

The extent to which the size of an average family has varied over the past decades is difficult to determine in the absence of truly comparable figures for the different decades. For this reason the Registrar General refrained from such a comparison in his review of the all-India Census figures. But some of the State Census Commissioners have made such a comparison, for instance, the figures given by the U P Census Commissioner (see Table II). As these figures were not collected on a uniform basis they should be treated with reservation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Whole</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>4.54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>4.77</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>5.01</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>4.87</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It will be seen from the table how the size of an average family has fluctuated between 1911 and 1951. First, there was a fall in the decade ending 1921 and thereafter a continuous rise until it rose to 5.04 in 1941. Since then it has remained stationary. The Census Commissioner of U P accounts for these variations as follows:

"The population fell in the decade 1911-21 by 3.11 per cent and the number of households by 1.71 per cent, thereby causing a decrease in the size of household by 1.71 per cent. In the decade 1921-31 the population increased by 6.67 per cent, the number of households by 2.02 per cent, thereby causing an increase in the size of household by 4.56 per..."
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**Life Insurance Corporation of India**
cent. In the decade 1931-41 the population rose by 13.57 per cent, while the number of households increased by 7.62 per cent only, resulting in an increase of 5.33 per cent in the size of household.

Is Joint Family Breaking?

The changes in the relative size of an average family since 1911 do not establish the conclusion that there has been a tendency in U P for the joint family to "break up; on the contrary it might be permissible to draw the opposite conclusion, since there has been a steady rise in the size since 1921. The fall of the decade ending 1921 might be explained in different ways; such as, the defective count of the Census houses (many empty 'houses' were also counted as Census 'houses') and the influenza epidemic of 1919, in which many families were simply wiped out. In the case of West Bengal too a similar fall in the average size of a family was registered due to the same cause, viz, the influenza epidemic. It is probably significant that in the decade ending 1941 when the full effects of the economic crisis of the early 30's on the population came to be reflected, there was a rise in the size of families in urban areas where, however, the average size of a family has been consistently lower in other decades. This was the result of the large influx of population from rural to urban areas in search of work in times of acute economic distress.

Composition of the Family

It must be conceded that it is somewhat difficult to determine the trend in joint family from a study of the average size of a family. Various factors having no direct relation with the trend in joint family seem to influence the size of the family. Increase in birth and death rates, emigration and immigration and other factors may influence the size of a family. But to draw any conclusion as to the trend in joint family from a study of these figures which are influenced by indirect causes is not prudent. Probably the information regarding the composition of an average family may be more helpful for observing the trend in the joint family.

The joint family system is a variable concept. In the western countries where individualistic sentiment is very strong, the composition of an average family is made up of husband, wife and their children; where a variation occurs in this normal pattern by the addition of such members as the in-laws it is considered a 'calamity'. But in India it would be considered a normal pattern if a family were to include, besides the heads of households, such relatives as fathers-in-law, mothers-in-law, etc.; the social conscience would still revolt against anyone who protests against such addition. Thus the nature of the composition of an average family would indicate better the trend in the joint family in India.

In the 1951 Census, information on the composition of an average Indian family was collected for the first time; consequently, it could not be compared with such information in the past. Unfortunately, even the information that has now been collected is neither very exhaustive nor very accurate. For instance, under the heads 'male relatives' and 'female relatives' all the distant and near relations of the heads of households are lumped together; these do not give us the precise relationship of the relatives with the heads of households. It is well-known that in India due to custom and practice, it is usual to recognise one family member, such as the eldest brother or the father, as the head of the family, while for all practical purposes there might be more than one head of family in such cases, as for instance, when two brothers with independent incomes live together. It would be useful to have information on this type of relationship in order to determine the financial status of the joint family; but the Census figures of relatives in general do not afford us this type of information. Consequently, we can only guess as to how many Independent and dependent members there are in a family.

The average composition of 100 Indian households as given in the Census is shown in Table III. The number of male heads of households exceeds the figures of wives of households, because there are 19 widowers. The figure of female heads of households probably represents the number of widows who have become heads of households on the death of their husbands. One thing appears to be clear from these figures: polygamy among the Hindus is very rare. If polygamy was widespread the number of wives should have shown some tendency to exceed the numbers of male heads. Among the children of the heads of households the daughters form a lesser proportion than that of the sons because of the fact that they are given away in marriage. Of the sons, a large proportion live with their parents to an advanced age, probably because (a) the sons marry at an early age, and are unable to live on their own with their families, for a considerable period after their marriage and (b) a large proportion among them may be minors and dependents. Among the relatives, as might be expected, females outnumber males for the simple reason that a large number of them constats of daughters-in-law of the heads of households. Another reason is that female relatives such as widow sisters or aunts of the heads of households often come to live with them. Probably the figure of the male relatives indicates the number of unemployed relatives to be found in 100 households; where the head of households is other than the father, the figure of the relatives might include a brother who might be an earning member. To the extent, therefore, these figures conceal this type of members they could not be an indication of the number of unemployed dependents in a family.

The Trends

The average Indian family still includes a considerable number of both male and female relatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heads of Households</th>
<th>Wife of Heads of Households</th>
<th>Children of Heads of Households</th>
<th>Relatives of Heads of Households</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sons</td>
<td>Daughters</td>
<td>Male Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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about 24.6 persons in 100 households. The fact, therefore, indicates that the traditional Joint family still remains by and large, the most common characteristic of the Indian family life. The largest number of families are composed of several members besides the heads of households. Consequently the "large" type of households is still the most numerous. This would be revealed by a study of the proportion of four types of households among 100 households as given in the 1951 Census. (See Table IV).

It will be seen from Table IV that the 'medium' type of households forms the largest number of households both in the rural and in the urban areas, followed by 'small', 'large' and 'very large' types, in that order. If 'medium' type of households is also regarded as comprising a large family we might consider 'medium', 'large' and 'very large' households jointly. In that case it would be seen that the largest number of households is still of the joint family type. To this we must also add the circumstance that these figures are based on a sample, which recognisably resulted in the selection of fewer 'large' type of households than of the 'small' type. If therefore actual figures were known they would reveal a yet larger number of 'large' type of households, and this would further strengthen the conclusion that the 'large' type of households still characterises Indian family life.

Table IV—Proportion of Different Types of Households

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small (3 or less members)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (4.5 and 6 members)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (7.8 and 9 members)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very large (10 or more than 10 members)</td>
<td>6 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But one fact should nevertheless be noted about the trend in Joint family which is recognisable from these figures: the 'small' type of households today forms a substantial proportion of the total households. It comes next to the 'medium' type of households which is the single largest type of house-

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