Family and Social Change
In India and Other South Asian Countries

Andre Beteille

That the traditional family type is undergoing rapid transformation and that the older joint family is being replaced by a simpler structure, has come to be accepted as an established fact.

In an agrarian economy the family, when it happened to be a land-owning unity stood to gain if its members held together. To the extent that there has been a shift from agriculture to industry, the ties which held together the joint family have been loosened, it is argued.

When there are no incentives for the members to live together and when, on the other hand, the new economic forces favour their living separately it is only natural to expect the joint family to be replaced by the nuclear family.

This reasoning ignores two facts. First, the number of people who have been actually affected by the new forces of change is relatively small.

Considering that the vast majority of India’s population still preserves an agricultural mode of life, can it be said that the new forces have had any general effect on the family structure of the country? And this question appears to be even more pertinent in the case of most of the other countries of South Asia.

Second, a long tradition of living in a structure where kinship values are of prime importance generates sentiments which might be difficult to abandon even when they appear to be largely irrelevant.

Kinship ties might adjust themselves to changing conditions and manifest themselves in new and different types of structures.

Any general statement regarding the family in South Asia is bound to be superficial at this stage. The gaps in our knowledge are too many, and the number and complexity of factors to be taken account of make it beyond the scope of a single paper to attempt an exhaustive study. Culturally, the areas comprising South Asia present many diversities. There are kinship systems which emphasize patrilineal as well as matrilineal modes of descent; in some areas, e.g., Indonesia, even bilateral groupings appear to play a part. The family types are diverse, and have been subjected to varying forces of change.

The present discussion restricts itself to a consideration of only some of the broad trends and processes. Many features of change have been ignored, and these are not necessarily the least important. Nothing even remotely approaching a quantitative analysis can be attempted in the present state of our knowledge.

Further, the study does not make any claim towards being representative of the whole of South Asia. The major part of it, in fact, deals with India. This is due largely to lack of familiarity with regions outside India for many of which no published material appears to exist.

There appear to be two approaches to the study of family structure in a large and heterogeneous area. The first is the survey approach which gives us frequencies of distribution in terms of broad and fundamental types. A relatively simple questionnaire should suffice to give an idea of the different family types. Such a questionnaire, administered to a carefully selected sample, will give us the distribution of family types in a particular area.

On the other hand there are certain inadequacies in this type of approach, in addition to the high costs involved. Among other things, it presupposes a more or less well-formulated classification of family types. Such a classification, however, can be made only after we know something as to what similarities and differences between particular family types might signify. In India today it is customary to make a dichotomy between sample and joint family types. This dichotomy assumes a different meaning when we consider the families in terms of their developmental cycle instead of merely seeing them as mutually exclusive type) (See Goody 1958). This, of course requires a detailed and intensive field-study within a limited area.

Family and Kinship

These two modes of approach, the one extensive in range and the other intensive, are really complementary to each other. It will be a mistake to suppose that either of these can be dispensed with, or even that one type of enquiry should follow the other. Rather, the two lines of enquiry should be pursued simultaneously so that a true and comprehensive picture may emerge.

In the countries of Asia—in India, at least—the family as a unit cannot be studied profitably in isolation from other social institutions. On the contrary it has to be seen in relation to the wider kinship system. The relationship of the lineage to the joint family, particularly where the latter is a large property-owning corporation, is close and intimate, in addition to the lineae, there are other kinship categories which play a part in family life. The work of Young and Willmott (1957) has shown the importance of such categories in an area where
their importance was supposed to be minimum. South Asia is a region where one can confidently expect the family to be bound by close ties to the wider network of kinship and affinity.

II

It has been said that the family in Asian countries has been undergoing change as a result of certain developments in the economic and related aspects of the social system. Two major difficulties have stood in the way of assessing the extent to which this change has already taken place. The first is that very little material exists from which one can confidently derive of the various types of families found at present, and their frequencies of occurrence. In India some data regarding family types have been collected in recent years, mainly in connection with studies of village communities. But these are still too meagre to be used as a basis for any meaningful generalization. As regards the other countries of South Asia, the material at hand appears to be even less comprehensive than in India.

A second, and perhaps more important difficulty is that only the vaguest idea exists of the types of family that prevailed before the introduction of modern social and economic conditions. In the case of India certain literary sources give us some idea of the existing family structure from a fairly early period in history. To what extent such material can be considered as giving an accurate representation of social reality is however a matter for debate. And here also, the data relating to the other countries of South Asia are either absent, or very meagre in amount.

These difficulties, however, have not impeded scholars from making statements about changes in the traditional family structure in Asia. In fact, the idea that the traditional family type is undergoing rapid transformation has come to be accepted as an established fact. It is believed that the older joint family in India and elsewhere is being replaced by a simpler structure, the nuclear family. To what extent this is true can only be determined by empirical studies. In the absence of such studies, the general tendency has been to infer in terms of logical possibilities the nature of change that the family is undergoing. Also, one has drawn analogies from Western countries which have undergone similar transformation at an earlier period in history. (See for instance, Nimkoff, 1959.)

No Incentive to live Together?

The logic explaining the change from the joint to the nuclear family is fairly simple. In an agrarian economy the family, when it happened to be a land-owning unit, stood to gain if its component members held together. This promoted economies in organisation, and also impeded the process of fragmentation. Further, in a stable and slow-moving peasant economy the joint family gave to its members the security which comes from having a common pool of resources. This included not only land, but seeds, agricultural implements, and also labour.

Inspite of these incentives the kinship unit never expanded indefinitely, but must have segmented after a certain size was reached. This inference is permissible since the effective functioning of a unit such as the family imposes certain limits upon its size. Tensions between agnates who were rival claimants to the ancestral property must have operated as immediate causes of partition and segmentation. In fact, Hindu law makes detailed provisions for the partition of joint estates under different circumstances.

In the modern economy, it has been argued, there are no longer the same incentives for members of the joint family to stay together. To the extent that there has been a shift from agriculture to industry the ties which bound together the component units of the joint family have been loosened. Also, since the new mode of production offers differential opportunities to members of the same joint family, to continue to stay together would only heighten tensions between agnates whose ways of life might have become incompatible. Added to this is the fact of geographical mobility created by urbanisation which often makes it necessary for brothers or sons to live away from each other in their separate places of work. Thus, when there are no incentives for the members to live together, and when, on the other hand, the new economic forces favour their living separately, it is only natural to expect the joint family to be replaced by the nuclear family.

IV

Two facts, however, have been ignored in the process described above. In the first place there is the question of the number of people who have been actually affected by the new forces of change. Considering that the vast majority of India’s population still preserves an agricultural mode of life, can it be said that the new forces have had any general effect on the family structure of the country? That is, assuming that industrial modes of production do lead to a change in the family structure, to what extent can we say that the change has already been brought about? And this question appears to be even more pertinent in the case of most of the other countries of South Asia.

The second question relates to the persistence of kinship ties even under conditions which appear to favour the loosening of such ties. It has been said that change from an agricultural mode of life removes the incentives for members of a kin-group to hold together. A long tradition of living in a structure where kinship values are of prime importance tends, on the other hand, to generate sentiments which might be difficult to abandon even under conditions where such sentiments appear to be largely irrelevant. Kinship ties might adjust themselves to changing conditions and manifest themselves in new and different types of structures. We shall give evidence at a later stage to substantiate the remarks made above.

To come back to the argument that the joint family was the norm in the traditional economy of land and grain. There are several references to the joint family in Hindu literature, and these have led scholars to conclude that this type of family was the norm in traditional Hindu society. A fact to which rather less attention has been paid is that along with the joint family mention has also been made of the existence of the elementary family. In the absence of sufficient
data we are not able to say to what extent the one or the other was numerically preponderant. In fact numerical data alone might in many cases prove deceptive. The study of the developmental cycle in the joint family has shown that along with this type of family, a certain number of simple families can always be expected to exist.

In fact, it is to be expected that even in the traditional economy the type of family could not have been the same in every section of the community. In India the caste system rendered the social structure a highly stratified one, and even slavery and serfdom are known to have existed in certain areas. The descriptions of Baden-Powell lead one to believe that there must have been a good amount of concentration of land and wealth in the traditional economy. The size and structure of the joint family can be assumed to have had some relation to the size of the estate held by it, if we go by what obtains today. The upper strata of society, controlling large estates, must have lived in families of considerable size. Also, for those who controlled much land, fragmentation would have had less drastic results than for those who had no such advantage.

Land-Owning and Family Structure

Proceeding from this we might infer that the family structure in Hindu society was different for different sections of the community. The large joint family which we customarily regard as being typical of Hindu society might in fact have been associated with only a particular section of it. This inference seems to be supported by whatever material we have with respect to the family structure in the present day villages of India. In the villages of North India large joint families appear to be traditionally associated with Rajput, Jat, Bhumihar and other land-owning castes. Certain mercantile communities also appear to be associated with large families, but to these we shall return later. The village studies made in recent years bring out the fact that larger families are more common among the land-owning castes, while among lower castes the number of elementary families is proportionately higher.

The groups which have lost their control over land constitute a significant element in India's population today. In the village their main source of livelihood is share-cropping and agricultural labour. Landless families do not have an economic stake in keeping together, and the incentives for maintaining large families do not operate as among land-owning groups. Fission might take place soon after marriage, and segmentation of the family is much more common among the lower castes than among the upper. It is not known to what extent such a population of landless labourers existed during the various periods of history, but its importance in terms of the family structure must not be lost sight of.

A recent study in Ceylon gives us some insight into the relation between family structure and land-ownership, and corroborates the inferences drawn above. The Sinhalese gedera is a kinship unit which has a close resemblance to the Indian joint family. The term gedera literally means 'house', and "metaphorically connotes kinsmen belonging or attached to a traditional house" (Tambiah, 1958, 24). It consists of "a small number of patrilineally descended kinsmen held together by a common vested interest in family property and linked by a strong sense of mutual kinship." (ibid, 24).

All the members of a gedera may not actually be living together, but effective ties are maintained in terms of a joint interest in property and ancestral home.

A careful study of the gedera leads to the conclusion that the size of the unit, as well as its internal composition depends a good deal on the nature and amount of property held under its control. Quite often landlessness leads to migration to the wife's people, and the result is a new alignment of the kinship group. In fact, the relationship of the gedera to land ownership is so intimate that its emergence and disappearance, as well as its many transformations can be seen in terms of the fortunes enjoyed by particular estates. "Once the ancestral lands (paraveni) with which the gedera was originally associated have been lost, even the barest semblance of gedera structure disappears." (ibid, 44).

The observations made above illustrate the fact that even in the traditional social structure there must have existed a certain diversity of family types. From here we might proceed to consider the ways in which modern conditions of living are affecting the character and composition of the family. Several factors have been discussed as being of importance for loosening the ties imposed by the joint family. Some of them are: (i) separation from the land; (ii) differential occupational opportunities; (iii) education, particularly women's education; and (iv) growth of urban centres and geographical mobility. The manner in which separation from the land might lead to the disintegration of the joint family has already been discussed. Differential occupational opportunities, by creating different standards of living, are likely to hasten the process of separation between the members of the kin-group. Finally, education among women, leading to economic independence would appear to favour the simple family, as opposed to the joint family.

For all this, the actual change in family structure does not appear to have been very marked. Whereas one might expect to notice wide differences in family structure in urban as opposed to rural areas, one does not actually find this to be the case. Kapadia reports from his study of Navsari that the joint family is more frequent in the town than in the surrounding villages (quoted in Nimkoff, 1959). Further, an enquiry conducted by the Indian Institute of Public Opinion in West Bengal appears to show that rural and urban attitudes regarding living in a joint family do not differ significantly (see Nimkoff, 1959). These are not conclusive evidence, but they do indicate that the situation is one of considerable complexity.

Let us take up the question of geographical mobility. The growth of urban centres in the last fifty years has led to a considerable movement of population from the villages. In some cases entire families have shifted to the new urban cen-
BOKARO

THE 4 MILLION TON STEEL PROJECT BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE

For the first time, Indian engineers have been entrusted with the design, engineering and supervision of construction of an integrated steel project of national importance.

M.N. DASTUR & CO. PRIVATE LTD.
CONSULTING ENGINEERS TO IRON & STEEL AND ALUMINIUM INDUSTRIES
P-17 MISSION ROAD EXTENSION, CALCUTTA-13
tres. Here, naturally the character of the family structure has remained unaltered. But more important are the cases in which some of the family members have migrated to the cities while others have stayed behind. There appears to be a regular pattern in terms of which such migrations are made. In the initial stage it is the men who come over to the city in search of employment. At this stage more or less regular contacts are maintained between the migrants and their families at home. At a later stage one or more of the men might bring their wives and children to live with them in the city. Here, a superficial observation might lead one to believe that a change has come about in the structure of the family, its component units having become dispersed.

Dispersal, Not Disappearance

It must not be assumed, however, that a mere dispersal of the elements of the joint family leads necessarily to its disappearance. In fact, although the family ceases to be a discrete unit spatially, its component parts nevertheless retain functional relations with each other. Thus, the break up of the joint family is, to a large extent, only apparent. It is quite a common feature to find the different members of the joint family returning to the ancestral home during the annual ceremonies, and on occasions of marriage and death. It is not known to what extent the family continues to have a common budget even after it has become territorially dispersed, but this appears to be true for a large number of cases. Finally, even where separate accounts are kept, remittances are frequently sent by the earning members of the household to the people at home.

Sometimes the migrants return to their ancestral homes after they have served their term in the centres of work. In such cases the dispersion of units is temporary, and there is a cycle of movements, the ties of relationship persisting through all the phases of the cycle. As the older members return to the ancestral home, the younger generation

Note, in this connection, the distinction made by Srinivas (1959) between the "unitary" and "federal" structure of the joint family, set out in search of urban employment, to come back again when their term has been spent.

Then there is the developmental cycle in the family structure itself. Seen in a wider perspective the simple family often appears to be a phase in the cycle through which the joint family perpetuates itself. The mechanism by which the joint family system assumes continuity is of a somewhat complex nature. The segmentation of a joint family might not lead immediately to the creation of several new joint families. The segments which in that case begin as elementary families need not, however, end as such. On the other hand they often tend to grow into joint families themselves, and to generate a new cycle of development. Thus, the simple family, instead of being considered as a new and distinct type of structure, might also be seen as a part of the joint family system. It is often a joint family in chrysalis, a phase in the developmental cycle of the joint family system. (See Goody, op. cit.)

Adjustment to Changing Conditions

The traditional Hindu joint family is considered to have consisted of a core of patrilineally related males, their wives, and unmarried sisters and daughters. The sisters and daughters on marriage became wives in other families, and usually remained there even after becoming widows. It is said that in present day India the household often includes several kinsmen other than those who constitute the traditional joint family. These are usually married sisters and their families, and maternal relatives. One might infer that in earlier times also the joint family included an occasional mother's brother, or a sister's husband, but such instances are assumed to have been infrequent. The present heterogeneous composition of the household, on the other hand, has drawn the attention of students of social change. The explanation offered for the large frequency of such "household units" is that they are the result of the break up of the joint family, and the dispersion of its constituent parts. The maternal, and other kinsmen have been dislodged from their parent units, and have attached themselves to other units.

But there is another point of view from which the situation may be seen. If mixed households show on the one hand that the members who have been grafted on to it have come away because of the break up of their parent family, they show something else too. They show that these individual grafts have not merely dispersed from their parent family, but that they have attached themselves to other families which are related to them by ties of kinship. They have not broken off to form separate units; they have come and united with other families which are also related, though differently as kin. The kinship structure is not to be thought of as something totally rigid, but as being capable of adjusting itself to changing social conditions.

VII

Another illustration may be offered of the way in which the kinship structure is capable of adapting itself to changes in the economic structure. From what has been said earlier it might be inferred that with a change from agriculture to capitalist enterprise the members of the joint family unit embark upon separate ventures, and the unit thus breaks apart. This, however, has not always been the case. On the contrary, the change into mercantile pursuits has sometimes led to a strengthening and consolidation of older kinship ties. It is a matter of common knowledge that the Marwars, one of the foremost trading communities of India maintain very large and cohesive joint family units. In fact so important is the place of the joint family in the social life of the community that some have gone to the extent of describing Marwari culture as a "joint family culture".

The Marwari joint family is a large unit. It "does not consist of direct descendants only, but includes cousins, grand-cousins, and relatives up to second and third degrees". (Agarwala, 1955, 141). Also in many families "not only are there lineal descendants but also sons-in-law, brothers-in-law and maternal relatives". (ibid., 141). The members of such a joint family may not always stay at one place, since the affairs of their commerce might make it necessary for different members to live in different parts of the
Day by day, month by month,
the face of India changes fast.
Mighty steel penstocks guide the
rushing river waters to turn the
turbines to produce electric power.
Massive generators, dotted across the
country, send this power vibrating along
wires to turn the wheels of industry. Electric
lamps are switched on in village homes. Long lines
of steel pipes girdle vast stretches of land, carrying
water to thirsty villages and liquid gold to refineries.
Automatic signals guide rolling wheels along a
criss-cross of steel tracks. Radio waves race across
the skies to help mighty Jet planes land on our soil
with their precious cargo. And thus a nation steps
out to tomorrow.

As electrical and mechanical
contractors and maintenance specialists on
behalf of leading West German manu-
facturers, we too are contributing our
bit towards building a new India.

REPRESENTING

MANNESMANN
FOR SPECIAL STEEL, PIPES AND
PIPE MANUFACTURING MACHINERY AND PIPE LAYING
AEG
FOR ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT
TELEFUNKEN
FOR TELECOMMUNICATION EQUIPMENT

Dodsal PRIVATE LIMITED
BOMBAY - CALCUTTA - NEW DELHI
HYDERABAD - BANGALORE - ROURKELA
country. But then, they "perform religious and family rites at one place and collectively, and are under the authority of the elder in matters of family and religion, joint investment of capital, joint enjoyment of profits, and of incurring marriage, birth and death expenses from the joint-funds". (ibid, 141-142).

Industry not Inimical to Joint Family

The Marwaris have been one of the most mobile communities in the country, and they have come in large numbers to live in the important cities of India. Their urban life, however, has not had any effect in loosening the ties of kinship. If anything, such ties have been all the more strengthened. The strategy of commercial enterprise has been so organised that its most effective operation can be carried out by a group of individuals who have complementary functions to perform, and are held together by the firm and cohesive ties of kinship. Nor is there any weakening of the kinship structure when there is a shift from mercantile enterprise to industry. "The combination of a number of industries in the hands of a few families have on the contrary tightened the joint family system. When the capital is joint they can hold more industries in one name. From the common pool capital is immediately and easily utilized for industries. Holding many industries is also a matter of prestige which is highly valued by the family." (ibid, 143). What has been said of the Marwaris in North India appears to be broadly true of the Chettiyars in South India. The Chettiyars are a leading commercial community of South India having mercantile interests which spread even outside India. It is said that at one time more than half the land in Burma was mortgaged to the Chettiyars. They also have major investments in Ceylon, Singapore and other areas across the sea. The Chettiyars operate in large kinship units which are geared to their commercial activities. The joint family sends out 'colonies' to look after its foreign investments. Not only do these 'colonies' maintain effective contacts with the ancestral home, but they return to it, and are replaced by other members of the kin group. When a member of the joint family marries he does not necessarily separate from the unit; only, it is said that a separate account might be opened in his name.

It is a common belief among economists that the maintenance of widespread kinship ties is not conducive to economic enterprise. This belief appears to have been derived from the experiences of western countries. We have seen that in India ramifying kinship ties can themselves be used to further economic enterprise. It would be interesting to know to what extent groups corresponding to the Marwaris and the Chettiyars play a part in the other countries of South Asia. There appears to be some evidence that the Chinese in Malaya organise their commerce on a kiship basis much as do the Marwaris and Chettiyars in India.

VIII

We have so far confined our discussion to families which are based upon a patrilineal system of descent. But we have seen that even in a strongly patrilineal system as in India cognatic ties might be taken into account in constituting a household. The data from Ceylon show even more clearly that there are many deviations from the normal patrilineal joint family type. Sons-in-law, other relatives by marriage and maternal relatives are to be frequently found as the constituents of a single joint household. One would like to know to what extent such variations can be considered as normal in a society where the patrilineal joint family is the prevalent form. Some have found this diversity in family composition to be an indication of the weakening of the older kinship structure. On the other hand, this might merely be another expression of the flexibility of the kinship structure, and its ability to assume new forms in the face of changing conditions.

The extent to which patrilineal ties are emphasized of course varies from one society to another. In some societies cognatic ties are given much greater importance than in India. In Thailand, for instance, the family structure is quite often bilateral in nature, including relatives both through the father, and the mother (see de Young, 1955, 23ff). Similar appears to be the situation in Malaya.

In a study of the family composition of a village in Johore it was found that 22 per cent of the households contained matrilineal descent groups, whereas the proportion of patrilineal extended families was less. (see Burridge, 1956). These variations appear to be of interest, and they may represent the family structure of a society in a state of flux. They may, of course, also represent a permanent and distinctive feature of a particular type of kinship system. It is only by making comparison in time that we can arrive at an understanding of the significance of such variations.

The Nayars of Kerala, on the other hand, have shown a clear trend of change from a matrilineal to a bilateral composition of the family unit. The father, who was formerly an outsider, has now come to be a part of the family, although his position there is still somewhat ambiguous. The change among the Nayars has been clear and continuous, and its relation to certain economic forces is obvious. "The change from a matrilineal to a bilateral kinship system, the emergence of the elementary family at the expense of the unilinear groups, and the decrease in range and functions of the kinship system, appear therefore as part of the overall change from a feudal to a semi-industrial economic and social system." (Gough, 1952, 86-87).

IX

As opposed to changes that have followed more or less spontaneously in the wake of new economic forces, one might consider the developments that have resulted from the introduction of certain new legislative measures. Unfortunately, very little material is available on the social impact of legislation dealing with marriage and the family structure. Two major trends in many countries have been to abolish polygamy on the one hand, and to give legal sanction to divorce, on the other. Both might be expected in the long run to have some effect in reducing the size of the family, and in making for a higher frequency of the elementary family.

It is not known whether the institution of polygamy had any general effect on the composition of the family, but in some cases its importance was considerable. Among Bengali Brahmins the practice of
Kulinism coupled with hypergamy and plural marriages led to certain curious developments in the family structure. A man of the highest sub-caste would contract alliances with several women, sometimes numbering fifty, or more. In such cases the wives lived in their respective parental homes where they were visited in turn by the husband. The children of such unions were brought up in their maternal homes, less under the authority of their father than their maternal relatives. Reform movements in Bengal had, of course, struck at the roots of Kulinism even before the present century. The legal ban on polygamy is naturally expected to remove the last traces of this institution.

Legislative measures against polygamy have not been equally drastic everywhere. There are, nevertheless, subtle ways in which legal discrimination against polygamy have been affecting the family structure. Among the Chinese in Singapore marriages contracted before the Registrar of Marriages carry certain legal advantages to the contracting parties, such registration, however, not being compulsory. Although up to now the great majority of marriages have been unregistered, "any Chinese man who marries before the Registrar deprives himself of the right to take a secondary wife". (Freedman, 1950, 105). The institutions of polygamy and concubinage have played an important part in traditional Chinese social structure. It cannot be assessed to what extent discriminatory legislation alone can lead to their disappearance. But the very fact that the community itself has awakened to the need for reform augurs for some change in the traditional structure.

These then are a few major aspects of the changing family structure in South Asian countries. Perhaps it is not yet time to attempt any systematic general formulation. For one thing, there are too many types of family structure, and too many factors of change, each in a sense characteristic of a particular region. The material at hand is meagre, and of a very uneven quality. Certain important features of change — for instance, the role of demographic factors — have been completely ignored. The first need is to have a clear idea of the existing types of family structure. And it is only by having regional studies in the various countries of Asia that such a need can be met.

References
de Young, John E — 1955: "Village Life in Modern Thailand" (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles).

Buddhism in Burmese Life

The knowledge and practice of Buddhism shapes much of the public character of the Burman and exerts a determinate influence on many aspects of the social structure. The first effect of the villagers' understanding of Buddhism is on the time horizon. Nothing can matter very much in this brief existence, wedged in among countless others. The effect of actions is very remote, so planning and sustained effort are discouraged and emphasis is placed on living in the here and now. Burmese life has the dual quality of appearing as a series of rather unconnected, immediate instances without much tie to the past, and with little concern for the future, and at the same time, it is filled with beginnings for projects of great energy which fizzle out and leave nothing in their wake. Burmans can and do plan, but the time horizon is always vague, and failure to do anything within a fixed period means nothing and occasions no emotions.

Many observers have noted the even tenor, the cheerfulness, and the optimism of the village Burman. These are in part derived from his Buddhism. Buddhism, where every man does what he can for his movement along the path to Nibban, leaves the individual feeling that any misdeed can be repaired in the future, that acts of merit can overcome acts of demerit, and that there is forever to do so. A person can only be as religious as his temperament allows him to be. He is always doing the best he can, and when he gets older, he will spend more time at kutho-getting works. Such an understanding leaves no room for guilt, anxiety, remorse, or worry . . .

The opposite of these features is a kind of superficiality of concern, a lack of deep emotional currents, and what, from a viewpoint of the Westerner, are remarkable swings in the personality. Burmese life appears on the surface to lack deep involvements, outside of the family, and Burmans are certainly more self-concerned than other-directed. Each Burman appears as a hard, irreducible atom, only lightly tied to other people, only slightly concerned with the state of community beyond his immediate needs . . .

The extreme emphasis on the individual atomizes the society into family groupings and inhibits the formation of larger, perdurable associations. It also promotes wide areas of individual autonomy and suppresses organizations oriented to other than religious ends. As such it tends to make leadership and leaders personalistic and charismatic, rather than institutional or structural. Burmese society is marked by coalition around leaders endowed with certain powers or abilities, and these derived from the notions of strong kan which lead to pot (power and glory), gan (virtue of piety, character and learning) and awe (authority, ability to command).

— From "Burmese Buddhism in Everyday Life" by Manning Nash in American Anthropologist, April 1963.