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Joint Family Culture in India: Meaning, Characteristics, Merits, Demerits

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For the Indian students of Sociology, the study of the Indian family system deserves special attention, not only because they are born in Indian families but also for here the family system differs in material respects from the western family system. The family in India does not consist only of husband, wife and their children but also of uncles, aunts and cousins and grandsons.

This system, called joint family or extended family system is a peculiar characteristic of the Indian social life. A son after marriage does not usually separate himself from the parents but continues to stay with them under the same roof messing together and holding property in common.

The family has joint property and every person has his share in it since the time he is born. The earnings of all the members are put in a common fund out of which family expenses are met. Non-earning members have as much share as the earning members. The Indian family system is thus like a socialistic community in which everyone earns according to his capacity and receives according to his needs.

The family in India is based on patrilineal descent. Children are identified by name and allegiance with the father's family. Property is passed from generation to generation within the father's family.

I. The Meaning of Joint Family:

(i) “ A joint family is a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred.” —Karve

(ii) “We call that household a joint family which has greater generation depth than individual family and the members of which are related to one another by property, income and mutual rights and obligations.” —I.P. Desai

(iii) “The joint family consists of persons having a common male ancestor, female offspring not yet married, and women brought into the group by marriage. All of these persons might live in a common household or in several households near to one another. In any case, so long as the joint family holds together, its members are expected to contribute to the support of the whole and to receive from it a share of the total product.” —Davis

(iv) “In a joint family not only parents and children, brothers and step-brothers live on the common property, but it may sometime include ascendants and collaterals up to many generations.” —Jolly

(v) “The Hindu joint family is a group constituted of known ancestors and adopted sons and relatives related to these sons through marriage.” —Henry Maine

Characteristics of Joint Family:

On the basis of the above definitions, the chief characteristics of joint family are the following:

(i) Large Size:

The first characteristic of the joint family is its large size. A single family consists of only the husband, wife and their children. But a joint family consists of parents, children, grand children and other near relatives along with their women. It is a group of which several basic families live together at one and the same time.

(ii) Joint Property:

In a joint family, the ownership, production and consumption of wealth takes place on a joint basis. It is a cooperative institution, similar to a joint stock company, in which there is joint property. The head of the family is like a trustee who manages the property of the family for the material and spiritual welfare of the family members. The total earnings of all the family members are pooled together.

(iii) Common Residence:

The members of joint family usually live under the same roof. They may also live in separate houses in close proximity to one another. They eat the same food and wear the same type of clothes.

(iv) Co-operative Organisation:

The basis of joint family system is cooperation. A joint family consists of a large number of members and if they do not cooperate with one another it is not possible to maintain the organisation and structure of the joint family.

(v) Common Religion:

Generally the members of a joint family believe in the same religion and worship similar deities. They perform jointly the religious rites and

duties. They celebrate all the festivals and social functions jointly. They also hold themselves jointly accountable for participating in social ceremonies like marriage, death and other occasions of family sorrows and rejoicing. They all share the family burden together.

(vi) A Productive Unit:

This feature of joint family is found among agricultural families. All the members work at one and the same field. They do the sowing and harvesting of the crops together. Even in the case of artisan classes all the members of a joint family do one and the same function.

(vii) Mutual Rights and Obligations:

The rights and obligations of the members of joint family are the same. None except the head of the family has special privileges. Every member of the family has equal obligations. If one female member works in the kitchen, the other does the laundry work, and the third one looks after the children. There is rotation of duties as well.

Origin of Joint Family System:

It may not, however, be presumed that joint family system originated in India. This institution is said to be the outcome of the settling down of the Aryans in different parts of the world. We have similar institutions practically all over the world. As we have learnt before in the ancient Roman society, the supreme authority rested in the eldest male member of the family who, in administering the family affairs, was entitled to take all steps.

When the pastoral stage was over and the people began to live a settled life by tilling the soil, constructing the house and maintaining the patrimony, joint family system came into existence. Difficulties of communication and travel compelled all the members of the family to live together and carry on jointly the family occupation in agriculture or trade.

Over and above these causes the kinship idea and the religion emphasizing ancestor worship further made joint family a complex organisation catering to the spiritual and economic needs of the large family groups which composed the society. In other parts of the world while joint family system has disappeared, in India, it still continues though suffering heavy strains brought about by industrialization and urbanization.

II. Merits of Joint Family System:

The following are the chief merits of the joint family system:

(i) Ensures economic progress:

It enables economic progress of the country since everyone in the family is guaranteed bare subsistence, a first condition of economic progress. Unless people are assured of food and shelter they would not devote themselves sincerely to the work of country's progress. It is an essential condition of national progress that the citizens must at least get two meals a day. Joint family provides this to its members and thus enables them to devote themselves to nation's progress.

(ii) Division of labour:

It secures the advantages of the division of labour. Every member in the family is given work according to his abilities without being taxed unduly. Every phase of family's life is managed by all members including women and children. Thus, during the harvest season every member of the family helps in harvesting the crops. No outside labour is required.

(iii) Economy:

It secures economy of expenditure. Since things are consumed in large quantities they are secured at economic prices. Within small means a large family can be maintained if it lives jointly.

(iv) Opportunity for leisure:

It provides opportunities for leisure to the members. The female members divide the household work and finish it within a little time spending the rest of it in leisure.

(v) Social insurance:

In the joint family the orphans find a comfortable asylum instead of being thrown out. Similarly, widows are assured of their proper living for whom remarriage in India is unthinkable. The joint family acts as a social insurance company for the old, sick and incapacitated.

(vi) Social virtues:

It fosters great virtues like sacrifice, affection, co-operation, spirit of selflessness, broadmindedness among its members and makes the family a cradle of social virtues. Under the care of elders the undesirable and anti-social tendencies of the young are checked and they are prevented from going astray. They learn to exercise self-control. All members learn to obey family rules and respect their elders.

(vii) Avoids fragmentation of holdings:

It avoids fragmentation of holdings and the evils inherent therein. It prevents property from being divided.

(viii) Socialism:

According to Sir Henry Maine, the joint family is like a corporation where trustee is the father. Everyone in the joint family works according to his capabilities but obtains according to his needs. Thus it realises the socialistic ideal—from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.

III. Demerits of Joint Family:

If joint family system has received the highest praise for its many advantages, it has no less been vehemently denounced.

The main defects of the system are said to be the following:

(i) Home for idlers:

Joint family is the home for idlers and drones as the non-earning members do not want to earn their livelihood. When a person can eat comfortably without exerting himself, he is unlikely to indulge in any strenuous activity. Mostly, in the joint family it happens that some people have to exhaust themselves while the others lead a life of utter lethargy.

(ii) Hindrance in the development of personality:

In joint family there is very little opportunity for the fostering of individual autonomy or self-dependence. The whole environment of the family is not congenial for the growth of the individual because he is bound down by the minutest rules and regulations framed by the head of the family who looks upon men and women as children even when they attain adulthood.

(iii) Encourage litigation:

The joint family system encourages litigation, for at the time of partition of common property generally disputes crop up which are not settled without a recourse being taken to law. In case of agricultural families partition leads to fragmentation of holdings which is harmful from the viewpoint of agricultural progress.

(iv) Leads to quarrels:

It is the hotbed of quarrels and bickering especially among the female members. Generally, there is hatred and jealousy between the wives of brothers. There is continuous strife and fighting over the doings of children. There is also the clash of ideas and temperaments on

account of which there are constant quarrels between the elder and young members of the family.

(v) Privacy denied:

In a joint family privacy is denied to the newlywed couple. The brides of the sons do not get an opportunity to develop their personality. They serve the entire family like slaves. They hardly meet their husbands during the day.

The invariable presence of other family members shames the bride and she cannot freely talk to her husband. Any natural love between husband and wife is prevented from blossoming. There is also no limit to the injustice done by the mother-in-law. In some cases this injustice becomes so inhuman and unbearable that women become fed up and commit suicide.

(vi) Unfavourable to accumulation of capital:

It is not favourable to large accumulation of capital. When one has to share one's income with large family, it is not possible to save much. The property of the family being jointly owned is sometimes allowed to go waste.

(vii) Uncontrolled procreation:

In the joint family the responsibility for bringing up and educating the children is shared. No individual feels responsibility to control procreation because of the limited income of the family. The offspring of one member will be treated on the same footing as others. No distinction is made between the statuses of the family members. In this way no direct benefits occur to an individual in the joint family by practising family planning or earning more.

Thus the joint family system has got both its strong proponents as well as opponents. However, we are to remember that no institution is perfect and also that no institution full of defects can exist very long. The joint family system has been in existence since the society changed from the agricultural stage of economic development.

While the system is breaking down in cities, it still largely prevails in the villages especially among the agricultural families. Though there may be exceptions here and there, yet it cannot be said that the system has been completely abolished. It is no doubt true that the system once considered the pillar of stability is finding it difficult to withstand the dizzying pace of social mobility and the transformation of values.

IV. Disintegration of Joint Family:

The following factors are responsible for the disintegration of joint family system:

(i) Industrialization:

The joint family system is most suited to agricultural families. India today is on the way to industrialization. With the establishment of new factories in urban areas workers from the villages move to the cities which breaks the joint family.

(ii) Extension of communications and transport:

As we saw above difficulties of communication and travel in ancient times compelled all the members of the family to live together and carry on the family occupation in agriculture and trade jointly.

Today when the means of communication and transport have been extended it is no longer necessary for men to stay with the family and carry on the family occupation. Now they go to the city and take up any other occupation or even living in the village adopt some other trade and when they adopt a trade different from the family trade, they establish a new home.

(iii) Decline of agriculture and village trades:

The joint family system in India flourished in the days of yore when agriculture and trade in the villages were in a sound position. Today with the establishment of factories the commodities produced by the village craftsmen cannot compete in quality or price with those

produced in factories with the result that the village industries suffer loss and after some time close down.

With the closing down of the village industry the workers move to the city. Further, more and more land is being acquired by the Government for setting up big public undertakings, creating new sectors for habitation and providing public amenities.

The population in the villages is growing at a faster rate than in the urban areas. Thus the pressure on land is high and not only the workers but land holders also are compelled to go to the city to find job there.

Owing to the onrush of people from the villages to the cities the Hindu joint family system breaks down. Besides the decline of agriculture and trade there are other causes as well which induce people to move to the city.

In the villages there are fewer facilities for entertainment and recreation, less opportunities for employment for the educated and inadequate opportunities for the education of children. A gentleman so called finds little attraction to stay on in the village.

(iv) Impact of the West:

India today has been greatly influenced in her social outlook by western thought and ideology. Our modern laws relating to marriage and divorce have been enacted on western pattern. Our education is entirely foreign in outlook and approach.

We have begun to look at the family as a partnership and not as a sacrament. Our views especially of the young men and women on sex and family relations have undergone a change. The influence of individualism has made deep inroads in the Indian outlook.

(v) New Social Legislation:

The joint family system in India has been very much influenced by the new social legislations consisting of the Civil Marriage Act (1872), Hindu Marriage Act, (1955), and Hindu Succession Act (1956). The

Civil Marriage Act enabled the adult boys and girls to marry against the wishes of their parents.

The Hindu Marriage Act enabled the women to seek divorce under certain conditions. The Hindu Succession Act gave the right of equal inheritance to women. All these acts have influenced the solidarity of the joint family and relationships between brothers and sisters, parents and children and husbands and wives.

K. S. Sambasivan, a contemporary Indian writer, dealing with the effect of the modern forces on the working class families of India writes.

“Industrialization has contributed much to family disorganisation. In its result most of the important ties that bind all family members together in an agricultural society began to loosen. Again, the worker unaccustomed to the work life in the factory also becomes disorganised and in such a condition is not able to enjoy the richness of the family. This condition affects his emotions also, leading him to seek pleasure through unnatural forces like alcohol, prostitution etc. Factory occupation has made members of the same family economically independent. The joint family, so common in India, is gradually disappearing.”

Most of the workmen when questioned by researchers express themselves against joint family system and prefer to live in separate families. It means that the joint family system under modern influence is weakening.

It is, however, to be remembered that joint family system in India has not completely died out. The causes of its disintegration are mainly social. The Indian people still keep intact the family attachment and live their traditional morality. Hindu sentiments are even today in favour of joint family.

Even in cases where family property has got divided and income of the family members is not pooled, the constituent householders consider themselves duty bound to participate in ceremonial celebrations like marriage, birthday, and religious functions. Such

participation keeps the joint family feelings alive. The thinkers who criticize the system have not been able to appreciate it properly.

Compromise and mutual adjustment are the keynotes of the Indian joint family system. The joint family is not a place where individuality is crushed but it is a cooperative institution where every member does his duty under the guidance of the eldest members.

In it we have a synthesis of individual and common interests; here are inculcated social virtues which make man a good citizen and teach him to live for all. What is needed today is to find out the ways by which the virtues of the joint family system can be retained. And this will require the intelligent cooperation of rulers and social scientists aided by enlightened public opinion.