

KINSHIP ORGANIZATION IN URBAN TAMIL WORKING CLASS FAMILIES IN WEST MALAYSIA

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Kinship organization within the traditional Indian Hindu family system is characterized by a complex set of norms, governing descent and alliance. The joint family structure originated from Manu, the law-giver who prescribed as an ideal that fathers and sons should stay together until the death of the father, at which point brothers could either stay together or separate (Kapadia, 1966:221). Orenstein holds that the Indian joint family is usually described as comprising a number of patrilineally related nuclear families living under one roof, sharing the same hearth, and sharing immovable property (Orenstein, 1961:341). This structure was perpetuated within an agrarian economy based on subsistence. With industrialization, however, there was tremendous growth in population, resulting in the expansion of urban centres and the rise of a new set of norms and values, emphasizing materialism, competition and individualism. This generated much social change in the overall organization of the core areas of Indian society, specifically the Indian family system. It was widely hypothesized by scholars that the joint family structure was breaking down and being replaced with the nuclear family, which was thought to be more conducive to an industrializing society. It was further maintained that traditional kinship ties were disintegrating.

Given this framework, the present paper is an attempt to analytically describe the structure of kinship organization practised in Tamil worker families in urban Malaysia. The second major objective is to compare the current structure of kinship organization with the ideal traditional kinship pattern. Finally, the salient factors influencing kinship structure in the Tamil working class in urban areas will be discussed.

The Data

The data utilized in this paper was obtained from a more extensive study on South Indian-family systems conducted in 1977 and early 1978. It was a comparative study of Tamil family structure in urban working and commercial class families, particularly in the state of Penang which has a high concentration of the Indian population. From a total sample of fifty families selected for the study, twenty five were Tamil working class families from a Hindu background. The families studied were "complete families" which consisted of a husband and a wife, both of whom were between the ages of 25 and 55, with at least one child. Single parent and childless families were left out of the sample. A structured questionnaire was utilized to interview both the husbands and wives separately on various aspects of family structure. In depth observation of these families was also undertaken over a period of time. A brief account of the background situation of these workers is in order.

The men in the sample were mainly government labourers from various departments in urban Penang, while 75% of their wives were housewives. The remaining 25% of the wives who were employed were largely factory workers and household servants. 96% of the men earned incomes ranging between \$100 to \$400 per month. This inadequate sum forced 32% of them to seek secondary occupations on a part-time basis. Their financial burden was increased with the large number of children in these families. These families were also forced to change their

residences at least three times on the average. This was due to the imminent element of change in their jobs and in the location of the low cost flats provided by the government for these workers. These major background features of low incomes, employment of wives, large number of children and constant changes in residence, have a very great influence on the pattern of kinship organization in these families, as will be subsequently discussed.

Kinship Organization: The Traditional Perspective

The traditional Hindu society was dominated by an agrarian economy, in which the joint family structure provided the required stability. The joint family consists of a few generations of male members and their dependents, living under one roof. These dependents are usually wives and children but they can also include cousins, elders and other family members who have lost their spouses or parents. It is in general a very supportive family structure. Its other basic characteristics include sharing a common hearth, holding common property, following the same religion and maintaining a system of obligations which acts as a unifying agent. In an agrarian society, land is the most important property. Inheritance of property is purely along patrilineal lines. Women have no rights to ownership of property. Usually the male members in the joint family commonly till the land and reap mutual benefits. Any male also had the right to ask for his share of the property, usually to set up his own household, if he so desired. However in day-to-day running of the joint family, formal authority lay in the hands of the oldest male member. There is a relationship of dominance — subordination among the members of the family on the basis of age, sex and ties of relationship (husband-wife, parent-child, older-younger, men-women) irrespective of the individual qualities of the members (Shah, 1965:73). The criteria of sex is important because only men own property and this gives them greater authority. Age is important in an agrarian society because it is equated with practical experience. Finally in the traditional Indian family structure there is an implicit set of relationship modes where for example a wife is subordinate to her husband and a child to its parents. This fixed authority structure gives rise to a clear set of social roles for the various members of the joint family.

These various rules and regulations governing kin interaction in the Hindu joint family, make it an extremely formal structure. Customary expectations are clearly defined and qualities such as respect, loyalty and submission to elders are held in high esteem. Individual aims and desires must be submerged below family dictates. Given these lines for kinship organization, a number of basic relationship patterns emerged.

In the joint family, the relationships are broadly categorised as being relationships among men, between men and women and among women. In the first category is the father and son relationship, which is marked by formal elements and social distance. In contrast to this the relationship among brothers is more open and spontaneous, though the eldest brother might still be treated with great respect.

In the second category the mother and son relationship is one characterized by deep emotion and attachment. The son often feels closest to his mother and confides in her. For a mother too, the children, especially the sons are the centre of her daily life, for even with her husband there is social distance. The husband-wife relationship in the traditional Hindu family is one filled with formal elements of interaction and differences in status. Before marriage these two individuals hardly knew one another. A young bride from similar caste and religious background was often selected by the elders in the man's family, in order to facilitate easy adaptation of the bride into the bridegroom's household. The husband holds a role of authority and his loyalty is first towards his family of orientation, rather than his wife. Contrary to this type of a relationship the brother-sister bonds are deep and filled with elements of protection. Elder brothers

are often highly concerned for the well being of their sisters. Even after her marriage, a sister can appeal to the brothers for aid and protection, should their husbands turn out to be cruel or bad providers. These kinship ties are further strengthened by the fact that the children of brothers and sisters have the right to marry each other. Cross cousin marriages are an important aspect in the kinship structure.

In the final category mother-daughter relationships and bonds among sisters are often characterized by similar features. These relationships are marked by much care and affection, but they are short-term relationships because daughters and sisters leave the household often after an early marriage. The relationship between sisters-in-law and with the mother-in-law is one of respect.

These three categories give a clear indication as to how kinship dynamics follow clear lines of sex and age division, within a patriarchal household. Kin contacts and ties outside the household are characterized by a strong inclination towards patriarchal members. There is much aid, either material or emotional, which is given to kin and interdependence is held in high esteem. Kinship organization in traditional Hindu families may be viewed as an elaborate system of social security, in an agrarian society run on patriarchal lines.

Kinship Organization in Urban Tamil Worker Families

The traditional kinship structure has been the basic model from which kinship organization in the urban Tamil worker families developed. Since the time of early migration to Malaysia, the Tamil workers carried with them the basic values governing Hindu family structure. However, certain conditions were instrumental in bringing about changes in the original structure. Majority of the Tamil workers, both in the plantation and the urban sector, have been wage labourers, without any form of property. They found themselves in a foreign environment, where interaction with other ethnic groups was inevitable. They had also come from India, as individuals or only with their immediate families. This meant that they had left behind their original kinship network and were forced to start anew. Furthermore, while the plantation workers had some degree of isolation from the other segments of society, which enabled them to maintain some original semblance of social identity, the scattered urban workers were caught in the process of social change, stimulated by industrialization and urbanization. These major conditions influenced the kinship structure among the urban Tamil workers in West Malaysia.

(a) Household Structure

From the data collected, it can be evidenced that 76% of the Tamil working class families were nuclear families, while the remaining 24% were extended families. The definition of a nuclear family is one where only the husband, wife and their children live together in one household. A household therefore, with more members, who have kin ties with either the husband, wife or their children is referred to in this paper as an extended family. There was not even a single case of the joint family structure which characterized the traditional Hindu family. The predominance of nuclear families can be primarily attributed to the fact that a low financial situation and constant shifts in residence do not encourage the maintenance of larger households, even in the form of extended families. These workers face intense financial hardships and are barely able to support a nuclear family. About 20% of the wives had no alternative but to seek outside employment. In their jobs these workers had to be prepared to move whenever the need arose. In addition to this, the housing accommodation that they were provided consisted of small single room flats. All these factors acted as deterrents to the maintenance

of a joint family or even extended family structure. There was also no major incentive like the joint ownership of property to propagate the larger household system. As a result, it was the nuclear or conjugal family structure which prevailed in these families.

(b) *Kinship Ties*

(Living as a separate conjugal household, does not imply a total break of links with kin. On the contrary these families still depend on kin for financial and emotional support. In this study when the working class couples first married, 52% of them lived mainly with the husbands' family. And only later with increased economic security, did they move into their own homes. This indicates initial patrilocality among these families.)

Another important trend which emerged from this study is that 24% of these families lived in extended households even after marriage. 50% of these worker families who live in extended families have only one additional member like a father, mother, sister or brother of the husband living with the nuclear family. Of the remaining 50% who live in extended families, 35% have both the mother and father of the husbands living in the household. The final 15% of the worker families had a married son, his wife and one grandchild living with them, indicating also that these sons were quite recently married and only temporarily living with their parents before moving into their own household. A comparison can be made at this point to the traditional kinship structure where patrilineal descent is still practised to some extent. Furthermore it should be noted too, that there are indications of the 'stem family' emerging. 'In the stem family parents reside with but one of their married sons, usually the eldest, while the other sons establish separate households as soon as they marry' (Orenstein, 1961:349). The stem family may also be viewed as a change in the nuclear family, to accommodate and provide for dependent parents. Thus even though it might be more conducive to live in nuclear families, stem families are resorted to, in order to accommodate the traditional value of caring for one's parents.

'In general, the ascriptive nature of kinship allows for a set of expected patterns of kinship relations. For example, the dyadic relationship between ego and his father, siblings or other consanguinal and affinal kin is generally institutionalized. An individual is obligated to conform to the expected pattern regardless of his personal feelings toward the kin in question. Failure will invoke appropriate sanctions.' (Ramu: 1974:620).

Even though 76% of these worker families are nucleated, there is much visiting of kin members. This is not surprising because living within a nuclear family structure can prove to be very isolating. There is a greater need to interact and obtain support, both material and emotional. The question of social origin and identity is crucial in this context.

(In these families, the wives more often than their husbands go to visit the kin members. The upkeep of extended family bonds often becomes a woman's task (See Table 1). In those families where there was no regular visiting of kin, their reasons given for this were mainly lack of finance, lack of time and the distance factor, in case the relatives lived far away.

These Tamil workers were also asked to indicate five important kin members they normally visited during Deepavali. It was established that the main kin visited were the immediate family of the husband and the immediate family of the wife. For example, husband's father, wife's brother and other similar categories of kin. Though there was a greater awareness of other kin member, these were considered further away in terms of social distance and so they were seldom visited. The notion of kin awareness was discussed by G.N. Ramu when he claimed that in his sample of urban dwellers in India there was an unusual degree of kin knowledge. Kin knowledge is understood as an ability to recognize the presence of kin and some

Table 1
Visiting of Kin

Visiting of Kin	Frequency	Husband %	Wives %
How often do you visit your kin?	Regularly	28	28
	Not so often	48	60
	Seldom	24	12
	Total	100	100
	Number of respondents	25	25

biographical information (Ramu 1974:621). These general kin members, however, are expected to be present during important events such as marriages and deaths.

The actual notion of kin (significant kin), therefore, seems to relate to a narrow group, which includes only the immediate family of either the husband or wife. Within this small range, traditional prescriptions, as to which family members should be given greater deference are not strictly followed. Kinship ties tend to be based on personal preferences. What this essentially means is that there is no specific maternal or paternal focus. And this is a radical change from the traditional kin structure which is strongly patriarchal in nature. R. Firth (1970) effectively discusses this phenomenon, which G.N. Ramu presents in the following manner.

“The nature of family life in urban areas allows a person a certain degree of freedom in the choice of relatives for regular interaction. Because kinship is less effective as the basis of urban social organization, social sanctions here cannot be easily invoked in relation to the breach of kinship expectations. Therefore, kin interaction becomes not only voluntary in many cases but also occurs only among a group of selected kin.” (Ramu, 1974:621).

These special kin with whom close interaction takes place are selected on the basis of a number of criteria and are referred to as ‘significant kin’. These significant kin were often from the family of orientation and were selected because of mutual feelings for each other. They were also selected on the basis of geographic propinquity. There is much mutual exchange of material and emotional aid among those kin members. Often the respect and avoidance criteria is called to play in the selection of these kin. For example, in this study there was a deep bond between children and their mothers, rather than with their fathers. This originated with the traditional dominance — submission pattern for relationship between the father and his children. In addition to this, the father’s preoccupation outside the household made him a more remote and unapproachable figure, who was to be respected. Another important point to note in this study is that since women do most of the relative visiting there is some inclination towards matrilinearity. These women would often visit the kin folk from their own families of orientation. However, at a more general level it is undeniable that majority of the respondents uphold the patriarchal tradition. A final point to note is that even with these significant kin, many of the traditional patterns of relationship are being eroded away and replaced by a more ego based pattern of interaction which is spontaneous to the situation.

Kinship Organization In the Rural Setting: A Brief Comparison

Majority of Indian families in the rural setting are found within the plantation environment. Similar to the urban Tamil worker, these estate workers are also provided housing which do not encourage large households. According to a study done by R.K. Jain, "The management is obliged to provide one 'line' for each married couple working on the estate but it cannot guarantee that the close relatives of the couple will be provided accomodation in lines of the same house block, or even in nearby house blocks" (Jain, 1970:40).

Jain further clarifies that in the plantation environment one must distinguish between a household and a family.

"A household is defined by the sharing of common meals and a common purse by all its members, even though they may not live in the same line. Although in the majority of cases a household is also a family unit, in some cases one family consists of two or three households. This happens when regular domestic co-activity, except the sharing of a common purse and common meals, takes place between two or more closely related households situated near one another." (Jain, 1970: 40-41).

On the estates therefore, even though managements discourage the joint family system, there is greater room for kinship organization, since majority of the immediate relatives are located within the same estate, when compared with the Tamil workers in urban areas. In Jain's study too, it was established that only 56% of the total sample lived in 'complete nuclear' families, 6% in incomplete nuclear families, 16% in nuclear families with parent and/or sibling; 6% in nuclear families with other kin and 6% in extended families (Jain, 1970:42). This indicates that even though majority live in nuclear families, there is greater accomodation of kin members. Aging parents especially lived with one of their sons and his family. Authority in these families was still in the hands of the men, though in a small percentage of cases there were female headed homes.

Interaction within the family is still largely traditional in nature, where the father and elder brother have to be respected. Women still have a much lower status and often a younger brother will order his elder sister to do chores for him. Sisters within the family have to work together, but they have few obligations towards their parents after their marriage. These trends give evidence of the maintenance of strong patriarchal factors in kinship organization. This is more keenly felt than in the case of the Tamil worker in the urban areas.

Among relatives too there is much visiting of kin since the majority of them live in the same or neighbouring estates. This visiting of kin is also often women's duty. But the patriarchal elements even in this sphere are strong, in that the husband's relatives are more frequently visited. There is also much inter-marriage among the kin members.

Generally, the kinship structure in the estates is closer to the traditional model of kinship organization, since the families are isolated from external influences, and there is greater room for social sanction if certain obligations are not met. As a result there is greater interaction and support among kin members when compared with the worker families in urban areas. The few changes that have occurred are often directly a result of low wages, lack of property ownership and the housing conditions. In this respect they are similar to the Tamil families in urban areas, which experience major changes in kinship structure as result of these same factors. However their rate of change is much lower since they are less exposed to the major forces of change in society, such as industrialization.

Concluding Remarks

In this study of urban Tamil worker families, the kinship organization is one which has undergone many changes when compared with the traditional model of the joint family system.

Majority of these families are nuclear in structure, where the husband-wife-child bond is deep. This type of a family structure is more conducive for an urban industrial economy, where transfers in the occupational environment and the housing provided for these workers, further encourage the maintenance of small families. Nevertheless there is some evidence of kinship organization which encompasses more members than those of the nuclear household. Some families support an extended household, mainly of patriarchal kin. There is also some evidence of the stem family structure emerging. In addition to this, there are kinship ties with significant kin, selected at a more personalized level. Generally there is much mutual aid and support among these kin members. This gives a sense of social identity and security to these families which already experience much economic hardships and uncertainties within an urban environment. These contacts with kin act as stabilizing factors in a modern industrializing society. Contrary to popular belief that close kinship ties hinder social change, it may be maintained that often these ties are contributive to the process of modernization. While the joint family has disintegrated, certain elements of the traditional Hindu kinship organization are still being perpetuated in the Tamil working class in urban Malaysia.

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