

True Structural Change and the Time Dimension in the North Indian Kinship System

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Studies of urbanization and industrialization have widely assumed that the adoption of city living causes the automatic dissolution of extended families and their replacement by nuclear, neolocal units. Economic, demographic and ideological conditions allegedly make this transition inevitable. Thus Mukerjee and Singh, in their social survey of Lucknow, assert:

The urban family at present is in transition towards the natural family [*sic*] comprising the couple and their unmarried children. But the transition is in no way complete, and many families still exhibit the features of a joint family—with several generations and a large number of relations living together.¹

The trouble with such a viewpoint is that it has been derived from an uncritical application of generalizations appropriate to the West's experience with industrialization. This is a dangerous procedure on a number of grounds, but particularly so in a country like India where unilineal kinship systems and caste, both rare or nonexistent in even the preindustrial West, occupy such important places. Bloch has pointed out that medieval feudalism arose in Europe in part as a response to the weakness of kinship institutions at a time when wider principles of interdependence and mutual obligation were required.² What is most important, however, is that in no society are all of the changes that occur in the composition of kin groups through time *structural* changes. Therefore, since the

transition from a nonindustrial to an industrial society represents a major series of changes in the structure of technology and significant social groups, it becomes essential that genuine structural change be differentiated from other structural activities, whether in regard to kinship or any other feature of society, if a truly accurate assessment of change is to be made. Furthermore, it will always be important to learn how much structural alteration in a given dimension of society is actually *necessary* to fulfill basic functional requirements of mechanized, bureaucratized productive activities. This latter may, in fact, become a most crucial variable in determining the eventual form which non-Western societies will take after they have achieved their maximum absorption of industrialization.

The need for distinguishing between true structural changes in kinship systems and merely normal rearrangements of personnel through time has been cogently stated by Fortes. He declares:

... what are the institutional mechanisms and customary activities of social reproduction in a particular society and how do they operate? ... In all human societies, the workshop, so to speak, of social reproduction, is the domestic group. ... The domestic group goes through a cycle of development analogous to the growth cycle of a living organism. The group as a unit retains the same form, but its members, and the activities which unite them, go through a regular sequence of changes during the cycle which culminates in the dissolution of the original unit and its replacement by one or more units of the same kind.³

Such an approach is decidedly essential if we are to understand the true nature of kinship organization in Indian urban areas today. In our effort to demonstrate this, we must first begin by stating the general features of the traditional kinship system found in northern India, the region where my field work was done. We must do so because, as is well known, any social structure varies in relation to what it has been in the past, as well as in relation to what it is becoming, due to the effects of forces of change. In fact, as we shall see, the evidence is especially compelling that such an approach is necessary when talking about India.

An entire tradition of Hindu law, ultimately traced back to Manu, lies behind and legitimizes the principles of relationship, descent and inheritance prevalent in this part of northern India; this is known as Mitakshara Succession.⁴ In brief, the following principles are included: (a) the "normal condition"⁵ of the Hindu family is

jointness, that is, it is a "coparcenary unit" which owes maintenance to all its members "in severality"; (b) property is inherited through male agnates; (c) females may not inherit the chief wealth of the joint family; (d) females become members of their husbands' joint families upon marriage and cease being members of their natal families; (e) residence is patrilocal/virilocal; and (f) any adult male agnate may call for partition of the coparcenary any time he deems it in his interests to do so.¹¹

The rule permitting any male agnate to call for partition appears to have been a means of assuring that younger brothers could not be deprived of a share in the property of the joint family after the father's death. For without such a rule, the leadership of the family, devolving upon the eldest brother as next in line of succession, might be used as a weapon against younger generational equivalents. With the coming of European rule, modern technology, bureaucracy, modern jurisprudence, the pecuniary economy, rapidly growing populations, and rising property values, a definite pattern or cycle of fission got established in domestic groups and persists up to the present time, especially in the rural areas, where most Indians live and where land is the chief form of heritable wealth. Basically it is this: Domestic groups divide in every generation, because after the father dies the sons eventually invoke their right to partition the coparcenary. There are a number of interrelated reasons for this. As the father ages, the sons are maturing, marrying, and having children of their own. This works counter to the unilineal interests of the kin group because it means that each son progressively develops conjugal loyalties to his own wife and children which often lead to conflicts with his lineal loyalties. With the removal of the father's strong patriarchal authority, these conflicting sets of loyalties become overwhelming because no basis exists for the reassertion of this authority with equal force at the intragenerational level. The right to partition nullifies the possibility of an all-powerful eldest brother who could use effective coercion to hold the unit together.

Viewed in the overall, we can say that contemporary social conditions, male agnatic succession, the right to partition, and the denial of major inheritance rights to women have combined to produce a characteristic developmental cycle consisting of a series of phases. During some of these phases, the personnel of the domestic

group accord with the standard description of the nuclear family, while in others they accord with that of the compound or extended family. This means that a mere counting of the number of simple and compound households displayed by groupings of North Indians would be wholly useless as a basis for ascertaining "modern" influences.

The phases through which the North Indian domestic group passes, therefore, are ultimately a reflection of certain fundamental events. Once again it must be emphasized that these events manifest themselves most ideally in the villages, where property and social relationships remain largely what they have been throughout Indian history. Thus, we are essentially saying that the village pattern of today constitutes an ongoing structural model for kinship relations, which is the frame of reference for modifications in kinship organization that may be observed in cities. This, of course, arises from the fact that the population of cities is growing rapidly and that this growth is being sustained primarily by migrants from the villages. These milestone events in the typical developmental cycle are: (a) the breaking of the heterosexual sibling tie by the out-marrying of sisters after puberty and their replacement by in-marrying wives; (b) a transitional phase during which efforts are made to keep the domestic group together despite the loss of the patriarch; (c) the breaking of fraternal ties through partition of the coparcenary following the death of the father. The full developmental cycle arising from these events follows:

PHASE I: The replacement of female siblings in the domestic group by wives.

Subphase A: (Nascent Period) From the moment of the first *ganna*, when the first sister leaves for, or the first wife comes to, her husband's household, until half of the *gannas* have occurred. During this nascent period, households contain a mingling of brothers, sisters, and brothers' wives, together with parents who are normally in transition from Young Adulthood (21-35)⁷ to Later Adulthood (36-50). The incoming wives are beginning to bear children, and the socialization of the next generation is commencing.

Subphase B: (Mature Period) From the point where more than half of all potential *gannas* have occurred, until the complete

replacement of sisters with brothers' wives. Here the domestic group is reaching its maximum size and generational depth. All brothers are acquiring conjugal units, and members of the parental generation are moving from Later Adulthood to Old Age (above 50) and death.

PHASE II: A period when the coparcenary unit is a fraternal extended family after the death of the patriarch (normally the father of ego but occasionally a father's brother, or other collateral agnate). This phase is bypassed whenever there is only one surviving son, of course. When present, it can comprise a large, complex domestic group consisting of the brothers' conjugal units and sometimes, in addition, a widowed mother and/or other widowed female kinswomen.

PHASE III: Brothers partition the joint family and establish separate domiciles, thus breaking the fraternal sibling tie as a basis for corporate activities. Frequently, this occurs due to quarrels among brothers in which pulls of loyalty between conjugal and lincal ties become irreconcilable.

Subphase A: From the establishment of separate domestic groups by recently divided brothers until the marriage of the first child. Marriages occur early among traditional Indians and do not lead to immediate cohabitation. *Gaunas* await the onset of puberty. Thus, married children continue living in their natal household, but their marriages signify the movement of the domestic group toward repetition of the first phase in the developmental cycle—viz., breaking of the heterosexual sibling tie. Subphase A is normally "nuclear" in structure and must be seen as a normal period in the life cycle of the Indian domestic group and in no sense indicative of structural change.

Subphase B: From the marriage of each brother's first child until the occurrence of the first *gaura*. With this latter event, the developmental cycle has come around full circle, and the original domestic group has been replaced by however many new ones arose in the aftermath of the patriarch's death and the partition of the coparcenary among the surviving brothers. In Subphase B, the domestic group is moving from a nuclear toward an extended structure once again. Children of the

household have experienced their Childhood (5-11) and are preparing to enter their "social apprenticeship" (Youth, 12-20) where the learning of adult roles commences in earnest.

On the basis of the foregoing, we may see that structural changes are not automatically indicated where families of a specific kind at any given point in time were observed. A certain number of nuclear families will be *normal* for the kind of kinship system described above. However, the value of determining the temporal characteristics of the kinship system is that it provides us with a basis for determining when events might occur which would fail to lead to a repetition of the normal developmental cycle. Such events would, of course, demand careful scrutiny as possible indicators of true structural change. With these thoughts in mind, then, let us now consider the domestic organization found among fifty *rickshawallas* whom I studied in 1959, and who reside and work in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, India.⁸

In 1959, Lucknow had a population of around 625,000. One of the chief means of transportation was the bicycle ricksha, a three-wheeled conveyance that is propelled and steered in the same fashion as a conventional bicycle. Two passengers are normally accommodated on the seat behind the driver, although, by overloading, more are sometimes carried. The Hindustani term *Rickshawalla* denotes one who operates one of these vehicles. There are in the vicinity of five thousand bicycle rickshas plying Lucknow's streets; driving these conveyances is obviously a purely menial occupation, and even casual observation reveals that most drivers are recent arrivals from rural areas, who have taken this job because they are qualified for little else.⁹

It was found that despite their living in a large city and practicing a modern occupation, the domestic groups of thirty-three *rickshawallas* fitted somewhere in the *normal* developmental cycle for North India, a cycle thought by many to be unobtainable in an urban, modern occupational setting. These were a mingling of Plains Hindus, Nepalis, and Muslims, which suggests that the same kinship principles were operating equally for all. In Table I, the personnel of the domestic groups at each phase in the developmental cycle are given; these are subdivided by generation and kinship role from the standpoint of the *rickshawalla* as ego. Here we see that most domestic groups are going through those phases in

which sheer numerical size and the pulls between conjugal and lineal ties are both at their maximum. That both are indeed subtly interrelated is suggested by the smaller number of *rickshawallas* whose domestic groups are in Phase IA, where numerical size averages about the same as for IB and II, but where the proportionate number of wives cohabiting with their husbands is less. Phase IIIA merely expresses the inevitable consequences of the process at work in the preceding phase. The domestic groups of ten *rickshawallas* have broken up into fifteen new units with an average personnel of less than four in each. Not all were the result of partitions among brothers, of course, because in some families there had been only a single son at the time of the father's death. However, all have in common the fact that they emerged as the end product of the natural series of temporal events which characterize the developmental cycle in North India. Most were nuclear, and the only exceptions were the presence of three widowed mothers entitled to maintenance for life in their deceased's husband's kin group. There were no indications that these groups would not repeat the normal cycle as they moved through time.

TABLE I

PERSONNEL OF RICKSHAWALLAS' DOMESTIC GROUPS IN DIFFERENT PHASES OF THE NORMAL NORTH INDIAN DEVELOPMENTAL CYCLE

| Phase of the Developmental Cycle | No. of Domestic Groups | Average No. in Domestic Groups | Male Agnates Ego/ | | | Female Agnates Si Da | | Wives of Male Agnates BeWi/ SoWi | | | Out-married Female Si Da | | Total |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|----|----|----------------------|----|----------------------------------|----|------|--------------------------|----|-------|
| | | | Fa | Be | So | Si | Da | Mo | Wi | SoWi | Si | Da | |
| IA | 5 | 7.4 | 4 | 16 | 2 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 4 | - | 2 | 1 | 40 |
| IB | 8 | 7.3 | 8 | 17 | 15 | - | 2 | 5 | 11 | - | 5 | 1 | 64 |
| II | 9 | 7.4 | - | 23 | 10 | 1 | 6 | 4 | 12 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 62 |
| IIIA | 10(15)* | 3.5 | - | 15 | 13 | - | 10 | 3 | 10 | - | 5 | - | 56 |
| IIIB | 1 | 7.0 | - | 1 | 2 | - | 3 | - | 1 | - | - | - | 6 |
| Totals | 33(38) | 6.1 | 12 | 72 | 42 | 2 | 27 | 16 | 38 | 1 | 13 | 6 | 228 |

* Ten respondents' domestic groups had split into fifteen IIIA units.

Among these normally unfolding domestic groups, two basic residential themes prevailed—a dispersed residential pattern and a single-household pattern. Among the former many were rural-based, many were not. By rural-based is meant that the main body of kin are in a village while ego is in the city, either alone, or in company of his conjugal unit and/or some other male sibling, to

earn a cash income which is seen as a contribution to the entire kin group's economic well-being. The main criterion of whether a group with a dispersed residential pattern is still definable as a domestic group is, of course, whether it continues to function as a coparcenary unit sharing economic resources. All of the urban-based domestic groups except one maintained a single household regardless of whether nuclear or compound, which indicates that even in the city the basic impulse to form complex corporate kin groups remains strong despite the supposedly atomizing effects of pecuniary standards, inflated costs, congested living, etc. The shift from traditional occupations and rural living to modern occupations and urban living does not necessarily destroy the corporate kin group. What actually occurs is that the emphasis of caste is shifted to what I have elsewhere¹⁰ termed "adaptive functions," while concomitantly the emphasis of the corporate kin group is shifted from a narrower to a broader range of economic diversification. Put another way, the income structure of the domestic group is modified to accommodate the new economic environment in a fashion that preserves its corporate nature.

Corporateness undoubtedly remains a major value in the Indian kinship system because even in the contemporary urban society and social order it serves useful purposes. Menial occupations such as driving rickshas are very poorly reimbursed, which means that dependence upon other kin in an atmosphere of shared economic well-being inevitably has a powerful appeal. A low standard of living seems to impel the members of kin groups to tap all known sources of potential income and to pragmatically rearrange their occupational commitments in response to opportunities as they arise. The truth of this is apparent not only in the persistence of the normal developmental cycle among so many *rickshawallas*, but is equally apparent among many of the seventeen instances of domestic groups which failed to conform to the normal cycle. Among the latter, four general categories of aberrant structure could be differentiated, which are called: (1) the isolated individual, (2) arrested conjugality, (3) arrested lineality, and (4) true neolocality. Each will be considered in turn.

In five cases, individuals were encountered who had simply broken off all ties with their kin groups and were leading an entirely isolated existence in Lucknow. It was clear that all, in one respect

or another, were examples of severe social maladjustment. They were disturbed individuals who had found it impossible to make satisfactory adjustments to their domestic environment. One had abandoned his conjugal unit in the village and had fled to the city; the other four were either unmarried beyond the marriageable age, or else men who had lost their spouses and declined to remarry. One suffered from leucoderma, or "white leprosy," a highly stigmatic disease in India, and the other four showed distinct evidence of severe emotional disturbance. Driving a bicycle ricksha requires no special skills or education; it simply requires ordinary motor skills and reasonable physical stamina. It affords a variable, generally low income, to be sure, but subsistence can be at least minimally maintained through the occupation. It is an occupation that facilitates both spatial mobility and a measure of personal autonomy. The back seat of the ricksha, albeit with considerable discomfort, can be used as a bed at night if necessary, and I have seen it used in this fashion in innumerable instances; in addition, the owners of bicycle rickshas frequently have a shed or some other sheltered place where drivers may sleep and attend to other minimal needs. In short, features of the occupation have a ready appeal to certain classes of deviants and misfits, perhaps especially those suffering from strong feelings of alienation.

Another typical domestic situation, found to be characteristic of six subjects, was what may be called "arrested conjugality." In this pattern we have an illustration of how the desire to maintain the domestic group as a corporate body may lead to the almost complete suppression of conjugal ties in favor of solidarity based upon lineal ties alone. This occurs by the simple device of parents deciding to indefinitely defer the marriage of their children, particularly sons, so that the resultant domestic group remains a corporate body restricted to lineal kin. Under conditions of severe poverty and hardship, an attempt is made to achieve tight solidarity by foregoing the relationships on which temporal continuity of the kin group depends. This measure holds down the size of the domestic group while simultaneously obviating the necessity of coping with the potentially centrifugal conjugal and affinal relationships. I do not wish to imply that these are the reasons which respondents gave for establishing this type of domestic group, however. The usual explanation was that poverty made the arrangement of suitable

marriages for children impossible. In reality, however, the cause has to be deeper, because it is easily shown that many domestic groups as bad or worse off than these nevertheless contracted marriages. It is perhaps a matter of not deliberately starting out in the direction of arrested conjugality, but of "discovering" at some point that "failure" to find "suitable" marriages for sons is beginning to pay dividends in that their single status renders a greater proportion of their income usable by the parents. One may draw this inference from much of the interview material.

Actually, there were two variations of the above pattern which merely reflected the different points in the developmental cycle where it was begun. Three were cases in which two or more brothers had remained joint (Phase II), while either themselves failing to marry or failing to arrange marriages for their offspring. The other three were cases of men who had established Phase IIIA of the cycle but had then arrested the process of development by neglecting to arrange marriages for their children. It must be realized, of course, that in both variations we are speaking of heads of domestic groups who range in age between Later Adulthood (36-50) and Old Age (50+), and who are either unwed themselves at this late point in life or who have children in Young (21-35) or Later Adulthood (36-50) who are unwed. It is only under these circumstances that we can meaningfully speak of an "arrested" pattern.

Perhaps the strongest proof that corporateness is a cherished value in itself in contemporary Indian domestic organization is contained in the characteristics of the type I have called "arrested lineality." This appears to be a pointed effort to enjoy all the functional advantages of the corporate kin group while at the same time overriding traditional unilineal considerations. What essentially occurred with four domestic groups fitting this category is that, strictly on the basis of economic expediency, three individuals and one entire conjugal unit had broken away from their lineal kin group and attached themselves to the domestic groups of persons who are normally residentially separate from ego. One person had adopted corporate residence with a mother's brother's domestic group in Lucknow, another with a father's sister's, and still another with a wife's brother's household. A fourth had affiliated with his father's younger brother, to be sure, but this had taken place long after the two had partitioned the original coparcenary and adopted separate

domiciles in separate communities. Among the *rickshawallas*, only four subjects displayed arrested lineality; but evidence from other data to be published in the near future makes it plain that this represents an important functional adjustment to Indian urbanization and modernization, which must be taken into account by investigators. It bears repeating in this context that the principle of corporateness in the broad sense, which implies economic cooperation and the sharing of economic resources among a grouping of kinsmen, must be conceptually distinguished from a given formal kinship structure which, under given sets of conditions, has heretofore been the exclusive, recognized basis for determining the personnel of corporate kin groups. Variations in domestic organization that appear possible in Indian cities today suggest that a considerable latitude exists for compromise structures which both recombine established principles of kinship organization and at times override them completely—all of this being undertaken, of course, in the name of achieving corporate units bound together by kinship ties.

True neolocality, in which a conjugal unit formally detaches itself from all other kin groups and assumes an entirely autonomous existence, was rare among *rickshawallas*. Only two cases were reported.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

(1) Entry into modern urban occupations does not automatically imply the disintegration of the extended family and its replacement by the neolocal nuclear family. Assumptions that this invariably occurs arise from historical experiences with industrialization in the West on the one hand, and with failure to distinguish normal processes of transformation in domestic groups from genuine structural change, on the other. The case of the Lucknow *rickshawallas* indicates that in a country like India, at least, compound kin groups are retained with great frequency in the urban environment regardless of occupation. Nuclear families almost invariably appear to be merely phases in the developmental cycle, rather than genuinely new manifestations of kinship structure.

(2) Compound kin groups persist because corporate activities determined and validated by kinship ties continue to enjoy importance in the eyes of those whose life and work are situated in cities.

That corporateness is the principal end valued is attested by the variations that occur in domestic organization in order to achieve it. Both lineal and affinal considerations are at times overridden for the purpose of assuring the existence of a grouping of kinsmen who will contribute the fruits of an often wide diversity of occupations to the common lot.

NOTES

1. Radhakamal Mukerjee and Baljit Singh, *Social Profiles of a Metropolis* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962), p. 37.

2. Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).

3. Meyer Fortes, "Introduction," in *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*, ed. Jack Goody ("Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology," No. 1) (1959), p. 2.

4. D. F. Mulla, *Principles of Hindu Law* (Calcutta: Eastern Law House, 1952).

5. *Ibid.*

6. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 introduced fundamental changes in traditional systems of law like the Mitakshara. For example, female agnates now technically enjoy the same succession rights as male agnates in the coparcenary. In reality, however, most Indians are continuing to adhere to the old legal pattern. How long this will persist is difficult to judge at this juncture, but it probably depends in part on the rapidity with which females become familiar with their new legal rights and find ways of enforcing them.

7. The following categories are employed in making age differentiations among Indians I have studied:

| | | |
|-----------------|-----------|---|
| INFANCY | 0-4 years | Prelingual and dependent. |
| CHILDHOOD | 5-11 " | Lingual, active but prepubescent. |
| YOUTH | 12-20 " | Puberty, marriage, social apprenticeship. |
| YOUNG ADULTHOOD | 21-35 " | Maximum physical contribution to family. |
| LATER ADULTHOOD | 36-50 " | Maximum administrative contribution to family. |
| OLD AGE | 50+ " | <i>De jure</i> status, rights to maintenance and "respect." |

8. My work in India was made possible by three generous sources to whom I express my heartfelt thanks. From 1960 to 1962, support came in the form of concurrent postdoctoral fellowships from the National Institute of Mental Health. A postdoctoral fellowship from the National Science Foundation facilitated my work in 1959-1960. My first trip to India was in 1954-1955 as a Fulbright Student.

9. Basic data on the *rickshawalla* sample are contained in Tables II and III.

TABLE II

CASTE, ETHNIC AND NATIONAL COMPOSITION OF A SAMPLE OF FIFTY RICKSHAWALLAS IN LUCKNOW, INDIA, 1959

| Community, Nationality, Caste | Traditional Occupation | Current Caste Occupation | Number |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|---------|
| <i>Plains Hindu</i> | | | (27) |
| Brahman | Priest | Priest/Cultivator | 4 |
| Thakur | Warrior/Ruler | Cultivator | 4 |
| Ahir | Cowherd | Cowherd/Cultivator | 1 |
| Gujar | Grazer | Cultivator | 1 |
| Kurmi | Cultivator | Cultivator | 1 |
| Murau | Veg. Cultivator | Cultivator | 2 |
| Kumhar | Potter | Cultivator | 1 |
| Kahar | Water Carrier | Variable occupations | 4 |
| Kori | Weaver | Menial occupations | 2 |
| Jaiswara | Scavenger/Tanner | Menial occupations | 5 |
| Chamar | Scavenger/Tanner | Scavenger/Menial occupations | 1 |
| Luniya | Grave digger | Menial occupations | 1 |
| <i>Nepali Hindu</i> | | | (4) |
| Chetri | Warrior | Variable occupations | 4 |
| <i>Muslim</i> | Non-Hindu | Variable occupations | 19 (19) |
| Total | | | 50 (50) |

TABLE III

AGE, MARITAL STATUS AND RESIDENCE OF FIFTY BECYCLE RICKSHAWALLAS IN LUCKNOW, INDIA, 1959

| Age Category | Rural | | Urban | | Married | | Unmarried | | Total | |
|-------------------------|-------|----------|-------|----------|---------|----------|-----------|----------|-------|----------|
| | No. | Per Cent | No. | Per Cent | No. | Per Cent | No. | Per Cent | No. | Per Cent |
| Youth (12-20) | 5 | 16 | 6 | 33 | 2 | 18 | 9 | 82 | 11 | 22 |
| Young Adulthood (21-35) | 20 | 63 | 12 | 67 | 17 | 53 | 15 | 47 | 32 | 64 |
| Later Adulthood (36-50) | 5 | 16 | - | - | 3 | 60 | 2 | 40 | 5 | 10 |
| Old Age (above 50) | 2 | 5 | - | - | 1 | 50 | 1 | 50 | 2 | 4 |
| Totals | 32 | 100 | 18 | 100 | 23 | 46 | 27 | 54 | 50 | 100 |

10. Harold A. Gould, "The Adaptive Functions of Caste in Contemporary Indian Society," *Asia Survey*, Vol. III (September 1963), pp. 427-438.