



SOCIAL KINSHIP SYSTEM IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Kinship is a relationship between any entities that share a genealogical origin, through either biological, cultural, or historical descent. In anthropology the kinship system includes people related both by descent and marriage, while usage in biology includes descent and mating. Human kinship relations through marriage are commonly called "affinity" in contrast to "descent" (also called "consanguinity"), although the two may overlap in marriages among those of common descent. Family relations as sociocultural genealogy lead back to gods (see mythology, religion), animals that were in the area or natural phenomena (as in origin stories). Kinship is one of the most basic principles for organizing individuals into social groups, roles, categories, and genealogy. Family relations can be represented concretely (mother, brother, grandfather) or abstractly after degrees of relationship. A relationship may have relative purchase (e. g. father is one regarding a child), or reflect an absolute (e. g. status difference between a mother and a childless woman). Degrees of relationship are not identical to heirship or legal succession. Many codes of ethics consider the bond of kinship as creating obligations between the related persons stronger than those between strangers, as in Confucian filial piety.

KEY WORDS:

Sociology, Kinship, Affinity, Agnate, Alliance, marriage.

INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION OF KINSHIP SYSTEM

kinship system refers to a set of persons recognised as relatives either by virtue of a blood relationship or by virtue of a marriage relationship. In sociology, all blood relationships are known by a technical term, consanguinity. Similarly, all relationships through marriage are given the term affinity. For example, the relationships between mother and son/daughter, sister and brother/sister, father and son/daughter are consanguinal, while relationships between father/mother-in-law and daughter-/son-in-law are affinal.

MAIN APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF KINSHIP SYSTEM IN INDIA

Indological Approach

As the social institutions of Indian society are rooted in literary and learned traditions, many sociological studies have made use of textual sources for explaining the ideological and jural bases of our institutions. For example, K.M. Kapadia (1947) has used classical texts to describe Hindu kinship. Hindu Social Organisation by P.H. Prabhu (1954) is also based on Sanskrit texts. Similarly, Irawati Karve (1940,

43-44 and 1958) and G.S. Ghurye (1946, 1955) have extensively worked on Indian kinship system. Both have used textual sources to explain kinship pattern in different regions of India from a socio-historical perspective. We can, therefore, say that Indological approach to the study of kinship has provided a framework to understand the elements of continuity and change in the system.

Anthropological Approach: Descent and Alliance

Anthropologists have looked at kinship systems from the point of view of descent and alliance.

A) Descent Approach

Formally speaking there

are six possible avenues for the transmission of descent group membership, from parents to children. These are

- i) patrilineal where descent is traced in the male line from father to son,
- ii) matrilineal — where descent is traced in the female line from mother to daughter,
- iii) double (duolineal or bilineal) — where descent is traced in both the father's line as well as mother's line for different attributes such as movable property in one line and immovable in another,
- iv) cognatic (bilateral) — where attributes are transmitted equally through both parents. Here no unilineal groups can be formed but group structure can be cognatic, that is, the group of kinpersons on the father's and mother's side. Membership can be acquired through either the father or the mother,
- v) parallel descent — a very rare form of descent where descent lines are sex specific. Men transmit to their sons while women to their daughters, and finally
- vi) cross or alternative type descent — this is also very rare. Here men transmit to their daughters and women to their sons.

In India, we generally find the patrilineal and matrilineal descent systems. Of the two, patrilineal system is more common.

In sociological studies the terms 'line', 'lineal', 'lineage' etc. with or without the prefix 'patri' or 'matri' have in the past been used in at least four different ways.

- i) they have been used to denote corporate descent groups, i.e., lineage proper,
- ii) often employed to denote the chosen line of inheritance, succession etc. in a given society,
- iii) in the study of relationship terminologies the expression “two line prescription” has sometimes been used to refer to terminological structures which are consistent with “bilateral cross-cousin marriage”,
- iv) regardless of which lines (matriline or patriline or both) are chosen for the above three purposes, lineal relatives refer to one's ascendants or descendants. Lineal relatives are those who belong to the same ancestral stock in a direct line of descent. Opposed to lineal relatives are collaterals who belong to the same ancestral stock but not in a direct line of descent.

Alliance Approach

Another concept that figured prominently in the study of kinship systems in India is that of alliance. Kinship includes the consideration of the patterns and rules of marriage. When a sociologist pays special attention to these aspects of kinship, we say that he/she is following the alliance approach to understand the patterns of kinship.

DIMENSIONS OF KINSHIP SYSTEM

- i) Kinship Groups: Kin relationships provide both a method of passing on status and property from one generation to the next effective social groups for purposes of cooperation and conflict. So we need to identify the form of descent or of tracing one's relationships. In other words, we speak of the social groups within which relatives cooperate and conflict. That is why, we need to describe kinship groups.
- ii) Kinship Terminology: The list of terms used by the people to refer to their kin relationships expresses the nature of kinship system. This is why by describing kinship terminology, we are able to throw light on the kinship system. Most features of the kinship system of any society are usually reflected in the way kinship terms are used in that society. Generally a person would apply the same term to those relatives who belong to the same category of kin relationships. In this case, these relatives would also occupy similar kinship roles. In describing a kinship terminology, it is usual to denote the speaker by the name of ego. The word ego means I in Latin and refers to the first person

singular pronoun. The speaker or ego can be either the male or the female. Secondly kinship terms can be divided into two types. One covers the terms of address. This means that certain kinship terms are

used when people address each other. Then there are those terms, which are used for referring to particular relationship. These are known as terms of reference. Sometimes, the two types may be expressed by one term only. Thirdly, you would also like to learn how to write long kinship terms in short. For example, if we wish to write mother's brother's daughter, we may do so by writing mbd. Take another example, father's sister's daughter's son can be described as fzds. Here, 'z' stands for sister and 's' for son. In the same way you can write in short ffbfd for father's father's brother's daughter. This method of writing kinship terms is useful when one is describing various sets of kinship terms.

iii) Marriage Rules: Just as kinship groups describe the form of kinship system found in a society, so also rules for marriage, categories of people who may/ may not marry each other, relationships between bride-takers and bridegivers provide the context within which kin relationships operate. Talking about these issues gives us an understanding of the content of kin relationships. It is therefore necessary to speak of marriage rules for understanding any kinship system.

iv) Exchange of Gifts: Sociologists like to describe social relationships between various categories of relatives. As there are always two terms to any relationship, kinship behaviour is described in terms of pairs. For example, the parent-child relationship would describe kinship behaviour between two generations. In the two units on kinship system in North and South India, we are not dealing with any particular social group. We cannot therefore describe kinship behaviour. Instead we consider the chain of gift giving and taking among the relatives for understanding the behavioural aspects of kinship system. This discussion gives us an idea of how kinship groups interact and kinship roles are played by particular kin persons.

KINSHIP SYSTEM IN NORTH INDIA

i) Patrilineage: In North India, we have mostly patrilineal descent groups. This means that the descent is traced in the male line from father to son. Members of patrilineages cooperate as well as show antagonism in various situations. Let us see how this takes place in terms of a) cooperation, b) conflict and c) inheritance of status and property.

a) Cooperation

Members of a patrilineage cooperate in ritual and economic activities. They participate together in life cycle rituals. In settlement of disputes, the senior men of the lineage try to sort out the matter within the lineage. Cooperation among lineage members is strengthened because they live close together in the same village. As the farm-lands of lineage members are normally located in the same village, they set up their houses almost next to each other. In this situation, there is constant exchange of material resources from the household of one member to another. This pattern of cooperation is amply described in the studies of kinship patterns in North India by Lewis (1958: 22-23), Minturn and Hitchcock (1963: 237), Beremen (1963: 173), Nicholas (1962: 174).

b) Conflict

Lineage members help each other, but conflict also characterises kinship relations among them. For example, T.N. Madan (1965: 201) shows how in a Kashmir village, rivalry among brothers leads to partition of the joint family. Later, this rivalry takes more intense form in the relationships between the children of brothers.

c) Inheritance of Status and Property

From one generation to the next, transmission of status and property takes place according to certain rules. In North India, these generally pass in the male line. In other words, we have a predominantly patrilineal mode of inheritance in North India. For this reason, composition of patrilineage becomes very important. Thus, the lineage fellows cooperate for economic and jural reasons. They share jural rights and therefore they cooperate in order to keep the rights. However, they also fight among themselves about who is to get more benefits from those rights. Pradhan (1965) has described how the Jats and other landowners of Meerut and other districts around Delhi have a certain portion of the village lands and how it cannot be transferred out of the lineage. To keep the land within the lineage, its male members have to remain united. Thus, it becomes a main principle of their social organisation. Let us now discuss the second kinship group.

ii) Clan: A lineage is an exogamous unit, i.e., a boy and a girl of the same lineage cannot marry. A larger exogamous category is called the clan. Among the Hindus, this category is known as gotra. Each person belongs to the clan of his/her father and cannot marry within the clan or gotra. One usually knows about the common ancestor of lineage members as an actual person. But the common ancestor of a clan is generally a mythical figure. The members of a lineage live in close proximity and therefore have greater occasions for cooperation or conflict. Common interests or action do not characterise the relationships among clan

members because they are usually scattered over a larger territory and their relationships are often quite remote. These relationships do become significant only in the context of marriage.

Caste and Subcaste: Besides lineages and clans, the kinship system operates within the families of the caste groups, living in one village or a nearby cluster of villages. As castes are endogamous, i.e., one marries within one's caste, people belonging to one caste group are kinspersons in the sense that they are already related or can be potentially related to each other. Caste-fellows generally come forward to help each other when others challenge their honour and status. They may also hold rituals together and help each other economically.

Subcaste is the largest segment of caste and it performs nearly all the functions of caste, such as endogamy and social control. In this respect, we can say that the internal structure of the subcaste would provide us the framework within which we can see the operation of kinship system. The members of a subcaste cooperate as kinspersons. They, depending on the context, work together as equals in the sphere of ritual activities and political allies in socioeconomic activities. As Vidyarthi (1961: 53-57) has shown in the case of a very small subcaste, one may trace one's relationship with most members of the subcaste. On the other hand, in the case of a subcaste spreading over many villages, one may be limited to maintaining relations with only a part of the total number of kin. Klass (1966) in his study of marriage rules in Bengal calls this part of the total as one's 'effective jati' i.e., those people of the sub-caste with whom one actually has relationships of cooperation or conflict. Among the subcaste kin, we should also include those related to a person through marriage. Here, generally a person's kin through mother are called uterine kin and those through spouse are known as affinal kin. These relatives are not members of one's family or lineage or clan. They are expected to help and support each other and, actually do so when an occasion arises for such an action. While a person belongs to only one lineage, one clan or one subcaste, he would always have a string of relatives who do not belong to his lineage/clan/subcaste.

Here we should mention how sociologists, following the descent approach to study kinship systems, try to explain the fact of special place of the relationship between a person and his/her mother's brother. For example, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1958) went to the extent of coining a new term to express this relationship. Following the principle of filiation (i.e., the relationship between a father and son in the case of a patrilineal society), a person's relationship with his mother's brother is to be understood by the idea of filiation on mother's side or the principle of 'complementary filiation'. Without going into further details about this theoretical issue, we would like to tell you that those following the alliance approach like to explain the same fact in terms of repetition of intermarriage through generations.

iv) **Fictive Kin:** We should also mention, in passing, the recognition of fictive kinship among villagers. Often, people, who are not related either by descent or marriage, form the bonds of fictive kinship with each other. We find the evidence of such a practice in many tribal and village studies. You may refer to the studies by B. Bandopadhyay (1955), L. Dube (1956), S.C. Dube (1951), S.K. Srivastava (1960) and L.K. Mahapatra (1968, 1969). On the basis of common residence in a village in North India, unrelated individuals may usually behave like brothers.

Mahapatra (1969) points out that fictive kinship is a mechanism to provide even such kin who are not ordinarily found in a particular situation. For example, in North India where village exogamy is a normal practice, it is rare to find a brother to a daughter-in-law living in the same locality. She can get a brother only through a fictive relationship. In urban context, you must have frequently come across small children who call any older man 'uncle' and an older woman 'aunty'. This shows how easily we make use of kinship idiom in our day-to-day behaviour towards total strangers. These transitory relationships do not however assume much importance in terms of actual kin ties and behaviour associated with them.

Marriage Rules

Because every time a marriage is contracted, new kinship bonds come into being, we can clearly see the relevance of marriage rules for discussing the patterns of kinship organisation. In the context of North India, we find that people know whom not to marry. In sociological terms, the same thing can be expressed by saying that there are negative rules of marriage in North India.

i) Clan Exogamy

Belonging to one's natal descent line is best expressed in matters of marriage. No man is allowed to marry a daughter of his patriline. In North India lineage ties upto five or six generations are generally remembered and marriage alliances are not allowed within this range. In such a situation the lineage turns into the clan and we speak of gotra (clan) and gotra bhai (clan mates). Widely used Sanskrit term gotra is an exogamous category within a subcaste. Its main use is to regulate marriages within a subcaste.

ii) The Four Clan Rule

In Irawati Karve's (1953: 118) words, according to this rule, a man must not marry a woman from (i) his father's gotra, (ii) his mother's gotra, (iii) his father's mother's gotra, and (iv) his mother's mother's gotra. In other words, this rule prohibits marriage between two persons who share any two of their eight gotra links.

iii) Marriages within the Subcaste

Associated with local terms is the idea of the status of various units within the subcaste. Taking the example of the Sarjupari Brahmin of Mirzapur district in Uttar Pradesh, studied by Louis Dumont (1966: 107), we find that each of the three subcastes of Sarjupari Brahmins of this area is divided into three houses (kin groups or lineages) which range hierarchically in status. The marriages are always arranged from lower to higher house. This means that women are always given to the family, which is placed in the house above her own. In this context, we can also refer to the popular saying in North India that 'the creeper must not go back'. The same idea is reflected by another North Indian saying that 'pao pujke, ladki nahin le jainge' (i.e., once we have washed the feet of the bridegroom during the wedding ceremony, we cannot accept a girl from his family, because this will mean that we allow that side to wash our feet or allow the reversal of relationships). This shows clearly that marriage rules in North India maintain a hierarchic relationship between the bride-givers and bride-takers. In terms of negative rules of marriage in North India, the above description reflects the rule that a man cannot marry his father's sister's daughter or his patrilineal crosscousin.

Another principle should also be mentioned here. It is rule of no repetition. This means that if the father's sister has been married in a family (khandan), one's own sister cannot be given in marriage to that same family (Dumont 1966: 104-7). The term family or khandan is used here as a smaller unit of a lineage. This rule of no repetition implies the negative rule of prohibition on the marriage with matrilineal cross-cousins. In other words, a man cannot marry his mother's brother's daughter.

Kinship Patterns System of Kinship

One of the founders of anthropological relationship research was Lewis Henry Morgan, who wrote *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871). Members of a society may use kinship terms without being biologically related, a fact already evident in Morgan's use of the term "affinity" within his concept of the "system of kinship." The most lasting of Morgan's contributions was his discovery of the difference between descriptive and classificatory kinship, which situates broad kinship classes on the basis of imputing abstract social patterns of relationships having little or no overall relation to genetic closeness.

Kinship systems as defined in anthropological texts and ethnographies were seen as constituted by patterns of behavior and attitudes in relation to the differences in terminology for referring to relationships as well as for addressing others.

Biological Relationships

Ideas about kinship do not necessarily assume any biological relationship between individuals, rather just close associations. Malinowski, in his ethnographic study of sexual behavior on the Trobriand Islands, noted that the Trobrianders did not believe pregnancy to be the result of sexual intercourse between the man and the woman, and they denied that there was any physiological relationship between father and child. Nevertheless, while paternity was unknown in the "full biological sense," for a woman to have a child without having a husband was considered socially undesirable. Fatherhood was therefore recognized as a social role; the woman's husband is the "man whose role and duty it is to take the child in his arms and to help her in nursing and bringing it up"; "Thus, though the natives are ignorant of any physiological need for a male in the constitution of the family, they regard him as indispensable socially."

Descent and the Family

Descent, like family systems, is one of the major concepts of anthropology. Cultures worldwide possess a wide range of systems of tracing kinship and descent. Anthropologists break these down into simple concepts about what is thought to be common among many different cultures. A descent group is a social group whose members have common ancestry. An unilineal society is one in which the descent of an individual is reckoned either from the mother's or the father's line of descent. With matrilineal descent, individuals belong to their mother's descent group. Matrilineal descent includes the mother's brother, who in some societies may pass along inheritance to the sister's children or succession to a sister's son. With patrilineal descent, individuals belong to their father's descent group. Societies with the Iroquois kinship

system are typically unilineal, while the Iroquois proper are specifically matrilineal. The Western model of a nuclear family consists of a couple and its children.

CONCLUSION:

Kinship is a term with various meanings depending upon the context. In anthropology, kinship refers to the web of social relationships that form an important part of human lives. In other disciplines, kinship may have a different meaning. In biology, it typically refers to the degree of genetic relatedness or coefficient of relationships between individual members of a species. In a more general sense, kinship may refer to a similarity or affinity between entities on the basis of some or all of their characteristics.

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