
UNIT 5 KINSHIP, FAMILY AND MARRIAGE IN INDIA

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Learning Objective



At the end of the unit, you should be able to:

- describe the marriage patterns in the Indian scenario;
- explain the difference in North and South Indian kinship; and
- discuss the household dimension of family in Indian context.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce the students to the concepts of kinship, family and marriage with illustrative examples from India. We shall touch upon a few debates and also see that at times the representation of Indian society has been more idealistic than actual. We shall make an attempt to represent the family and marriage practices of all sections of Indian society rather than being confined to the sanskritic or textual norms. It must be emphasised that although marriage and family are universal for human societies the form and practices vary considerably across cultures and are also not static, and change with times and situations. As the definitions of kinship, marriage and family has been elaborated in the earlier units, they would not be taken up here.

5.2 MARRIAGE

There has been considerable debate about the definition of marriage given the huge ethnographic variations in what passes as marriage in various societies. The basic working definition of marriage appeared in the Notes and Queries (1951) “Marriage is a union between a man and a woman such that the children born to the woman are recognised as legitimate offspring of both parents”. However such a definition of marriage as is obvious is highly Eurocentric and has limited cross cultural applicability. Among the Nuer for example, a rich widow with no children can enter into a ghost marriage with a young and fertile woman so that the children born to the ‘wife’ are socially considered as children of the dead man and become legitimate heirs. In India the practice of **Niyoga** enabled a young widow to achieve

the same end through a brother /classificatory brother or family priest. However as Kathleen Gough has pointed out the fact of producing legitimate children does remain the most important function of marriage. She was replying to scholars like Edmund Leach who were of the opinion that the Nayars of Kerala did not have a real marriage as the father had no role in the identity of the children who took on the mother's name and identity in a matrilineal system of inheritance. The society had no social role of father as the children were begotten through visiting husbands who were only sexual partners to the mother and had no rights over their children. The mother's brother wielded authority in households comprising of brothers and sisters and the sister's children. However Gough points out that every Nayar woman did undergo a marriage ceremony with a person of proper caste ranking and wore the *tali* (a kind of necklace worn as a sign of marital status). Although the husband did not have any social role, he did have a ritual status of legitimizing the woman to be socially sanctioned to bear legitimate children. A woman observed pollution rites at the death of this husband like a woman would of a regular husband. More importantly if a woman bore a child before this marriage ceremony the child would be considered illegitimate and the mother and child banished. Thus a Nayar marriage was a proper marriage in bestowing legal and social status on the child. She gave a often quoted definition of marriage as “—a relationship between a woman and one or more other person, which provides that a child born to the woman under circumstances not prohibited by the rules of the relationship, is accorded full birth status rights common to normal members of his society or social stratum” (Gough 1959:32).

Gough's definition takes care of polygamy that is both **polygyny**, where a man may have more than one wife and **polyandry**, where a woman may have more than one husband. While polygyny was practiced in many parts of world and is often associated with horticulture and the practice of bride-wealth, polyandry is found only in South Asia. Polygyny is associated with those economies where women play a significant role in the economy, like in hoe cultivation and also where the number of wives signifies high social status as among the aristocracy of the East. However polyandry is confined to some rare geographical regions especially among some communities of the Himalayas, like the Jaunsaries and Kinnauries; also among some Tibetan and Bhutiya communities. In most such societies it takes the form of fraternal polyandry where a group of brothers may have a wife in common. In Hindu mythology polyandry is described in the Mahabharata where five Pandava brothers have a common wife in Draupadi.

Some scholars have criticized Gough's definition in that she does not take into account those societies where children from concubines may also have legitimate status.

Polygyny has often given rise to conflicts of succession between children, especially sons of co-wives, as depicted in the popular Hindu epic The Ramayana. According to law giver Manu, the son of a wife of proper caste ranking and who has been married in the most appropriate manner, that is gifted as a virgin by her father with proper ritual has more rights than the sons of other wives and concubines.

5.2.1 Caste and Marriage

In India caste and marriage are almost inseparable among the Hindu majority and except the indigenous populations, caste is found even among Muslims and Christians in India. Caste does not aptly describe the Indian social organisation based on two levels of differentiation, one at the abstract level of Varna, where all beings are

divided into four broad and ranked categories, Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudra; plus a category that lies outside the varna system the untouchables (*asprcya* or *achuyt*). At the actual level of social interaction including marriage and kinship it is the 'jati' an endogamous and geographically localised group that is the effective social unit. Thus jati is an extended kin group as for any person all relationships of blood and marriage will lie inside one's own jati. However rules of exogamy were operative within the jati in the form of *gotra* exogamy and *sapinda* exogamy.

Gotra is a group based on socially constructed mythical ancestry, where some mythical divine being in the form of an ancient sage is considered the common ancestor of the group. Since only Brahmins could be the descendants of the *rishis* (ancient sages), all other varna had probably taken on the gotra of their presiding family priests. While gotra exogamy is found among all Hindus, the Sa-pinda (Sa=together, pinda= a ball of rice) rules are applicable mostly in North India. These include all those who have right to offer *panda* (ritual offering to a dead person) to a man. All those who share the same body, metaphorically the same flesh, belong to the *sapinda* category. It includes those who are putatively related by blood and excludes those who are related by marriage, thus a son and brother's son is *sapinda* but not a son-in-law.

Depending upon the community, the rule of *sapinda* exogamy was extended to all persons descended from certain generations from the father's and mother's side. The most common expression of this rule was that a person must not marry someone who may have a direct male ancestor in the direct male (father's) line up to seventh ascending generation and up to fifth ascending generation in the mother's line. This obviously excluded all collateral kin through the blood line.

In south Indian kinship the rule of Gotra exogamy is prevalent but not that of Sa-Pinda exogamy as certain persons in collateral lines are eligible for marriage.

Reflection

The Hindu marriage cosmologically evokes the analogy of the seed and the earth, rooted as it is in an agricultural economy. The three rules of marriage pertaining to the seed and earth analogy are:

- 1) Only those children are considered as equal in rank to the father, who are born of women of equal caste ranking who have been married as virgins. This will be true for all caste rankings.
- 2) It is acceptable for a man to marry a woman of lower rank than himself as the power of the male seed is superior to that of the earth; hence a man's progeny even if born of an inferior woman will have his qualities. Thus hypergamous or *anuloma* (in the direction of hair) unions are acceptable though not the best.
- 3) But the opposite is not true. A woman must not marry down, or hypogamy or *pratiloma* (against the hair) is not permissible. If a Brahmin woman marries a shudra the children are lowest of untouchables.

Thus in real terms it means that women of lower castes are accessible to men of higher castes and women of upper castes are kept out of bounds for all except men of their own caste and higher. Thus Brahmin women are the most secluded and shudra women the most accessible. However for a regular marriage, it is always preferred that the wife should not be of lower caste. But according to the laws of Manu an upper caste man can take as his secondary wives women of lower castes.

Hypergamy can take different forms in North and South India. Thus among the Rajputs of N-W India, the Patidars of Gujarat and the Rarhi Brahmins of Bengal the hypergamy means marriage between ranked groups of the same caste. Here the child gets the same rank as the father. In South India the hypergamous marriages take place between castes and the children are given the rank of the mother. A famous example is that of the Namboodri brahmins and the Nayar women. Only the eldest Namboodri son was allowed to marry a Namboodri woman and have children of his own rank, but the younger sons were compelled to go to the Nayar women as visiting husbands and their children were only identified as the children of Nayar matriclans. Although they both follow gotra exogamy and jati endogamy, there are some substantive differences between North Indian and South Indian or what is more popularly known in anthropological literature as Dravidian kinship system.

5.3 NORTH AND SOUTH INDIAN KINSHIP

In addition to the practice of polygyny and hypergamy, marriages in North India are marked by a higher status given to the bride receivers than the bride givers, thereby giving the man's family a higher social status than a woman's family that has resulted in a general degrading of women in society, where the mother of a son receives more prestige than the mother of a daughter and the birth of a daughter is viewed as a lowering of rank of her entire family. Among the status conscious Rajputs of North-Western India, it is this status consciousness that is one of the reasons for widespread female infanticide as the father of a daughter feels socially degraded. This is also the reason why there is no preference for women exchange, rather women preferably move in the same direction, that is it is preferred that sisters be married to a set of brothers rather than an exchange of siblings take place as it is done in Bengal, in the custom of *Palti Bodol*, where to save on dowry, siblings can be exchanged if they are otherwise properly matched. Since the practice of exogamy is done at the village level, entire villages stand in relations of bride givers and bride receivers with appropriate rankings and taboos. Thus a person from a bride giving village will not accept even water from a bride receiving village.

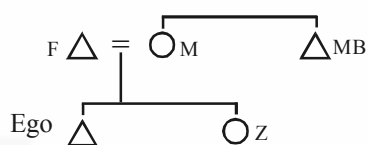
In South India there are two distinct differences, the first is the separation of the cross and parallel siblings of the parents and a merging of the grandparents generation in terms of kinship terminology that had led the south Indian kinship terminology to be labelled as 'bifurcate-merging', the second is the practice of what was referred to as the practice of cross-cousin marriage by those following the 'descent school' in kinship studies. In South India it is preferred that a boy marry his mother's brother's daughter or his father's sister's daughter, neither of which categories is referred to as a 'sister' and the father's sister and mother's brother are also referred to by the same term as used for mother-in-law and father-in-law.

Louis Dumont in his analysis of kinship on what he calls as the principle of affinity, takes a different theoretical stand. According to Dumont, where there exists positive marriage regulations, that is some categories of kin are earmarked for marriage, the following criteria apply;

- 1) Marriage becomes part of an institution of marriage alliance, which spans the generations. This is in opposition to the descent theorist's views that marriage relations are confined to one generation and only descent runs through generations.

- 2) The concept of affinity should extend so as to include not only those who are related to a ego by marriage, but also to people who inherit such a relationship from their parents. Thus a son will inherit an affinal relationship in the form of his mother's brother from his father who already has an affinal relationship of wife's brother to him. Thus where there is prescribed cross cousin marriage, the mother's brother and father's sister are never consanguines, but always affines, as inherited from the parents.
- 3) In terms of kinship terminology such relationships will have an affinal content.

Thus the Dravidian kinship terminology can be described as one where there is one term for all males and all females in the grand parent's generation. The two terms in father's generation, namely father and mother's brother are not simply different but denote two classes of relatives; one consanguineal and the other affinal. Thus father and mother's brother are brothers-in-law to each other, or linked to each other through the mother.



In the same way the relationship to father's sister is mediated through the mother, where the brother of one woman is husband to the other.

Such affinal relationships are continued in ego's generation, become weaker in ego's son's generation and disappear fully in the grandchild's generation. The basic structure of the system is of fathers on one side, including the father's brother and mother's sister's husband and father's affines on the other, including mother's brother and father's sister's husband.

According to Dumont we should differentiate between the immediate or synchronic affine and genealogical or diachronic affines who are affines by virtue of inheriting an affinal tie from the earlier generation. Dumont also demonstrated how the concrete expression to the abstract concept of alliance is given differently in different social systems taking the examples of the matrilineal Kondaiyam Kottai Maravar and the patrilineal and patrilocal Pramalai Kallar.

For the Kallar, the category of brothers is split into two, the brothers, one's own and the sons of the father's brothers who are part of one's local or residential kin group and the sons of one's mother's sisters, who are spread in various places, depending upon where the mothers were located after marriage. Thus although they are notionally consanguines, the relationship with such relatives is weak as it is spread over a large geographical area and tends to be forgotten over the generations, unlike the enduring ties with the patrilineal kin. The father's sister on the other hand is born and remains in the father's house till she gets married. Thus although terminologically she is an affine, she has an ambiguous position as a weak affine having been treated as a kin before her marriage. The mother's brother in a patrilineal situation is a strong affine.

The situation is just the reverse in the case of the matrilineal Kondaiyam Kottai Maravars, where the opposition between father and mother's brother is viewed differently. In the matrilineal situation the father would be an affine and the mother's brother a kin, therefore the ambiguity attached to the father's sister in the patrilineal case would be attached to the mother's brother in this case who will be considered a weak affine, while the father's sister would be considered a strong affine.

In other words as Dumont puts it, the foremost affine in the upper generation is the affine of the lineally stressed parent, the mother's brother in the patrilineal situation and the father's sister in the matrilineal one.

The distinction between the two categories of relative is also expressed in ceremonials and gift giving. F.G. Bailey in Orissa and A.C. Mayer in Malwa have noted that there is a lot of similarity in the ceremonial functions of relatives like wife's brother and mother's brother, even though the former is an affine and the latter a relative of blood connected through the mother. In a sense both the relatives are similarly situated as the wife's brother becomes the mother's brother in the next generation; gifts given by both are referred to as *mamere* in the local language so that culturally also the two relatives are put in the same bracket. In opposition to *mamere* is *dan*. These are the gifts given by those who have taken a woman from the group, the father's sister's husband and sister's husband, in contrast the *mamere* is given by those who have given a woman to the group. Thus Dumont has pointed out that essentially from the cultural point of view the real difference is between wife giver's and wife receivers and not between uterine and agnatic kin.

As an example one can take the case of the Sarjupari Brahmins of U.P. who ignore the sa-pinda rule. But adhere to the two rules that;

Firstly, a lineage does not 'take' a girl from a local lineage to which a girl has been given by them, as the bride receivers are in a permanent position of superiority symbolized in the ritual of '*pao-pujan*' (feet worship).

Secondly, a man does not marry his sister and daughter (including classificatory ones) into the same family; for this would mean matrilineal cross cousin marriage, not permissible in North India.

However among the lower castes such as Dhobis, such marriages are permitted. Among the upper castes the former rule prohibits reversal of marriage between larger units such as local descent groups and the latter prohibits the repetition of marriage between smaller units such as families. Among the lower castes such repetition leads to stronger community formation at the local level, so necessary for their survival. The lower castes may also practice bride exchange and widow remarriage.

In the study of south Indian kinship it is seen that ceremonial gifts are given by those relatives where the affinal relatives are passed down generations that is by the mother's brother, father's sister or father's sister's husband, wife givers in all cases by the rule of prescriptive marriage to the children of parent's cross sex siblings.

Among the high status Sarjupari Brahmins the first rule permits repetition of marriage between lineages but in the same direction, thus taking care of caste norms, but not particularly of kinship. In south India marriage rules reflect pure kinship norms. The Sarjupari Brahmins also have the rules of "three houses, thirteen houses, and one lakh (hundred thousand) and twenty-five thousand" houses arranged vertically. Similar rules are seen in Bengal among the Dakhin-Rarhi Kayasthas of the "three houses (Kulin), eight houses and seventy-two houses", similarly arranged hierarchically in order of preference. Such status is attributional while the status difference between bride-givers and bride-takers is interactional.

5.4 FAMILY

The form of family is both synchronically and diachronically determined. Among the upper caste Hindus the Mitakshara school of Hindu law is usually followed in which the Hindu Joint family is one in which all male agnatic members have a share from birth and they may demand a share in the property as soon as they reach the legal age of maturity. The male members along with their wives and children may share the same roof and hearth and are coparcenaries. In addition there may be other members in a joint household in the form of dependents like orphans and widows, usually related women born in the family. A joint family is symbolically united in common worship of some deity looked upon as the benefactor of the particular lineage or *kul*.

The head of the family is usually the eldest male member known as the **Karta**, who wields considerable power. However as the well known sociologist Arvind Shah points out the three generational joint family is only an ideal type and rarely realized in actual practice.

The biggest difference in family organisation is based upon caste, occupation and economic status. The large undivided joint households were usually found among the wealthy upper castes, who found it useful to stay together in a large household with supportive resources like a large house and many servants. It was functional for the management of large estates and businesses.

On the contrary the lower castes and poorer sections of the people rarely have enough resources to form joint households. Also their meagre earnings do not permit the setting up of larger units. If the family lives at subsistence level the daily earnings or food does not permit any accumulation or cannot be shared among large number of members, it is each to his own in such a situation. Similar situation is found among the tribal populations where the joint household is almost unknown.

Thus the projection of the majority of families in India being joint is only an upper caste, class and an ideal depiction.

With the use of the historical model many anthropologists have criticized this idealistic assumption. A.M. Shah, a well known sociologist highly regarded for his work on family, found in his social and historical study of a village in Gujarat that the kind of family assigned to tradition was not present even in the pre-colonial era. Let us see what he has to write about Radhvanaj, a village consisting primarily of upper caste Rajputs and Brahmins (Shah 1998).

“According to the Census of 1825 Radhvanaj had a population of 716 persons divided into 159 households and there were 25 castes” “73 % of the total number of households were very small or small in 1825. The ideal of the so-called joint family household was not very strong in the village and this was even before the beginning of industrialisation and urbanization”. But even though there were no joint families, the Rajputs, namely the Rathods of this region formed exogamous lineage groups. But in the very same village such lineage groups were not found among the other caste groups. “By and large, strong and elaborate lineage groups were associated with control over land”. As Shah has further elaborated land ownership provided stability of residence and facilitated growth of the lineages. Land ownership also provided power and therefore, lineages with the help of the unity provided by the kinship bond, tended to be repositories of power.

India joint living is not found at all, Channa (1985). As rightly pointed out by Shah land ownership often provides the economic base for joint living. For households who have to live off their daily earnings it is a difficult proposition to pool in the earnings at the end of the day and go for joint living. What the earlier authors had relied upon was an ideal basis for the family based on values and scriptural norms. But in reality the economic and political considerations determine at the actual level what shape is going to be taken by the household. The main resource of the dhobis for example are the households, referred to them as *grahak* (clients) from whose houses they get clothes to be washed. As a couple get older their capacity to wash and iron clothes decrease. When a son grows up he gets a few clients from his father but most of his clientele he can built up on his own depending upon the capacity for hard work, initiative and luck both of his own and that of his wife. Very soon after their marriage young couples prefer to set up their own *chullah* or hearth, in other words set themselves up as separate production and consumptions units separate from their parents. Because the young couple does not want that they should do all the hard work and the aging parents should share the fruits of their labour. Unless they get very old and disabled, their children rarely support parents.

According to Shah, among the upper castes and elite section families of society, the sentiments and bonds, both economic and social continue to operate even if the members are living in different locations because of necessities of work, or lack of urban space or any such factor; For example, children of middle class families who are settled abroad or in different places within the country, still consider the parental house as their own, returning for major ceremonies and events on a regular basis. Economically too the bonds of sharing and cooperation persist even from a distance. Thus the joint family as noted by Shah is acquiring a 'federal' multi-centred character.

However in some parts of India, apart from the joint families, or joint sentiments based on monogamous marriages, some different forms of families are also present. The polyandrous families are still found in some hilly areas like Himachal, where it is considered good to marry a set of brothers to a single woman so that scarce resources of land can be preserved and since these communities still depend upon sheep grazing and agriculture, the undivided household of several brothers and their wife leads to more prosperity.

Among the Khasis of Meghalaya, the family property and name is inherited in the female line with the youngest daughter inheriting the family house and property. The husband of the youngest daughter in a Khasi family comes to live with her and she is primarily responsible for the performance of all the household rituals. The family name also runs in the female line. Thus the patrilineal and patrilocal family is not absolutely universal in India.

The practice of resident-son-in-law, also called *ghar-jawai*, *ghar-jamai* or *mappa* is found among many communities of India. Among the Bhutiyas and other hill people it is a common practice with the son-in-law becoming like the adopted son of his parents in law and even performing their death rituals. Among the Tibetans and Bhutiyas the daughter has inheritance rights and even when the resident son-in-law performs the rituals like a son, it is the daughter who is socially recognised as the mistress of the property and remains dominant over her husband.

The Muslim households usually follow the Hindu pattern with the wealthy families living in large joint households and the poorer ones living mostly in nuclear families

along with the urban and educated families, which are also nuclear. Although polygyny is permitted for the Muslims the actual incidence is rather low and not any different from those of Hindus.

Values of education of women are often cited as factors for the break up of joint families as are business rivalries and clash of interests. In the traditional joint households the money was earned from a common estate or business, with modernisation, the various sons took up jobs according to their own capacities and conflicts could ensue over different incomes and contributions to the common pool. Women's education further complicated matters as they developed more individuality and resisted being dominated. Yet deference and respect for elders still persists and most children do not take major decisions without the permission or consent of their parents.

5.4.1 The House-hold Dimension of the Family

In addition to the class and caste based difference a family can be viewed in terms of its development over time and Shah has described the developmental cycle of the Indian family following the model given by Meyer Fortes. Even the simple of basic family may exhibit different structures depending upon the stage at which it is found. The basic household in India is called a '*chullah*' or *ghar*. The following possible compositions are possible

- 1) Husband, wife and unmarried children
- 2) Husband and Wife (when there are no children born or they have left the household by marriage or migration)
- 3) Father and unmarried children (when the wife is dead or divorced)
- 4) Mother and unmarried children (for same reasons as above)
- 5) Unmarried brothers and sisters (because of death of parents)
- 6) A single man or woman (for various reasons of death or separation or migration).

In the formation of the simple household, the terms "children", "father" and "mother" also include all step children and adopted children, step mothers and adoptive mothers and step father and adoptive fathers so that in reality a simple family may at times be a 'compound family'.

The actual power structure of the household may also vary. Thus widowed mothers may play a considerable significant role in the affairs of their sons even though by the rules of patriliney the son inherits the father's status. Similarly the role of women as wives and daughters may also be significant in certain situations.

As Shah points out the development process of the household is not random but may follow a pattern depending on the following factors.

- 1) The demographic factor, like birth, marriage and death and also the sex ratio and the actual number of persons who come to live in a household by what is known as the process of accretion.
- 2) The second depends on the norms of residence that may also vary; like for example the phenomenon of the resident son-in-law and the norms regarding residence of parents.

5.5 SUMMARY

In conclusion we can say that it is difficult to have a uniform description of kinship, family and marriage in India as there is considerable regional variation (Karve 1963, Kolenda 1987), and also across caste and tribal populations. Some significant regional works are that of Veena Das (1976) and Paul Hershman (1981) on Punjabi Kinship, Fruzzeti and Ostor (1976) and Ronald Inden (1976) on Bengali kinship, Dumont (1966) and Trautmann on Dravidian kinship, and Madan (1965) on Kashmiri kinship, to name a few. One may also refer to the significant contribution of Leela Dube (1997) to a gendered approach to the study of kinship. Some unique features such as of caste and kinship and polyandry are found in South Asia not found anywhere else. Significant differences exist across North and South India and among lower and upper classes. There have been changes also in family and kinship norms due to transformations in social and economic variables. Thus kinship is just not ideational but practical as well serving existing needs of society.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Describe the basic principles of South Indian Kinship and how it differs from North Indian Kinship?
- 2) Discuss the various forms of the household in India with specific reference to the developmental cycle.
- 3) Discuss the relationship between bride-givers and bride takers and its ritual and ceremonial expression among the upper castes of North India.
- 4) Discuss the various forms of lineality in India, with suitable examples.
- 5) Describe the changes in joint families and the nature of the changes.