The Joint Family: A Case Study

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There has been no systematic research into the structure of the family in the field whether in rural or urban areas, and the most serious writers on the subject have relied on general observations.

The present study is an attempt at a depth analysis of the family although the data on which it is based is not entirely adequate for the purpose, representing as it does a very small part of an urban community, and being based entirely on the results of a questionnaire survey.

However, by using some of the concepts and methods of social anthropology, this data can be interpreted to give an indication of the dynamics of the joint family.

MUCH has been said and written about the Hindu joint family. Sociologists, social philosophers, and social reformers have been greatly exercised over the break-up of the joint family and even political parties have taken it up as a slogan. The general feeling is that modern life with its increasing urbanisation and the recent legal reforms make the disintegration of the joint family inevitable. Occasionally statistics are shown to prove the point, for almost invariably both joint and nuclear types are found in any factual study of the family. And the incidence of nuclear families is taken as proof that the joint family is breaking up. The traditional assumption behind such a deduction is that every Hindu family is normally a joint family. Such an assumption has been encouraged by the study of Hindu law and scriptures where the normative Hindu family is always joint. But they deal only with a norm and not the reality. Both the Dayabhaga and the Mitakshara with its several regional forms provide in detail for the right- and duties of the various members of the joint family. The nuclear units that constitute the joint family are recognised in the rules laid down for the partitioning of property, but this unit must again grow to the normative type of the joint family.

In an article on the joint family in The Economic Weekly of February 20, 1960 F G Bailey says that the family can be studied at three levels. First, a static analysis of the structural form can be made. Each family goes through a cycle of development; providing a repetitive equilibrium for the institution. This is the family in its dynamic aspect. A third level of study is possible where such conditions arise that the dynamic process does not repeat itself but shows definite changes which will lead to changes in the very structure of the family. This kind of analysis introduces the time factor into the study of structure. Another writer on the family, Haymond Smithy ("Negro Family in British Guiana;" London 1956) applied the concept of a developmental cycle to his data and found that the two types of families which appeared in his figures were actually stages in the normal family cycle. As his study was limited to a period of some months and he could not rely on the memories of illiterate villagers to tell him exactly who had been the members of the family at various times in the past, he resorted to the ingenious method of arranging the families according to the age of the head of the household. This method will be applied to the present data.

The Data

The figures on which the present discussion is based were collected as part of a questionnaire survey covering the two final year classes in the high schools of Baroda. Students were asked how many of the following kin lived in their household—father’s father, father’s mother, father, mother, father’s brothers, their wives, their children, brothers, brothers’ wives, brothers’ children, sisters, sisters’ children, any others’. From their answers, two main types of families could be discerned the joint family and the nuclear family. If there were any kin, whether by blood or by marriage, other than the students parents and siblings, so long as these were not the mother’s relatives or a widowed sister with her children, the family was regarded as joint.

The joint family took many forms. Taking the student as our perspective, there were two types of joint families. One was joint in the father’s generation, that is, the additional members were the father’s parents, his brothers, and their wives and children, or any one of these. The other type was joint in the student’s own generation and consisted invariably of his married brothers one of whom may even be the head of the family if the father is dead. The first type of joint family shows a much greater variety of forms, as we shall see later, because it has a greater tendency to split and is very often an incomplete joint family. Sometimes such a family continues to share in the common property of the original joint family. Sometimes, the property has been divided but some members of the joint family continue to live together. The classic type of joint family is also to be found with all the father’s brothers, married and unmarried, living together, with the grandparents if they are alive, and the property undivided. The joint family consisting of the student’s married brothers is almost always self-contained in the matter of property having no share in some other property nor dividing its own.

Limited Sample

The sample is admittedly a limited one. It is not claimed here that the following analysis applies to the general population of Baroda. It does not even properly apply to the three major castes that make up about three-fourths of the high school student population of Baroda, as the sample excludes the possibly considerable number of less educated families in these castes. As these castes are, however, known to be the most advanced education-
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ally, the present sample may be taken as indicative if not typical of the entire caste community. The several minor castes which make up the remainder of the student population are here excluded from the analysis because they are obviously not typical and even unusual for their respective communities.

A caution may here be sounded that in looking at the family as a dynamic institution, it must be remembered that the cycle may not be repetitive, and that some at least of the families may be undergoing structural and not cyclical changes. Correlations with other social concomitants, such as occupational changes, education and so on would make possible an assessment of how much of the cyclical process is actually social change, but this lies beyond the scope of a brief paper and the data will be regarded as giving a simple cycle of development.

Heads of Families

In the following figures fathers include also father's brothers where these are mentioned as guardians of the student. Mothers, and other relatives if they are the guardians, are excluded. Table 1 combines data for the three castes in the sample, the Brahmins, the Banias and the Patidars.

Most of the heads of households of 35 years and less are brothers of the students. These brothers are of them married, heading a household consisting of all the brothers. In some cases the brothers are living with some other relatives in a joint family arrangement, while some are not married and head a nuclear family. It may be assumed that a brother is regarded as head of the household only when the father is dead. Of the fathers who belong to this age group very few head a nuclear family, more of them residing with their relatives.

In the next age group of 36 to 40 years, there is an almost total absence of brothers as heads. As nuclear families predominate in this group, it may be concluded that at this age a man is most likely to head his own nuclear family, though a fair number of these fathers live with their parents or brothers or both. Only two of these relatively young fathers have married sons and these are staying with them. Nuclear families also predominate in the 41 to 45 age group and in the 46 to 50 age group. They diminish appreciably in the 51 to 55 age group, and in the oldest category of 50 years and above, are replaced in importance by kin where the father is living with his married sons.

The Picture That Emerges

Families joint in the father's generation are most common in the 41 to 45 age group and secondarily in the 36 to 40 age group. In the older groups they show a steady decrease in numbers as the age of the head increases. At the same time, the number of heads of families who live with their married sons shows a slight increase with the age of the head, from this we may deduce that a man with young sons of his own is quite likely to be living with his own parents and brothers. But where the sons are grown-up and married he is less likely to be living with any of his kin. The separation from his own family is finally made when his own sons marry and a new joint family comes into being. There are very few instances in the present material of a family where the married brothers of the head as well as his married sons live together, and most of these are to be found among the agricultural Patidars.

The picture of the family that emerges from Table 1 is that of a young man, married and living with his father's relatives. As he grows older, he separates to form a new family with his wife and children. These children, grow up and marry and the sons go on living with him constituting a joint family. Sometimes these sons separate after a few years, and sometimes they continue to live with the parents until their own children get married when they again separate. The likelihood is that they separate before the children are actually married.

The number of nuclear families is large: over one half of the total number. It is possible that some of these are not merely a stage in the development of the joint family but are self-perpetuating. They never develop into a joint family. On the other hand, as the number of joint families is not inconsiderable, it is likely that most families pass through a stage of jointness though thin may be only atrophied and never developing to the full form of the joint family.

Incidence of the Two Types

Simple statistics show a variation in the incidence of the two types of families in the different castes. Thus Patidars have the most joint families and Banias the least. The cycle of development is also likely to vary. We first consider the Brahmins (Table 2).

Well over a half of the Brahmin families are nuclear. Some of these may be perpetual nuclear families. The developmental pattern, as shown in the figures for joint families, is similar to the general pattern. The tendency to
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live with his relatives diminishes after the father reaches the age of 45. Even before his children are old enough to marry, he separates to form a nuclear family, and in the 46 to 50 age group, there are hardly any joint families at all, while the incidence of nuclear families is quite high. After the age of 50 again, the head is living with his married sons, although some of these older families are nuclear, which would mean that married sons have separated.

The pattern for the Manias is rather different. There are more nuclear families than in the case of the Brahmins. The percentage of nuclear families among the Brahmins is 56.5 whereas for the Manias it is 62.7. (Table 3)

Not only are there more nuclear families among the Manias but also they definitely occur more often among the younger age groups. Very few of the younger fathers are living with their relatives. In accordance with the general pattern the number living with relatives further diminishes as the age of the head increases. Also, relatively fewer of the older families develop into a joint family where the grown sons are now married and still living with the family. In no age group does the number of joint families exceed the number of nuclear families. This would point to a situation of social change, for the Manias are a high Hindu caste and their extensive trading activities in the past have been conducive to the maintaining of a joint family. In the same survey, it was found that the Bania students in the sample came from a rapidly changing sector of the caste and that they were giving up trade in favour of jobs — a process that required education of some sort or other. In the case of the Banias we seem to have a rather special situation and the above findings may apply only to a section of the Manias and not to alb But the change is a clear one.

The Patidars, traditionally a rural and an agricultural caste unlike the others, and the students of which caste are derived from rural agricultural families to a considerable extent, have a large number of joint families. Only 34.7 of Patidar families are nuclear. We may expect to find the joint family in a more crystallised form in this caste because of its continued agricultural moorings. (Table 1)

There is little variation by age, in the Patidar nuclear families, unlike in the Bania ones. The variations in the joint families follow the pattern of the total sample. The younger the guardian the more likely it is that he is head of a household consisting of his brothers. After the age of 36, up to 45, he is found living with his relatives, and from 11 onwards, he may be living with married sons. As the age of the head increases, he lives less and less with his relatives and more and more his family expands to include married sons except for an inexplicable drop in the age group of 51 to 55 years.

Among the Banias and the Patidars, there is a fair number of families where the brother is head unlike the Brahmins where this type of family is relatively absent.

The Individual Forms

We will now go on to consider the individual forms of the joint family. The family that is joint in the student's generation has a consistent structure of the father and his married sons living together. The only variant of this arises when the father is dead and one of the brothers becomes the head. Families joint in the father's generation, however, show a much greater variety in their composition. The number of these families is not large, but a study of their structure will give some idea of caste variations. Because the data is fairly consistent for each caste it may be taken tentatively as the general pattern for each caste.

Of the thirty Brahmin joint families, twelve are joint in the father's generation. Six of these, have one or other or both the paternal grandparents only and two have an unmarried father's brother only. Of the remaining four, one has the head's father and his married sons and three have the father's married brothers as well as his father or both parents. These four alone may be classed as real joint families. The inclusion of an aged grandparent or of an unmarried uncle is actually like giving shelter to a social dependent and not real jointness. These may be considered as incomplete or atrophied joint families.

The Banias have the greatest deviation from the traditional family pattern in terms of numbers. But they show a better development of the joint family than the Brahmins. Of the thirty-eight joint families, only fourteen are joint in the father's generation. But none of these is the atrophied type found among the Brahmins, consisting of an unmarried uncle. Nor is there the residual type that we find among Patidars where the partitioning of property is followed by a breakup into smaller units that may not be nuclear. We have data on the internal structure of eleven of these families. Three of these families include married father's brothers only. Three include grandparents only. Four have both. One family consists of both married uncles and married brothers. Of these eleven families therefore, only the three with grandparents may be considered as incomplete. The others show a high degree of jointness. They are better developed than Brahmin families in terms of jointness.

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<th>Father Brother</th>
<th>Joint (a)</th>
<th>Joint (b)</th>
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Role of Property

The joint family shows the greatest development among the Patidars both in terms of numbers and the structure of individual families. Property especially plays a very clear role. There are fifty-seven joint families of which twenty-six are joint in the father's generation. Of the twenty-four families for which data is available, seventeen are bound together by common property and seven have divided the property but some of the original members of the joint family are still living together and may be called 'residual joint family.'

Where the property has not been divided, there is a marked tendency for the joint family to hold together. Thus in eleven of the seventeen families the fathers married brothers are living together and nine of these have in addition one or other or both the grandparents. Four of these three-generation families also contain the students' married brothers. These may be regarded as the joint family at the height of its development. No Brahmin family included both married uncles and married brothers, and the one Bania family that did so had no grandparent. The other six families where property is still joint are of the incomplete type. Four have only grandparents and two of these state specifically that the married uncles in the one and married brothers in the other are separated. One family includes an unmarried uncle and one includes grandparents and married brothers.

In the case of seven families the property has been divided and the father's married brothers have in all these cases separated. But a residual joint family has persisted with the continued inclusion of one or both grandparents. One of these families includes married brothers. Another is headed by a married brother and one is headed by an unmarried brother. But they are all the end result of a partitioning of property.

The comparison of the family structure in the three castes shows that there are very clear variations in each. This does not mean that there are family types for each caste but rather that there is a range of variations for all the castes with a tendency for one caste to vary in a particular direction.