Chamar Family in a North Indian Village

A Structural Contingent

Bernard S Cohn

Most field workers who talk about family structure in India freeze processes which take place over time. To analyze family types, we have to look at the individual families we are studying at a moment in time. The view taken here differs from this in trying to view the type of family not as a fixed entity but rather as a structural contingent.

In a north Indian village the distribution of family types found is a result of the interaction of cultural traditions, structural necessities, and economic factors.

The types of family which can be seen in the village are nuclear and extended. Extended families may be thought of as two sub-types, unstable and stable; the stable ones are those which are often called joint.

To illustrate the importance of the underlying conditions of family types and the actualization of the structural contingents, I will describe the situation found among the Chamars, a landless agricultural caste, found in village Senapur in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

My hypothesis is that it is not only land or property which tends to bring about joint family households among Chamars; rather a combination of factors may be involved. Land is important, but not sufficient; some of the wealthiest Chamars do not have joint-family households. The combination of factors should include urban employment and literacy. Literacy leads to a drive for Sanskritization, which in turn is an incentive for joint families.

Social scientists working on questions of the nature distribution, and processes of change affecting the Indian family have generally used simple structural criteria to develop the classifications of family types. Most of these scholars tend to think in terms of nuclear and joint families. In this view the joint family is associated with the rural, pre-modern sector of the society, and the nuclear family is viewed as the result of modern industrial and urban conditions. A few scholars, notably Dr I P Desai have pointed to the complexities involved in the relationships within even what appear to be nuclear families and have argued that the whole conception of the joint family in urban India is changing but that the direction of change is not simply from the joint to the nuclear family and there are many intermediary types to be found. Desai has called strongly for the use of cultural criteria as well as structural criteria in the study of the family.

Dr Irawati Karve's standard definition of the joint family strongly suggests the need for cultural as well as structural criteria:

A joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common family worship and are related to each other as some particular kind of kindred.

Karve adds that the joint family always has an ancestral seat or locality which is the home for the members of the joint family even though trade or service takes them away from the locality.

It is the argument of this paper that not only do we have to include these cultural phenomena in our discussions of changing family types but that the simple structural criteria used to define family type need to be re-examined to determine the structural pre-conditions which set the type of family and household given individuals will live in at any given time in their life. Most field workers who talk about family structure in India freeze processes which take place over time. To analyze family types, we have to look at the individual families we are studying at a moment in time. The view taken here differs from this in trying to view the type of family not as a fixed entity but rather as a structural contingent.

In a north Indian village the distribution of family types found is a result of the interaction of cultural traditions, structural necessities, and economic factors. The type of family which can be seen in the village are nuclear 1" typically consisting of a married man and woman with their offspring, although in individual cases one or more additional persons may reside with them" (Murdock : "Social Structure" 1949: 1), and extended ["two or more nuclear families affiliated through an extension of the parent-child relationship" (Murdock : 1949 : 2)]. Extended families may be thought of as two subtypes, unstable and stable; the stable ones are those which are often called joint. Extended families, which are the cultural ideal among Hindus in north India, develop in response to specific conditions, among which is a tradition of living jointly, an economic base to support a Joint family, sufficient role differentiation within the family, clear lines of authority among the generations, the need for a labour pool, and longevity of members of the family.

To illustrate the importance of the underlying conditions of family types and the actualization of the structural contingents, I will describe the situation found among the Chamars, a landless agricultural caste, found in village Senapur in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Senapur is a large multi-caste village, which is dominated by the landlord Thakur caste. The total area of the village is a little over 2,000 acres; and the population in 1953 was 2,100, of whom 600 were Chamars and 450 Thakurs. The Chamars, who provide most of the agricultural labour for the Thakurs, live in six hamlets which are located away...
from the main village site where the Thakurs and the artisan castes reside.

Chamar Family Types

The Chamars themselves have no separate terms to distinguish the types of households they live in: they use one word generally to encompass those who live in one household. _ghar_, which literally means “house”. Other words are used for the word we use, for family, but often they encompass more than those who live in one household and refer at times to lineage segments as well as the household. The word _ghar_, when used in the context of a family, means those who take their food from one _chula_ (stove). Those who take food from the _chula_ form the commensal group, which means to a Chamar the sharing of property and rights, a common pockelhook, a common larder, common debts, common labour force, and usually one recognized head. The head of the household is usually the oldest competent male in the household. In affairs of the hamlet, the head is easily recognized by the members of every household and identify the head.

The 122 households of Chamars in Senapur, on the basis of structural criteria, may be divided in the following fashion:

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Nuclear</th>
<th>Extended</th>
<th>Joint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single aged adult</td>
<td>Man, wife and unmarried offspring:</td>
<td>Man, wife, sons, sons' wives and offspring:</td>
<td>Man, wife, sons, sons' wives and offspring:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>or woman and unmarried offspring</td>
<td>or sons-in-law with children over five years of age</td>
<td>or sons-in-law with children over five years of age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Land Holding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Poorest</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Rich</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>3.4 <em>biswas</em> per capita</td>
<td>6.2 <em>biswas</em> per capita</td>
<td>11.1 <em>biswas</em> per capita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>2.4 <em>biswas</em> per capita</td>
<td>5.6 <em>biswas</em> per capita</td>
<td>6.9 <em>biswas</em> per capita</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average Chamar household cultivates a little under one acre. The average Thakur family cultivates six times as much. Connected with the amount of land cultivated is a range of other economic factors which affect household types. A Chamar attaches great importance to the land he cultivates, even though on the average the produce of his own cultivation provides food for himself and his family for only about four months of the year. Most of the land which a Chamar cultivates is part of his pay for working as a permanent agricultural labourer for the

Demography

Chamars, especially males, have low life expectancies. Out of 319 Chamar males, in village Senapur only 19 were above the age of fifty. Out of 338 females, only 25 were above the age of fifty. Clearly a three generation family is impossible if the third generation is non-existent. My impression was that those Chamars who survived childhood usually died between the ages of 35 and 45. Among the Thakurs, where the joint family is much more prevalent, my impression is that life expectancy is much higher.

Economics

It was difficult to obtain accurate statistics on land held and cultivated and on other possessions among the Chamars. Before 1952, no Chamar owned land; all land was owned by Thakurs. After the Land Reform Act of 1952, however, a few Chamars had the option of becoming landowners. The key concept in the relation of Chamars to the land is not how much they own, but how much they cultivate and under what types of tenure. In December 1952, by their own estimates, the 122 Chamar households cultivated 124 acres as non-permanent tenants and only 12 acres as permanent tenants. In addition, they cultivated nine acres on a sharecropping basis. Chamars estimate that four acres are needed to support a household of 5-6 people. Is there any relationship between family type and land holding?

The six hamlets in which Chamars live in the village were classified as rich, middle, and poor, in terms of land held. In every hamlet, extended families have slightly more land per capita than nuclear families.

THE ECONOMIC WEEKLY
The Chamar man, as a day agricultural labourer, is the main source of income for a Chamar; for all but a few Chamar, this is the only way to make a living in the village. The peak working period of a Chamar is when he is between 15 and 35; after that he is considered by Thakurs as old. Older Chamar cannot get employment as ploughmen and have a harder job getting daily work than the younger and better workers. Therefore there is a sharp decline in the economic role of the Chamar male as he grows older and contributes much less to the household. It should be noted that the decrease in economic importance is not so sharp among Chamar women as they grow older. They continue into their fifties and sixties to be economically productive; they may act as servants in Thakur houses, or they may be midwives, or they may release younger Chamar women for held work.

In Thakur households, men do not have a comparable loss of economic role. It is true that these days Thakurs do much the same work as Chamar, except for actual ploughing. Thus, as a Thakur male grows older, he is not able to make as much of a direct physical contribution to the household. But since Thakur holdings are comparatively larger, an older Thakur man may still have a role as farmer manager; because of his knowledge of crops, agricultural technique and marketing, he can still keep the household managerial role in his hands. He oversees and directs the activities of his younger brothers, sons, and hired labour. He still continues to be head of the household in the economic sphere of the family's activities.

The Chamar man, on the other hand, loses his economic role as he grows older. Once his ability to contribute directly through his labour is lost, his position as the head of the household is weakened. His ability to hold his sons arid younger brothers together in a joint family decreases, if it does not disappear.

Another factor connected with their lack of land and their low economic position which presses Chamar to live in nuclear-family households rather than in extended-family households is the bare subsistence level of Chamar life. Most Chamar of Senapur are on a semi-starvation diet for at least two to four months a year. The average Chamar family grows only a four months supply of food on the land they cultivate. Other income is earned by daily wage work for Thakurs or by outside employment in an industrial centre. During August and January, even by pooling all its sources of income, the average Chamar household gets only a half-pound of coarse grain per head, per day. For those who get jobs in the village, their wages are at their lowest point during these months.

The most frequent explanation given for the Chamar for the splitting up of joint-family households was squabbling over food. In twelve cases of partition on which I have data, in eight the stated reason for breakup was quarrels over differential contributions of food and income. A brother with one small child does not see why he should share his meagre earnings with a brother who has three small children and hence gets a larger share of the common household food supply. Thus it appears that a joint-family household requires something above a bare minimum subsistence for its continuation.

The Role of Women

The small amount of land cultivated leads to another factor tending towards nuclear-family households among the Chamar. There is no reason for the Chamar to pool their labour to cultivate their small plots. A man and his wife and children are fully capable of performing all agricultural operations, except the sowing of sugar cane, which is the only agricultural activity in which Chamar engage on their own plots for which more than one adult male is needed. For artisan castes, such as Lobars or Kohars, or for Thakur landlords, a pool of labour is an economic asset. For example, several carpenters can work together more efficiently with respect to tools, facilities, and tasks, and thus an extended-family household is an advantage.

After disputes over food-sharing, the most common cause for separations among Chamar is disputes between brothers' wives or between wives and their husbands' mothers. A Chamar woman is a full economic partner of her husband. She does the same agricultural labour that her husband does, except ploughing.

She is paid the same rate as a man for agricultural labour. In addition, many Chamar women act as servants in Thakur households, helping Thakur women with all tasks except those which take place in the kitchen. For their work as house servants, they are paid in grain, cloth and cooked food.

When a Chamar woman gets into a dispute with her mother-in-law, she is in a strong position because of her important economic contribution to the household. Her threat to leave the household is taken seriously, because it would mean considerable economic loss to her husband's household. Chamar women do leave their husbands for short or long periods, and they can divorce their husbands. A woman's father or brothers are not unhappy to see her come home, because she can contribute to their household. For a Thakur woman to return to her father's house on a permanent or semi-permanent basis is almost unheard of. Not only is tradition against it, but a Thakur woman would become to some extent a burden on her fathers house. When a Thakur woman is young, she contributes indoor labour and children to the household. But in comparison to a Chamar woman, she does not make such a direct and visible contribution to the income of the household. A Thakur woman is directly under the control of the older women of the house, while a Chamar woman is out working and mixing with men. The Chamar woman has a view of herself as a person apart from her husband. She is a full and active economic contributor to her household and she may demand separation of the joint-family household if she feels it would be to her benefit. In a joint family household, there is need for the submission of its members to the authority of a head. Along with this, there should be role differentiation. In most Chamar households, the economic roles of husbands and wives are interchangeable.

Mobility

Traditionally there should be a locus, in a physical sense, for a joint-family household. The importance of a traditional seat of a joint family is obvious among the Thakurs. They point proudly to heir ancestry and to their connection with the village and the local...
Choice of the millions.

PHILIPS

Normal and Special Incandescent and Fluorescent, Mercury and Sodium Lamps • Fluorescent and Incandescent Fittings, Ballasts, Starters and other accessories • Radios, Radiograms, Recordplayers, Records, Amplifiers, Tape Recorders, Hearing Aids, and other appliances • Television and Telecommunication equipment • Cinema Projection and Sound equipment • Professional and Radio Components—Valves, Transistors, Semi- Conductors, Condensers, Loudspeakers, etc. • Electronic Measuring Instruments • Industrial and Scientific Equipment • Process and Quality Control Equipment • Nuclear Apparatus and Accelerators • Medical Apparatus—X-Ray, Ultra-Violet and Infra-red Apparatus, Dental Equipment • Hospital Equipment—Sterilisers, Operating lights, etc. • Pharmaceutical Specialities • Cables and Wires

PHILIPS

contributing today to India's future

PHILIPS INDIA LIMITED
A Chamar’s roots are “not in his land, but to a Thakur who has provided him with land and the opportunity to gain a livelihood. The primary tie of a Chamar to a village and a locality is through his Thakur by means of the Thakur-Praja tie. Before the enactment of the Land Re- form Act of 1952, the Thakurs owned all the land in the village; all non-Thakur households owed a primary allegiance as praja (dependent) to that Thakur household on whose land they had built their house. Theoretically, the Thakur protected his praja and supported him in time of need. The praja owed allegiance and assistance to his Thakur. Even other Chamars often describe a fellow Chamar, not by name, lineage or household—as upper caste men describe their fellow caste members—but by referring to him as the praja of a particular Thakur. The principal reason a Chamar stays in his village is because that is where he can get work. The greatest depth I found in Chamar genealogies was three ascending and three descending generations, compared with seventeen for some Thakurs. The Chamar does not need the genealogical knowledge that the Thakur does as there is little land to be passed to kin.

From a study of Chamar genealogies it was evident that over the last seventy years there has been considerable geographic mobility among Chamars. Out of forty-eight households found in the largest Chamar hamlet, only eight claimed to be first settlers—i.e., that they came with the Thakurs. The other forty households have migrated to the village from elsewhere during the past two hundred years. Fifteen per cent of the living adult males in the village were from villages other than Senapur. As far as I can find out, all adult Thakur males were born in the village.

There are three situations which lead Chamars to move. A serious dispute with his landlord will make a Chamar flee with his stock and few belonging; he usually flees to the village of his wife’s family, his mother’s family, or his married sister. If a Chamar has little land in his natal village, and if his father-in-law has land and no sons, he often goes to his father-in-law’s village; he settles in his father-in-law’s house and hopes that his son will inherit the father-in-law’s cultivating rights or land. In Setiapur in 1952, there were four such men living in or near their fathers-in-law’s houses. A third reason for leaving is if a Chamar hears of an opportunity to get more land to farm in another village, usually the village of affines or uterine kin; but in one case a Chamar family consisting of a father and two sons and their families left the village because they could buy land in another village.

The mobility of Chamar families tends to break up joint families, as often only part of a household moves, leaving behind a nuclear family. The kin ties among the Chamars who move seem particularly brittle and after one or two generations knowledge of the kin who have moved is lost.

Establishment of Joint-Family Households

As I have already stated, most of the Chamar joint-family households are only temporary joint-family households. A Chamar household continually changes in response to certain conditions. We freeze process to talk about it; but we should not lose sight of the fact that for Chamars the joint-family is a structural contingent not a fixed form.

What I mean by a structural contingent can be seen in the following example, which shows the effects of extra-village employment on Chamar households in the village. Of the forty-two joint-family households, eighteen had one or more members working outside the village. Of the eight nuclear-family households, fourteen had members working outside the village.

Urban employment works in two ways to maintain or bring about temporary joint-family households. First, if a man leaves his family behind while he goes to work in the city, he usually leaves his family with his parents or with his brother. For the period of the man’s absence, there is a joint family since the money remitted from the city goes into the common fund and what land the man may have is used jointly. When the man returns, however, he may set up an independent household; and he will then not share the money he brings back. I call this type of joint family an unstable joint family: one which has been set up to meet a particular economic situation.

Outside employment may also be a major factor in setting up a stable joint family: a three-generation joint family existing through time. The families of the three Chamar school teachers illustrate this. In each case the children who became school teachers grew up in joint families. This is not accidental; probably only a joint family among the Chamars could afford to forgo a child’s labour so that he could get sufficient education to become a school teacher. Each of the three teachers continued to live in a three-generation joint-family household after getting his education, though one of them is head of his household. In one of these joint families, the oldest generation consists of two brothers and their wives. Whether the joint families will continue after the oldest generation dies off, I do not know. I do think, however, that it is the steady cash income combined with the little land they have to work which makes it possible for these joint families to endure. In several other cases industrial labour on the part of a younger son or brother seems to perform the same function.

Another factor which seems to stabilize joint families is tradition; some of the Chamar families have a tradition of living in joint-family households. These families tend to be the relatively wealthy and powerful Chamars and also tend to be the leaders of the Chamars. My hypothesis is that it is not only land or property which tends to bring about joint-family households among Chamars: rather a combination of factors may be involved. Land is important but not sufficient; some of the wealthiest Chamar families do not have joint-family households. The combination of factors should include urban employment and literacy. Literacy leads to a drive for Sanskritization, which in turn is an incentive for joint families.
The breath of industry

Oxygen — feeding the flame that knifes through steel, welding enormous broken castings and bubbling through molten metal to make pure steel — the flow of Oxygen in modern industry never ceases. From tiny workshops to the great steel plants and shipyards, wherever there is metal to be worked, Oxygen is on the job.

INDIAN OXYGEN LIMITED