



DISCUSSANT RESPONSE

by

NELISTRA SINGH
Department of Science of Religion
University of Durban, Westville
Durban, SOUTH AFRICA

to **Bina Gupta's**

**MODERNITY AND THE HINDU EXTENDED FAMILY SYSTEM:
A PROBLEMATIC INTERACTION**

The Eighteenth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Seoul, Korea August 23-26, 1991

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RESPONSE TO PAPER BY PROF BINA GUPTA

MODERNITY AND THE HINDU EXTENDED FAMILY SYSTEM:

A PROBLEMATIC INTERACTION

The paper has attempted to explore the interaction between modernity, industrialisation and urbanisation as it exercises its sphere of influence on the Hindu extended family system. The writer conjectures that this interaction is invariably problematic since the effects of these processes has been responsible for determining the functionalistic changes within the structure of the extended family. However, she notes that the situation in India is an anomalous one. Despite the rapid industrialisation of India in the present century with the country ranking amongst the tenth most industrialised nations in the world today. It is argued by the writer that something very much resembling the traditional Indian extended family, supported by the values and norms of obligations, responsibilities, and a sense of kinship that normally govern the traditional extended family still exists. The writer seeks to explain the degree of resilience of the extended family system to perpetuate itself in the face of the evolutionaly socio-economic transformation that Indian society is experiencing.

The writer in quoting Robert Crane notes, with regard to the urbanization of India's population, that whereas in 1921 approximately 11 percent of the Indian population was urban, by 1951 it had increased to 17 percent. Perhaps the inclusion of more recent statistics would have strengthened the writer's hypothesis. In this regard the following more recent statistics should be noted. While in 1951 the urban population in India was 17.3 percent and the rural 82.7 percent, in 1981 the urban population had grown to 23.3 percent and the rural had decreased to 76.7 percent (Bouton 1987:113).

Urbanization is a worldwide trend and is often seen as automatically accompanying industrialization and economic development. India's slow rate of urbanization is therefore viewed by some as an anomaly. Two reasons are often cited for India's slow rate of urbanization viz. (1) India's relatively slow rate of industrialization (virtually 71% of India's labour force still work in agriculture; and (2) India's relatively inhospitable and expensive urban environment.

The writer, in referring to Milton Singer opines that the Indian extended family system exhibits remarkable resilience in the face of a rapidly emerging modernized state. Indian culture is cited as one of the preservative factors for this phenomenon.

Within the confines of the paper the writer seeks to explore some of the primary factors responsible for the continued vitality of the traditional extended family in India.

Of the various definitions cited in defining the joint family by modern scholars the writer considers the definition offered by Irawati Karve as the most succinct viz. "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 family worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred".

However, no consensus is arrived at regarding the prototype of the traditional model of the extended family. The writer also cites the models postulated by Aggarwala, Desai and Singer respectively. For the purposes of the paper the writer maintains that "a three or four-generational group of persons related by blood makes up a joint family when they are held together by what may be termed, a 'joint family principle'". It should be noted that this model is structurally fluid and does not conform to the traditional model of the joint family as it existed in antiquity.

Further the writer notes that Aileen Ross maintains that industrialization and urbanization are forcing changes into the structure and relationships of the extended family and contributing to its disintegration into smaller units with preference for separate homes. The writer then notes that this view is challenged by several studies which opines that there is no close link between industrialization and urbanization, on the one hand, and the particular form the family assumes on the other. In this regard she cites Gore's study of Aggarwal families.

In Gore's study the reasons forwarded for the move away from the joint family was occupational and personal. However, it may be argued that occupational reasons are related to industrialization. In this regard the study in the Delhi area by BR Ghosh (1974:261) which analyses the changes in the family as a result of inroads of urban influence is noteworthy. According to Ghosh there is an increase from 0 to 60.9% incidence of nuclear type of household within the last 55 years. He maintains that urbanization does effect the size and composition of the household.

Although these processes have resulted in a structural shift towards nucleation, joint family obligation continue to persist. The paper cites Singer as identifying certain adaptive processes by which families maintain or modify joint family structures in an industrial or urban setting viz.

1. Compartmentalization
2. Vicarious ritualization
3. Separation of commercial "ownership" from "control"
4. Household management in industry
5. Cycles of Authority.

It is maintained that joint family living is not being rejected outright nor is there a mass preference for the nuclear family system. Since most of India is primarily rural it would be interesting to note if the variables discussed apply to the joint family in rural areas as well.

It is argued by Gupta that it is a mistake to equate the appearance of nuclear living units with the supposed disintegration of the extended or joint family in India. The emergence of nuclear households are not the result of the perceived disintegration of the joint family structure but is necessitated rather by inevitable external variables and processes.

The writer forwards reasons for the continued persistence of the Indian extended family. Firstly she notes that in spite of urbanization village life and agrarian pursuits is still the dominant factor in Indian society. Secondly the custom of early marriages and clearly defined roles in a joint family contributes to its resilience. Thirdly the caste system by impeding

social and geographical mobility is seen to contribute to the continuance of the joint family. Traditional Indian laws of inheritance also work in favour of the household. Psychological and ideological factors are also cited as very important.

The concluding discussion regarding the categories of tradition and modernity which is central to an understanding of the hypothesis posited in the paper should perhaps have been discussed at the outset. This would have provided a clear theoretical framework since the hypothesis posited is a problematic interaction between structures, in this instance the joint family, which is bound in "tradition" and the effects of modernity which is seen as a problematic interaction.

The writer notes in conclusion that the effects of industrialization and urbanization, processes associated with modernity, on the Indian joint family is limited. These developments in contemporary India has not led to the disintegration of the extended family. However, it must be noted that while the extended family still retains importance in Indian society today, one has to recognise that the traditional form of the extended family as it existed in antiquity has undergone structural metamorphosis. Although the effects of urbanization and industrialization on the joint family are seen to be limited, several internal factors such as mutual consent, occupational necessities and individualization are exercising modifications on the structure and

form of the joint family.

An important factor that needs to be taken cogniscence of is the changing role of the Indian women in contemporary society. Although still cherishing traditional ideals Indian women are becoming a multiple choice woman. Going on data gathered from their work experience, lawyers, marriage counsellors, social scientists and analysts believe that in the last decade there has been a sea-change in the attitude of urban middle class women towards themselves, their careers and personal relationships (India Today 15/10/1989:155). The sociological dimension of the phenomenal growth of middle class India, the huge influx of women into the work-force and their increased mobility afford them the opportunity to make choices in terms of family preferences.

To quote studies dealing with the process of change, Indian sociologist K Ishwaran (1974:176-177) suggests that one must not lose sight of the fact that even though nuclear families are on the increase, perhaps because of the greater geographical and social mobility that is found in a society being modernised these nuclear families cannot live in isolation without active co-operation and contacts with extended kin.

In her paper about the family in Gujarat, Hemlatha Acharya (1974:187), after examining the process of change in Gujarat concludes that the change of structure does not mean disintegration. She notes that it is true that family is changing, because roles in the family are changing. These do engender tensions, but the family is not disintegrating. On the contrary, it is moving equilibrium that characterizes family. It is advisable to view family types as a continuum, having at the one end the "ideal-type" nuclear family and at the other extreme end the "ideal type" joint family. In between, variations of both types occur, according to the time and place of the particular family type and the field of experience of its members.

In terms of defining the interaction of modernity and tradition on the joint family, an issue that needs clarification is the effect of the processes cited on the extended family as it functions in the urban areas as compared to its rural counterpart.

The utility of the values of extended family living cannot hurriedly be dismissed as antiquated. While the regional variations in India might show differences in nature and the rate of change, the affectional bonds in family life influenced by traditional joint family values play a very important part in maintaining the general stability of life in modern India.

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