

A note on the joint family

by S. Devadas Pillai

The unit of Hindu society is not the individual but the joint family — K. M. Panikkar, *Hindu Society at Crossroads*, 1961, p. 43.

The decay of the joint family system has time and again been predicted.¹ Those who believe that changes in economic life, through industrialization, will change almost everything else, made bold predictions about 'decay' and ominous directions of change, but they have not come true. It would appear that those among western sociologists who made such assertions were projecting the experiences of their own milieu; they hoped that what had happened around them would happen everywhere else in the world too. Many Indian sociologists were strongly carried away by this view and began to explore it. They said, along with their western counterparts, that the joint family was a great obstacle to economic development. There were however a few like K. M. Kapadia, I. P. Desai and A. M. Shah who struck a different note. Kapadia wrote extensively on the family and made it his life-study, contributing two classics on the subject.² I. P. Desai has done some fundamental thinking which gave rise to the idea that 'jointness' is one of the values in Indian culture. He also categorized types of joint family and this was a significant step towards clearer thinking.³ A. M. Shah's writings on the family have been refreshingly bold and his recent book on the household dimension of the family should create some fresh thinking.

Those who were talking of 'decay' were using mostly the physical characteristics of the family as found especially in urban centres. The generally small urban family units were looked upon as extremely independent units because they appear to be so from the economic point of view. Also, some observers took the nuclearity of these units for granted, that is that they would remain nuclear all the time. Thus an important process was overlooked, namely that all joint families split up sometime or the other, and that the split units possess the potentialities to become joint again if necessary. As Irawati Karve observes, jointness and non-jointness are often 'alternate temporal phases of one social phenomenon'.⁴ Due to demographic factors like childlessness and mortality, and calamities like famine and pestilence leading to large-scale mortality and movement of population, the non-joint family must have always been in existence in most parts of India. But even if this is proved statistically it hardly militates against the argument that jointness as an ideal has always existed and been put into practice in varying degrees of articulation in different levels of society.

The western view of the joint family

Socialization is naturally in tune with this ideal. Those who argue that Indian parents of tomorrow, with education largely of the western type, may

socialize their children in a different way and that the joint family may become eventually a thing of the past seem to be almost saying that the joint family is just a collection of related people living together. They are heavily under-estimating the strength of the cultural fabric that has given shape to the ideal of jointness and a co-operative way of living. To go deeper into this problem one must reconsider concepts like freedom, independence, self-reliance and related concepts in the context of the Indian milieu. The joint family exists as part of the caste group which is in turn part of the larger community. An Indian is normally socialized to interact with a very wide range of people. Those who are not familiar with his concept of group life, his need for group relations and his own idea of interaction-experience cannot fully understand how exactly an Indian joint family works, how problems arise endlessly and are solved through constant manipulative strategies adopted by both the individual and the group. If these facts are not taken care of, phrases like 'mutual rights', 'kinship obligations' and 'functionally joint', used by Kapadia and I. P. Desai in the context of the joint family cannot be grasped in their proper sense. As an example of such misunderstanding, we may take William Goode's writings on the Hindu joint family. Goode has been quoted and re-quoted widely, for his book brings together a lot of scattered material. While this is a commendable part of his work, it may be noted that he begins with the implied assumption that the nuclear family will be an inescapable reality in all industrializing societies. He is also convinced that Indian family patterns 'embody or express most of the factors that have impeded its (India's) social development'.⁵ Further, it is evident that Goode does not go into the connotative aspects of words like mutual rights and obligations. There can be serious differences in the way in which people in different parts of the world look at kinship obligations and rights. Indians are socialized to look at it in a certain way — which Goode does not consider when he criticizes Kapadia and Desai. Let us quote Goode in full: 'Kapadia has insisted that 'even in those cases where the property is divided and the income of the members of the families is not pooled... the constituent families maintain their connections through mutual cooperation and rights and obligations other than those of property. Members of these constituent families meet on such various occasions as the marriage feast, etc.' He follows this definition by a further clarification: 'If a residential unit of two generations shares with another nuclear or joint family, with which it has ties of kinship, all or some rights and obligations shared by the members of the joint family, then it is a joint family functionally'. Defined thus, however, almost all family systems in the major cultural areas of the world, including the West, become 'joint families' '.⁶ This is a very innocent way of looking at Kapadia's words. Goo-

de is obviously not bothered about what are 'mutual rights and obligations' in the context of the Indian family and exactly how they foster cooperation and unity among split units of a joint family. Goode boldly concludes that Kapadia's and I. P. Desai's concept of the joint family 'rests on a simple confusion about the conjugal family of the western world'.⁷ Kapadia and Desai may have confusions about the western conjugal family but I think Goode himself is not free from confusions about the Indian joint family in its functional aspects. It may be profitably noted that there could be a set of people who have deep-rooted notions about a co-operative way of doing things; about a way of living in which being obliged or obliging someone are considered normal things in preserving group relations. India has, after all, a group-centred society.

Goode admits at one stage that 'the obligations are doubtless more intense and the social interaction more frequent among members of an Indian joint family than in a western conjugal family' but avers that his data 'do not show a continuation of the complete pooling of income, distribution by the eldest male, or residence of all the appropriate ascendants and collaterals in the contemporary family'.⁸ The point, however, that Kapadia and Desai want to assert is that 'pooling of income' and such other factors are not the necessary conditions for the continuation of the ideal of jointness. Similarly, Goode states that the 'Indian male does not receive the kind of socialization which would permit him to act independently, show initiative and function with ease where he must rely completely upon himself'.⁹ I think this statement too is not very relevant to the Indian context if one is prepared to re-consider concepts like freedom and self-reliance in terms of the milieu for which they are applicable. I am not suggesting that we should build up a multiplicity of definitions but that one definition of personal freedom or individuality won't do. There could, I think, be one definition of tuberculosis or some such disease but that is medical science the principles of which social science cannot fully imitate. It is not suggested here that social scientists doing comparative studies are not aware of the dangers of being ethno-centric but that hardly anything is being done about freeing oneself from the clutches of ethno-centrism. Just as there is a Chinese way of life¹⁰ or a Japanese way of life which is different from the American way of life — by which I mean the concept of the people concerned about human relationships and the institutions that sustain them — there is an Indian way of life. Under the impact of the western form of industrialization and education this way of life is undergoing change but to understand the nature and extent of these changes and their impact upon the original culture one has to understand the original culture itself. This is however not possible if one places himself in the 'centre' and with his own

definitions and try to pass judgements on those at the periphery. The fact is that, generally speaking, an Indian child is heavily socialized to live with a deep sense of obligations and rights with regard to kin (and even his friends); he is told to be concerned about relationships (for their own sake); he is *not* told that it is dirty to be sentimental; he is not taught to raise self-reliance to a cult. In short, he is not taught to live 'to the relative exclusion of a wide range of affinal and blood relatives from . . . everyday affairs':¹¹ this being one of the characteristics of a conjugal family, as Goode mentions it.

Change and adaption of the joint family

Goode concludes that the direction of change in the Indian family is clear: it is moving towards the conjugal family. 'But', says David Mandelbaum, 'from the evidence he (Goode) summarizes it seems that such directional change, even as reflected in attitude and opinion surveys is also not great or at least not yet very great. The filial-paternal ideal is strongly respected in cities as well as in villages and is quite often observed in practice . . .'¹² Prof. Mandelbaum has been exclusively concerned with India since 1938 and his views based on several years of field work need careful attention. My study of the Bulsar region for long periods on two occasions convinces me how joint families develop strategies to meet new challenges.¹³ Among the upper castes, who often show a high degree of 'jointness', I have found cases where physical separation is even recommended by elders at some stage to maintain 'functional jointness'. However, even such separations are implemented, at least one son, married or unmarried, remains with the parents or, if the situation demands, parents opt to be a little far away from the village to be with one of their sons. Distance, temperament of the people involved and many other factors naturally decide the nature of such preferences. What is at the back of such an arrangement is the ideal that aged people, like children, should never be left alone as far as possible. This is part of the obligations of grown up children, and not fulfilling them generally shatters an individual's image of himself and as seen by his group. Those who have no sons or have sons working far away, as it is common in these days, opt to live with a married daughter or invite her to live with them. In fact this trend is growing — joint families in the female line in *patrilineal* settings — and this is a major departure from traditional norms especially in towns and cities. Even traditionally many patrilineal caste groups practised the 'adoption' of a son-in-law when there were no sons to look after the household. It used to be considered shameful for a son-in-law to be invited to live in his father-in-law's house but the stigma is waning. In matrilineal societies, as among the Nayars of Kerala, joint families rested on the female line. The Nayars, traditionally, consider it un-

fortunate not to have a daughter to continue the family line of the mother. The matrilineal and matrilocal Nayar family had, it is true, a male head who looked after the property but a Nayar woman, married or unmarried, could own property in her name; she was entitled to shares of the family property of her mother as much as her brothers.¹⁴ I am however not suggesting that these legal privileges indicated a Nayar woman's social position. My point is that the idea of jointness finds expression in the female line as well.

Coming to think of how joint families react to changing circumstances, I have found this to be more revealing among some lower groups like the Dhodiyas among whom I did field work for two years in the Bulsar region of South Gujarat recently. There are among them functionally-joint families with six or more kitchens. In the family of one of my respondents, Chandulal, there are six kitchen units with separate rooms for each unit under the same roof. A long corridor connects the different units and facilitates interaction. The head of this big family with 29 members is 74 years old. With him lives his eldest son and son's wife. Property in the form of land has been divided on verbal (not legal) agreements: livestock are owned separately but are often taken out for grazing by members of any one or two units. One unit owns an oil engine for agricultural irrigation but it is used by other units on a nominal rent. The youngest of the brothers is a teacher, one is a tailor, while the others are farmers. In another joint family, one of the separate kitchen units had itself become a joint family in course of time with three generations. In some other units, the division of land did not correspond to the number of units: sometimes two brothers jointly looked after their shares while another plot of land was managed by the father and one married son.¹⁵

The Dhodiyas having been strongly oriented to agriculture had, it appears, a substantial degree of joint living since a long time. It is also my impression that some of the lower castes who were not strongly oriented to common residence are getting *closer* to the ideal of joint family which is perhaps part of the general process of imitating ideals held by those at the top of the social hierarchy. The ideal of jointness is, therefore, only getting reinforced as far as the region of my field work is concerned. The Dhodiyas, who are a fast changing group, in the sense that their participation in education and modern forms of occupation is stronger than that of other Adivasis (or Scheduled Tribes), appeared to me to be striking a compromise by evolving a family type which retains almost all aspects of joint family life except the common kitchen. In other words, most of the non-economic characteristics of the joint family have been retained in some form or the other (as suitable to the culture patterns of different caste groups), while the

possibilities of economic conflicts have been reduced by maintaining separate kitchen units.

Another instance of just how ingenious arrangements can be made in the interests of joint living is very clearly brought out by aman Unni's study of a nucleated village in Rajasthan.¹⁶ Fissioned households retain joint living by developing a housing complex which can be fully understood only if we realize *meanings attached to space*. Space is structured in such a way that interaction is possible to the fullest extent. Also, says Unni, that this arrangement facilitates the working of the general authority and discipline of parents or the eldest brother. While a composite kin group housing complex as described above is evolved by the relatively well-to-do, Unni notes that poorer households, after partition of the main households, may be found in independent houses separated from one another. But this separation is more apparent than real. 'If the meanings of space are understood in terms of its function and the manner in which such huts are oriented to each other is studied, it is easy to group a few such closely related households as having a housing complex practically functioning in the manner of the composite house of the relatively well-to-do households'. More or less the same phenomenon of kin-group housing is also found in the villages I studied in the Bulsar region of South Gujarat.

Self reliance and group orientation

In his study of family and kin in Indo-European culture, published in the 'fifties', G. S. Ghurye had suggested that the Anglo-Saxon family was nuclear in type, and the reviewer of Ghurye's book in the *American Anthropologist* thought that the idea deserved 'circulation' among sociologists who attributed the nuclearity of the western family to the industrial revolution.¹⁷ Klaas van der Veen, among other significant things, discusses this point in one of his recent papers.¹⁸ Van der Veen is of the view that, among other things, impartibility of inheritance in west European medieval society, due to ecological and political factors, led to a strong tendency towards nucleation long before the impact of the industrial revolution. Climatic and soil conditions made it necessary to keep meadowland, pasture, woodland and plowland from division to maintain a viable homestead. Besides, patrimonial lords favoured a single-heir inheritance 'because it guaranteed them a structure of rent payments and economically viable rent-paying units'. Impartibility or single-heir inheritance had 'far-reaching consequences' for filialpaternal and fraternal bonds. In an agrarian society, this meant that economic goals were no longer shared by all members of a family and that each had to look for his own way. As van der Veen suggests, this must have naturally weakened reliance on the paternal family, and put great stress

on individual effort, personal achievement and self-reliance. And whether the Protestant Ethic was or was not a great factor in promoting capitalism, it certainly promoted an 'intense pre-occupation with oneself' and put great stress on action, a devotion to 'calling' on a *rational* basis for human relations.¹⁹ It cannot be denied that these have had a role in promoting individuation of the family along with a high sense of personal freedom and individuality. One may even look further back and search for references in the Holy Bible which recommends and legitimizes family individuation.²⁰ The industrial revolution which came later on only strengthened the possibilities of self-reliance, individuality and nuclearity.

We may make a similar search in the Hindu scriptures. The beliefs and ideas of the Hindu milieu stress upon obligations to society. In the four-stage scheme of life called the 'ashramas' the second stage called the 'grihastha' enjoins upon a man to settle down and carry out his obligations to people around him. This is 'dharma' or righteous conduct. Acquisition of wealth or personal welfare is recommended but it has always to be subject to righteous conduct which refers to not only the ways of achieving wealth but also the uses to which it is put, which necessarily includes fulfilment of obligations and being useful to kith and kin. The Hindu epics and mythologies are replete with references to social relationships. As Irawati Karve says, 'In song and drama, the deeply religious poetry and homely proverbs in almost all languages of India as far back as literary records exist, the family situation has been exploited in a hundred different ways'.²¹ The epic Mahabharata, for instance, is the story of a big joint family with 84 principal actors depicting the pathos, bathos and ethos of family life. The epic Ramayana is yet another story of a joint family, depicting strong inter-play of emotions between mother and son, husband and wife, and brother, and many others. It would be wrong to dismiss these epics as having had their influence and impact only on the upper layers of society. Anthropological studies have proved that even the most isolated Adivasis refer to them, though with variations. For instance, correspondence between the beliefs of the Baigas and Gronds (two Adivasi groups) and references to them in the epics and folklore of the people of the plains has been noticed by Karve.²² My own field work among the Dhodiyas gives me many convincing evidences of this type. Elderly women of this group have their own version of the story of Ramayana.²³ Suffice it to say that the family theme pervades the entire society from top to bottom, stressing upon obligations and rights with regard to kin of different categories, and the nature of relations subsisting between them.

Life-cycle ceremonies like birth, marriage and death require the presence and participation of specific kin. There are also rituals and periodic cere-

monies to cement the bond between brothers and sisters, since sisters are enjoined to leave the parental home after marriage among patrilineal castes. In all these rituals the protective role of the brother is emphasized. Among the higher and middle castes who have the strongest forms of joint family, brother-sister rituals are sometimes performed between neighbours and distant kin to emphasize the bonds subsisting between them. There are indeed so many other forms of expressing and symbolizing mutual concern between siblings and friends among different caste groups and regions. For instance, the Rajputs, at least some groups among them in central Gujarat are obliged to provide basic clothing for their married sisters throughout life time. Even when they are well-off — and the groups I am referring to here are well-off — they wait for the the occasion to give and take this annual gift in a symbolic manner.²⁴

Furthermore, take movies, plays and novels: they commonly tackle the theme of how an individual relates himself to others, be it family or the society at large. Film themes centering on parents, brothers and sisters have had perennial popularity; they usually deal with tensions, conflicts, co-operation and unity within the family circle. Friendship is another category of social relations which has had tremendous appeal on the Indian screen. Two friends falling in love with the same woman, the ensuing conflict and resolution, has always been a favourite theme among writers for films. The hero getting caught in a net-work of social relations, some good, some bad: this has been another favourite theme. Good ultimately triumphs over evil and it is usually a friend or a kin who helps him to come through difficulties.²⁵ Westerners whom I had the chance to meet in India and who saw some of these films were frank enough to express their surprise: what was there to talk so much about the large number of relatives and friends? Having had a change to come in contact with a part of the western milieu, I appreciate their remarks more than ever.

Closely related to the theme of social relations is the recurring theme of harmony, nonviolence and consensus. This does not mean that there is no place for violence or conflict. On the contrary, group-orientedness as found in the Indian setting can and do lead to conflict and even violence: hence the strong emphasis on harmony and consensus as ideals which call for giving up extreme views or modifying opinions and actions to suit the goals of the group. A group of such a description might give the picture of a herd of sheep, but it is far from it: the group in this context allows private goals and aspirations to work out within the framework of its general goal. A good instance of the working of the harmony concept and consensus is the system of caste panchayats which are known to have existed since a long time, dealing with violation of caste norms and ruptures in human

relationships including divorce. We bring in here the concept of harmony and consensus as they are related to the concept of social relationships. If we try to understand all the three concepts together from the Indian point of view, it can be seen that they produce a concept of individualism which is different from that of the west. Doing what one likes all the time, having a strong personal choice in everything and sticking on to it, projecting feelings as strongly as possible and many such things may be the very commonly accepted modes of projecting individuality in the western culture in general but in the Indian setting this may be tolerated only in special circumstances.²⁶ In fact, an Indian, ideally, does not receive such a socialization.

Joint family and the Indian sense of individualism

To the westerner who believes that he does exactly what he wants all the time, and that he is free from persuasion from any source — hidden, open, human or organizational — the Indian sense of individualism may appear to be extremely passive and not worth being termed individualism at all. This is very true if the western concept of individualism is applied to the Indian milieu — as Edward Shils does in his oft-quoted study of Indian intellectuals. Shils is unhappy because he found Indian intellectuals different from their counterparts in America. With his home-made definitions of individuality, personal freedom and all that it is natural that he did not see many redeeming features in Indian society. The trouble with him is that he constantly compares American society with India not India with America. If he had done both a balanced picture would have emerged. He assumes, for instance, that the western conjugal family is a much better form of family and therefore sees only the 'deadening' and 'restrictive' aspects of the Indian family. A more objective view may be that both the western and the Indian family demand a price from the individual. Both systems have prices to pay. It would be useful to discuss what is the nature and extent of this price and then talk about the merits and de-merits of the two systems.

In the context of jointness and group-orientation an Indian child is naturally taught to interact with kin of different categories and people of different ages who belong to the neighbourhood and the community as a whole. Even in a residentially nuclear family, a young boy or a girl is all the time coming in contact with a large number of kin, neighbours and villages. He is encouraged to interact with them in a manner that is keeping with his age. Eventually, he interacts more with some, less with some more and avoids a few. Depending upon the culture of his region and of his immediate milieu he has to use classificatory kinship terms or forms of addresses that suit the age, sex and other attainments of the people with whom he inter-

acts. It must be noted that in the majority of Indian households childhood is a short period compared with the norms in economically developed western countries. Participation in different activities of the household is expected of children who are nine or ten years old, particularly in the villages and small towns and among the poor and the middle classes in big cities. With opportunities for better education and increase in the standard of living this situation will undergo some change but the fact remains that life as lived in Indian families, with domestic and social events galore, with doors open and with room for many things to happen as they come, call for the participation of everyone in his own capacity in the total amount of work involved. Children therefore do not remain children as soon as they are able to participate in the business of daily life. They are thus brought in contact with people of all ages, and it is this manner of interaction that moulds his sense of individuality at the very outset; he is taught to place his actions and thoughts in the context of his relations with a variety of people around him. It is not suggested here that other cultures do not socialize children this way but that much weight is given to this aspect in Indian society.

Now, with all the above facts put together, we must try to find out whether the Hindu joint family or Hindu culture as a whole curbs the development of individualism and if so to what extent — and above all what will be our definition in such a study. Happily, there are some signs of re-thinking on these issues in the west itself. Paul Bohannan, making a comparative study of American families with the Tiv families of Nigeria, discussed the problem of maturity in Tiv households with a psychoanalyst. The psychoanalyst wondered how was it possible to 'achieve maturity if the Tiv never got out from the shadows of their parents . . .' Then, says Bohannan, 'we agreed that we might sensibly ask how middle-class Americans can be expected to achieve maturity when their spouses have to take on so many aspects of adult parenting — or else it has to be overcome. Ultimately we might even ask whether both societies do not have poorly conceived ideas of maturation, dependency, and the nature of the human personality'.²⁷

The conjugal family, equality and self-reliance

It may be useful at this juncture to take a look at some aspects of the western, particularly Dutch family, as I have seen them. The western conjugal family is the ideal type evolved to suit ideas of freedom, equality and self-reliance *generated from that milieu* and constantly sustained by growing affluence. The late Prof. Nimkoff, an authority on the American family, observed that in the American family economic inter-dependence is getting weakened while there was greater psychological inter-dependence between

the spouses. These ties are 'more volatile and less enduring' as can be seen from the high rate of divorce and desertions, the latter of which, as he says, are 'more disturbing' than the former. The family 'more readily falls apart since hostility and aggression when they occur are more disruptive than in societies in which the more traditional institutional values are emphasized'.²⁸ The same view is put forth by Bohannan in a different way. The nuclear household 'is an institutional answer primarily to the problem of perpetual sexuality' implying thereby that other problems are 'more overtly moralized and less densely organized or institutionalized than is the marital or mating relationship'. In other words mating relationship is 'axiomatic' while parenting is 'less axiomatic'.²⁹ Mating relationship in the Indian family is on the other hand more or less subdued as far as possible while parenting is I think axiomatic. This is a major difference which, if understood, will tell us why a woman in the joint or non-joint family comes to be primarily recognized as mother and not wife. Problems arising from divorce, which is an expression of freedom to terminate a relationship, are institutionally solved in nuclear-oriented societies. The separated partners may successfully resume mating relationship with someone else, and this often happens. But the damage created by broken homes remains hard to be repaired. A missing parent cannot be substituted if one of the characteristics of the ideal type is that the couple 'cannot count on a large number of kinfolk for help just as these kin cannot call upon the couple for services'.³⁰ In an Indian family, whether residually or functionally joint, members who have had a role in bringing up a child from the very beginning can play the substitute's role and greatly minimize the vacuum in a child's life.³¹ The diffuse pattern of role relationships in this type of family shows its positive side on such occasions. Also, as van der Veen has pointed out, the diffuse pattern brought about by generational depth and width due to numerous siblings and cousins, ensures a wide range of concern for almost everyone in the family.³² Each one is also in turn trained to show concern for all other members and to interact with them. Efficiency for interaction which is a necessary precondition to good human relations is thus heavily promoted in a joint family. The western conjugal family, on the other hand, especially the type that is emerging now, can leave children alone as far as possible and allow them to find their 'own way' — which is of course in keeping with the ideology of promoting individualism, selfreliance and personal choice. The accent on 'spousing', greatly enhanced by the romantic movement in the west — which incidentally has two sides³³ — has brought about norms that are 'practical' and conducive to greater privacy. For instance, it is a 'good' thing to send children to sleep at a specific hour, preferably an early hour in the evening. If they do not sleep it does not matter but they must retire

to their rooms. The living room is then at the disposal of parents and guests — if any — thereafter. With affluence coming in, and the number of children going down, every child gets a room from almost the very first week of its birth. 'Parties' and other adult events that take place in the home are not the concern of children. In turn 'teenage parties' are coming into vogue, and this promotes a life of his or her own for the child. Prof. K. M. Kapadia once told me casually that the Indian child is constantly socialized to be a life-member of his natal family while a modern western child is at least in *de jure* terms socialized to be independent of his parents and siblings. Eric Fromm in one of his books candidly brings out the predicament of the western mother who has to socialize a child to be away from her though she does not want him to be so. If this is correct — if Fromm is correct about the west and Kapadia about India — then it is the pattern of ideology that matters since ideas do give rise to behaviour.

In many families in and around Amsterdam children are paid by the hour to work in the home. From whatever little I have been able to observe during my stay in Holland for over one and a half years, I feel this is a growing trend, in part accentuated by excellent social security measures for the population in general, including assistance to young people in quest of education. The state, in keeping with its high ideology of freedom and self-reliance, comes out with bold measures to make young people free from the clutches of the family. Naturally, parents have to adopt measures that are in keeping with this ideology. Paying children for work done at home, aided by the fact that human labour is scarce, is therefore an extremely democratic measure which has the positive side of keeping parent-child relations going. And at this stage 'parenting' can stop because parenting cannot theoretically take place between 'equals'. Furthermore, 'equals' cannot be exploited for work or ordered about. With such an ideology coming into sharp focus, along with great advances in the techno-economic environment, children as equals and independent beings may leave the home and be on their 'own'. In the advanced teen-age stage this indeed becomes a compulsive action because he or she need be as far away as possible from 'non-chosen' dependence — and parents, brothers and sisters are relations through 'uninvited' biological accidents.³⁴

The point I want to stress is that such an extreme accentuation of non-dependence as in the west has an ideology to back it up. So also a situation in which dependence on human beings is looked upon as normal upto a certain level, as in India, has an ideology to back it up. It is true anyway that poor economic circumstances heavily accentuate the dependence level and make it look ugly but at the root of it are ideas that are traditionally accepted, namely, that is not a bad thing to rely on human beings; indeed

it is considered proper and normal.

Jointness as a way of life

Bernard Cohn in his painstaking study of Indian civilization suggests that demographic changes and the education of women will be strong forces questioning the ideology of the joint family. By demographic changes he means an increase in the number of old people. Cohn writes: 'Perhaps a society can sustain a veneration of the aged only when there aren't many aged around . . . Perhaps the culture rather than the form or structure of the joint family will change as more and more men reach their forties and even their fifties before they can inherit land because their fathers are living longer. The culture of the joint family may have been maintained by a demographic artifact that there weren't too many grandfathers around for too long, so that the possibility of a three-generation family living together was not at all that frequent. Now more and more women will be living past middle age, their children grown, and will still be in households under the domination of the mothers-in-law. The change in the age structure, with more young around and more elderly remaining in positions of authority, may lead to changes in the culture, and particularly that of the family'.³⁵ I doubt this.

Attributing the culture of the joint family, which includes veneration of the aged, to a demographic artifact appears to me to be an over-simplification. While children are taught to respect the aged, for the aged this happens to be a growing need and a tonic during old age. The aged themselves generally adapt ways that are acceptable to the young. Indeed, when an old man does not get respect from the young by local standards he is often criticized for not showing qualities that cause veneration. In a culture where the old look for acceptance by the young, the former's attitude to authority and discipline undergoes constant amendment. For instance, as said before, in many families properties are often divided during the life-time of the parents to avoid conflicts. It is also true that mothers in law do not continue to dominate households as before when they find that daughters-in-law are not young children as they used to be;³⁶ similarly fathers do not play the patriarch's role when they find their sons rising in occupational and educational status. There are often conflicts and tensions on these issues but they are amicably solved in most cases because family unity in a demonstrable form is a great source of prestige in the setting. Cohn also expects that the 'new elites' will bring up their children in quite a different way so as to help change the culture of the joint family.³⁷ The new elites are generally thought to be comprised of the westernizing sections in big and small cities but from what I know of the westernizing elites in the metropolis of Bombay

for the last 20 years, I think a good part of westernization is at the superficial level and is therefore misleading. There is a lot of physical westernization going on in India and therefore serious studies of the content of westernization among the elites is necessary before deciding whether the new elites are really oriented to a radically new way of life.

We come now to some other points. The overt distance between husband and wife in an Indian family always surprises the new visitor from the west as much as manifestation of togetherness and attachment between spouses in a western family surprises a new visitor from India. The simple fact is that demonstration of romantic attachment and possessive feelings for one another are discouraged in one setting and encouraged in the other setting. This may be both due to situational and ideological reasons. It may be correct to say that in the Indian setting relationship between the spouses is taken for granted and is therefore considered not worthy of demonstration. In the west, the focussed psychic inter-dependence between the spouses has not only the waves of the romantic movement to back it but also a long tradition of nuclearization of the family and a strong and ever-growing ideology of self-reliance and free-will. Modern techno-economic trends are only intensifying the ideals of free-will and self-reliance which in turn may accentuate the seclusive character of the conjugal unit.

The Indian setting — call it holistic or group-centred — has neither this techno-economic dominance nor an ideology of free-will, individualism and self-reliance that stands comparison with the west. In a holistic setting focussed relationships are neither possible nor even felt very necessary. A spouse cannot under-emphasize his or her role as son, daughter, sister or brother, friend and neighbour. When all such roles are played in varying degrees of intensity as situations demand, focussed relationship between spouses cannot develop as quickly as in the west nor is the need for it felt so compelling. Furthermore, focussed relationships call for a great number of similarities in tastes and outlook between the persons involved. In the west if the present trends continue, marital success may increasingly be evaluated in terms of the nature and extent of similarities in tastes, interests and ideas between husband and wife. G. A. Kooy, whose main interest of research is the Dutch family, says: 'In varying degrees of articulation modern Dutch couples normally interpret a successful marriage as a bond characterized by 'communis opinio' and communication between husband and wife in nearly all matters'.³⁸ This is certainly keeping with what Johan Goudsblom means by describing the family culture of the Dutch as 'strongly introverted'. This strong introversion is ideally meant, among other things, to secure a large degree of 'privacy', 'seclusiveness' and 'homely coziness' or *gezelligheid*.³⁹ A western from this background would naturally find it

strange to see Indian spouses with dissimilar tastes, habits and interests living under the same roof. But an Indian is trained to live with diversities from the time of his birth. Not only the larger environment, which is first of all made up of different caste groups with dissimilar customs and manners, but also the family into which he is born is made up of different types of people besides his parents and siblings. As he grows up he learns to tolerate dissimilarities without retreating from them as far as possible.⁴⁰ Gradually dissimilarities come to be looked upon as complementing forces in the total system. Folk sayings like 'all five fingers are not the same but they are all important as they belong to the same hand' bring out the manner in which 'non-equality' and 'diversities' are looked at. Not only that, a certain degree of 'non-equality' — some kind of a hierarchical arrangement of things — are considered necessary for the amicable functioning and durability of group life as conceived by Indians. And the joint family is after all a big group.

It is difficult to go into more details in this paper. It may be somewhat clear now that the manner of thinking as presented above is at great variance with the ideals of egalitarianism prevailing in the west. In some societies of the west, egalitarian thinking has gone so far as to consider it unnecessary for children to address parents by kinship terms or even to use higher-grade pronouns (like *U* in Dutch). In Holland many young parents are encouraging their children to call them by their first names, and this is not just a freak decision but the product of some new thinking based on long-cherished ideals in their milieu. This brings us back to Prof. Nimkoff once again.

Says Nimkoff: 'Within the framework of the tradition of freedom and the environment of economic affluence, the characteristics of the western family seem socially intelligible'.⁴¹ So also we must make the Indian family socially intelligible by references to Indian traditions. Once the traditions are understood many hasty generalizations will be reduced to mere guesses and some of the positive aspects of jointness will become as clear as its many negative and restrictive aspects. Besides, many built-in flexibilities in the traditional set-up will come to light and give us a clue as to how some of the restrictive aspects of the joint family are getting rectified without much harm to basic ideas. Certainly, the joint family will undergo many changes; it has always been changing in response to major threats from the larger environment. But as Irawati Karve has written, 'a people used to the mores of the joint family will find in it an accommodation to new circumstances which would be hard for the imagination of a people whose mores are grounded in a non-joint single family'.⁴²

Notes and references

- 1 For about four years now, my friend Dr Klaas W. van der Veen of Amsterdam and I have been discussing east-west differences. We have coped up with each other's cultural shocks discussed them at length and tried to make some of them 'socially intelligible'. This paper bears the stamp of these discussions for which I am very grateful to Dr van der Veen. He has also gone through an earlier draft of the text critically. I am also thankful to Mr Philip Vuysje of Amsterdam for comments on an earlier draft which, I may mention, forms part of my writing efforts during my stay in The Netherlands for over one and a half years. I am highly thankful to the ZWO, The Hague, whose munificence I enjoyed in The Netherlands.
- 2 K. M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India* (3rd ed., 1966) and *Hindu Kinship* (1947).
- 3 I. P. Desai, 'The Joint Family, an Analysis', *Sociological Bulletin*, vol. 5, Sept 1956.
- 4 Irawati Karve, *Kinship Organization in India*, 1968, blz. 394. Examining Talcott Parsons' argument that the West European conjugal family is a structural imperative of the industrial society, and that the joint family hinders the development of an industrial society which is a system of 'universalistic-specific-affectively neutral achievement-oriented roles', Karve says that in Europe the joint family was not in existence universally even in medieval times and that it certainly broke with the empire-building activities of European nations and the commercial epoch that followed. All this was before the coming of the industrial age. 'In India overseas and overland commercial activity was well known since before the beginning of the Christian era and did not affect the family structure'. There is no evidence that the joint family is one the wane in India, says Karve, and adds that if Parsons and with him others think that in India modern industrialization is leading to a gradual decline of the joint family it is a hypothesis not yet substantiated' (ibid., blz. 391-92).
- 5 See opening paragraph of William J. Goode, *World Revolution and Family Patterns*, 1970 ed., chapter titled 'Changing Family Patterns in India'.
- 6 Goode, Ibid., blz. 242-43.
- 7 Goode, Ibid., blz. 242.
- 8 Goode, Ibid., blz. 243.
- 9 Goode, Ibid., blz. 245. This is based on the studies of two other observers, Joseph Elder and Gittel Steed.
- 10 Francis L. K. Hsu, *Americans and Chinese, Purpose and Fulfilment in Great Civilizations* (rev. ed., 1970). I would like to invite the reader's attention to a noteworthy paper of Prof. Hsu dealing with prejudice and its intellectual effect in American anthropology (See *American Anthropologist*, 75:1 (feb. 1973).
- 11 Goode, op. cit., blz. 8.
- 12 David G. Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, vol. I, blz. 53-54. The observations of F. G. Bailey and Scarlett Epstein on the joint family which are generally in line with Goode have already been challenged by M. S. A. Rao (See *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, New Series, vol. II, 1968, blz. 98-111).
- 13 See *Industrialization and Rural Society* (with K. M. Kapadia), ch. on the family.
- 14 In fact, daughters got a larger share according to the number of children they

had. A Nayar joint family is always known by a special name, inherited from the mother's line by both sons and daughters but perpetuated by daughters only. Nayar women used no surnames or family names at the end of their personal names even when they were married. The question of using husband's last name did not arise but this is changing today. In legal documents both men and women used their mother's family (*tarawad*) name even when they do not live there. In the central part of Kerala with which I am familiar this is even so today.

- 15 For details, see S. Devadas Pillai, 'Pattern of Family Among the Dhodiyas of Bulsar Region' in *Family, Youth and Revolution*, ed. by D. Narain, in press.
- 16 K. Raman Unni, 'Rural Families in the Residential Setting: Aspects of Kinship in the Pattern of House Groupings' in S. Devadas Pillai (ed.), *Changing India: Studies in Honour of Ghurye*, in press.
- 17 Review of G. S. Ghurye's *Family and Kin in Indo-European Culture* (1956) by Munro S. Edmonson in *American Anthropologist*, Feb. 1958.
- 18 Klaas W. van der Veen, 'The Joint Family: Persistence or Decacy?' in S. Devadas Pillai (ed.), *Changing India*, op. cit.
- 19 Kemper Fullerton, 'Calvinism and Capitalism', in Robert W. Green (ed.), *Protestantism and Capitalism: The Weber Thesis and its Critics*, 1959.
- 20 Genesis 2 : 24 ('Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife...'); Matt. 19 : 5, 6; Mark 10 : 7; Eph 5 : 28-31. (Note the words *leave* and *cleave unto*). I am thankful to my friend Mevr. M. Copier for drawing my attention to these references.
- 21 Irawati Karve, *Kinship Organization in India*, 1968, ed., blz. 22.
- 22 Ibid., blz. 20.
- 23 A detailed account of the Dhodiyas is in preparation.
- 24 I am grateful to my friend Dr G. D. Thakore for bringing this to my notice.
- 25 India is the largest film producing country in the world, as per recent statistics, followed by Japan and Hollywood.
- 26 However, substantial variations are likely between different parts of the west. The reader's attention is invited to a note in Dr van der Veen's paper in this issue of the *Gids* referring to an American's remarks on the Dutch society.
- 27 Paul Bohannan, 'Dyad Dominance and Household Maintenance' in Francis L. K. Hsu (ed.), *Kinship and Culture*, 1971, blz. 59.
- 28 M. F. Nimkoff on the American family in M. F. Nimkoff (ed.), *Comparative Family Systems*, 1965, blz. 338-39.
- 29 Paul Bohannan, op. cit., blz. 45.
- 30 William J. Goode, op. cit., blz. 8.
- 31 In residentially joint families or even in nucleated families living in a kind of kin-group housing complex, there are instances in which a grandmother or an aunt is specially attached to a child and is therefore called mother by the child while the child's real mother is called by some other term.
- 32 Klaas van der Veen, 'The Joint Family: Persistence or Decay?' in S. Devadas Pillai (ed.), *Changing India*, op. cit.
- 33 Bertrand Russell who is perhaps one of the first to advocate 'trial' marriages in the 1930s (see his *Marriage and Morals*) has this to say: 'A bad effect upon the relations of men and women has been produced by the romantic movement, through directing attention to what ought to be an incidental good,

- not the purpose for which relations exist. Love is what gives intrinsic value to a marriage and like art and thought it is one of the supreme things which make human life worth preserving. But though there is no good marriage without love, the best marriages have a purpose which goes beyond love. The love of two people each other is too circumscribed, too separate from the community, to be by itself the main purpose of good life. It is not in itself a sufficient source of activities, it is not sufficiently prospective, to make an existence in which ultimate satisfaction can be found... It becomes sooner or later, retrospective, a tomb of dead joys... This evil is inseparable from any purpose which is to be achieved in a single supreme emotion. The only adequate purposes are those which stretch out into the future...' (See *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, 1971, ed., blz. 133).
- 34 Klaas W. van der Veen, 'Ambivalence, Social Structure and Dominant Kinship Relations: A Hypothesis' in Francis L. K. Hsu (ed.), *Kinship and Culture*, 1971, blz. 397: 'For solely in the husband-wife relationship is a free choice implicit. All other kinship relations are uninvited — a son cannot choose his father, nor his mother, brother or sister. (It is not without significance that, particular in western society, so much is done to wipe out the 'bad luck' that is a result of this 'injustice').
- 35 Bernard Cohn, *India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization*, 1971, blz. 158.
- 36 Note that the age at marriage is going up in at least small towns and cities. In the villages too the upper castes show a rise in the age at marriage of girls.
- 37 Bernard Cohn, op. cit., blz. 164.
- 38 G. A. Kooy, 'Marital Success in the Netherlands' (mimeo. paper), 1970. In Kooy's nation-wide survey, based on a representative sample, 32 per cent could not be interviewed (refusals 19 %, appointment impossible 10 %, useless information 3 %). While some people are averse to being interviewed for surveys, for some other people, as Kooy suggests, poor marital relation must have been an additional reason for not responding. It may be added that 'communis opinio' and the 'made-for-each-other' syndrome are emphasized frequently by 'quiz programmes' on the Dutch TV.
- 39 Johan Goudsblom, *Dutch Society*, 1967, blz. 138-39. The Dutch nucleated family called the *gezin*, while getting reduced in size in terms of the number of children and also by the gradual elimination of all other kin, gradually separated itself 'from kinship and community'. Goudsblom adds that simultaneously the family moved from the 'open type' to the 'closed type', the latter having been first evolved by the burgher city elites (Ibid., blz. 133).
- 40 It is common to find people of different political shades in the same house. During the active phase of the communist movement in Kerala this was a common occurrence, though the communists, on ideological grounds, showed intolerance about it in the beginning.
- 41 M. F. Nimkoff in Nimkoff (ed.), *Comparative Family Systems*, 1965, blz. 339.
- 42 Iramati Karve, *Kinship Organization in India*, 1968 ed., blz. 393.