

RESEARCH NOTES

Some Aspects of 'Complex' Families in Calcutta

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This study attempts to analyse the structural characteristics of a sample of Calcutta households which do not conform to the patrilineal pattern of intra-family relations. Its main objective is to delineate the pattern, if any, in the formation of non-patrilineal family organisation in a metropolitan urban complex.

The classification of such family units in terms of 'adhesions', i.e., those additional kin or affines who cannot trace their lines of descent among themselves, and who do not belong to the basic structures following the patrilineal norm of residence was first attempted about two decades ago by Mukherjee (1962) when these units were labelled as 'joint family complex'. In analysing the household types and family organizations in rural Bengal, Pakrashi (1962) likewise felt the need of making a distinction between male and female adhesions but his data did not permit analysis beyond the descriptive level. The importance of studying 'complex' families, especially from the point of view of types of adhesions, has also been felt by other scholars for obtaining "an idea of the extent of deviation from the rules and norms of kinship for the particular society" (Dube, 1974; 313).

For the West Bengal society, Mukherjee observes that 'complex' families "are similar in structural articulation and elaboration to the patrilineal joint families. By representing a transient formation in the society, . . . they register therefore another form of variation around the central tendency in the evolution of family organization (Mukherjee, 1977:58). Even if we, for the present, leave aside the question of tensions attendant on the grafting of kin and affines of various grades in 'complex' families (Shah, 1974), Mukherjee's observation does not make it clear whether this phenomenon holds good irrespective of urban-rural locations, religion-caste, and other societal stratifications. For, many have noted (Kapadia, 1956; Ross, 1961; Goode, 1963; Desai, 1964; Kolenda, 1968; Conklin, 1976; Freed and Freed, 1982, etc.) a significant association between family structures and urbanization, levels of living, caste, education and so on. Since 'complex' family is a structural reality, we contend that it would also show a pattern distinctive of its own. The present analysis seeks, therefore, (a) to identify the social groups which maintain such a complex structure in the city by accommodating those members who normally cannot

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live in their families, and (b) to project the findings in the light of some select variables.

METHOD

The present analysis is based on the data collected in connection with a survey on some aspects of family planning in Calcutta by the Indian Statistical Institute during 1973-74. A two-stage stratified sample design with block as the first and household as the second stage of sampling was adopted to select a total of 1417 households from the 64 sample blocks, randomly. Households were so selected as to make the design self-weighted (Sarkar, 1977; Pakrashi and Halder, 1980). The first stratum comprising households with one married female living with husband, and having at least one live birth, has been left out from this analysis because its selection procedure was somewhat different from that of the second and the third strata. The households studied comprised mutually exclusive co-resident commensal groups of people who usually lived together and shared a common kitchen. For the present analysis, a systematic classification of the households was made in relation to kinship ties which bound the constituents together in a locally functioning unit. Ultimately, a sample of 1474 family and non-familial units were taken from which a total of 170 'complex' family units were identified by the criterion of patri-virilocal norm of residence. They were further classified into two types—patrikin and matrikin—according to the nature of constituent adhesions. The socio-cultural and economic characteristics considered were: a) religion-caste, b) occupation, c) education, and d) age of the head of households.

FINDINGS

The analysis reveals the following characteristics of the city families :

1) The single-member households comprising male and female non-familial units account for 13.69 per cent of the total sample households in 1973-74. This is considerably at variance with the figure arrived at by Sen (1961 : 164) in the survey of Calcutta. It is difficult to imagine that this reduction could take place within two decades in the normal course. The only plausible reason could be the differential nature of design of the present survey and the exclusion of one stratum from the analysis.

2) Of the family-households, the non-extended families including the nascent family occur more frequently (47.15 per cent) than the extended family (39.16 per cent) confirming the persistence of the earlier trend.

3) Within the extended households, the lineal joint families occur more (44.64 per cent) than the collateral joint families (25.95 per cent) and the 'complex' families (29.31 per cent).

4) The 'complex' families account for 11.52 per cent of the total sample households which is marginally higher than the figure (8.92 per cent) obtained for West Bengal in 1960-61.

The adhesions which have made the sample families 'complex', deserve our attention. In about 60 per cent cases these 'additional members' were related to families as the head's widowed, divorced or married sisters or daughters; father's brother's daughters; father's sister's or as their progeny. Cases of members of the woman's parental home living with the members of her conjugal home occurred in 35 per cent families. The combined occurrence of both the male-side and the female-side adhesions was found in the remaining few families. The female-side adhesions were mostly wife's brother, wife's sister, wife's mother or mother's sister. Interestingly, there was no instance of wife's father living in daughter's family.

It was amongst the Muslims of Calcutta that we noticed a relatively higher proportion of 'complex' families. Table 1 shows that 21.48 per cent of the total Muslim families were 'complex' according to the patri-virilocal norm of residence, while the percentages were only 9.53 and 4.76, respectively, among the Hindu and other communities.

Table 1 DISTRIBUTION OF 'COMPLEX' FAMILIES BY RELIGION/CASTE-GROUP AND TYPE

Religion/caste-group	Type of kin/affine			Percentage of 'complex' families	
	Patrikin	Matrikin	Total	In each group*	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High caste Hindu	28	33	61	9.10 (670)	35.88
Sch. caste/Tribal Hindu	14	8	22	11.11 (198)	12.94
Other Hindu	15	11	26	9.45 (275)	15.30
Muslims	41	17	58	21.48 (268)	34.12
Others	2	1	3	4.76 (63)	1.76
Total	100	70	170	11.52 (1474)	100.00

*Figures in parantheses for this and subsequent tables indicate number of sample units.

The adhesions in the Muslim families were mainly patrikin, having lineal linkage with their grafted families. The few matrikin in these families comprised either wife's brother or mother's sister who were living with or without their children.

Among the Hindus, the occurrence of 'complex' families did not vary markedly by caste-groups. It was less frequent among the high caste-group which included the Brahmin, Kayastha and Baidya castes, and only marginally more among the Scheduled and other ritually impure castes. The nature of adhesions, however, showed a difference. Among the high caste Hindu families,

the incidence of matrikin was higher, while patrikin occurred more frequently among the Scheduled caste and tribal families.

The distribution of 'complex' families among occupational groups does not show any significant difference. But as to the nature of adhesions, a distinction between the "white collar" and the "non-white collar" workers occurs. For example, Table 2 shows the more frequent occurrence of matrikin among the "white collar" and patrikin, among the "non-white collar" groups. Again, within the "white collar" group, the proportion of matrikin is much higher among the professional, managerial and technical families than among the families of clerks.

Table 2 DISTRIBUTION OF 'COMPLEX' FAMILIES BY OCCUPATION CLASS AND TYPE

Occupation class	Type of kin/affine			Percentage of 'complex' families	
	Patrikin	Matrikin	Total	In each class	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Professional, Managerial & Technical	20	19	39	10.26 (380)	22.94
Clerk	16	14	30	11.49 (261)	17.65
Manual labour	23	17	40	10.36 (386)	23.53
Others	41	20	61	13.36 (447)	35.88
Total	100	70	170	11.52 (1474)	100.00
White collar	36	33	69	10.76 (641)	43.49
Non-white collar	64	37	101	12.12 (833)	56.51

Education is generally believed to affect the formation of family structure. To what extent it is related to the formation of 'complex' families in Calcutta is shown in Table 3.

Interestingly enough, the proportion of 'complex' families tend to increase with the increase in the level of education. The 'complex' families occur more frequently among those having high education and less frequently in the very low and low educated families. However, among the latter, we find a larger incidence of patrikin compared to the former where the matrikin predominate.

Table 3

DISTRIBUTION OF 'COMPLEX' FAMILIES BY MAXIMUM LEVEL OF EDUCATION AND TYPE

Maximum level of education category*	Type of kin/affine			Percentage of 'complex' families	
	Patrikin	Matrikin	Total	In each category	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Very low	17	15	32	7.32 (437)	18.82
Low	49	20	69	12.21 (565)	30.59
Medium	16	18	34	9.97 (341)	20.00
High	18	17	35	26.72 (131)	20.59
Total	100	70	170	11.52 (1474)	100.00

*Level of education "Very Low" includes illiterate or with education below primary; "Low" includes primary and above but below school final; "Medium" includes school final and above but upto graduate; "High" includes education beyond college.

Like education, age of head of family also affects the family structure as some have noted earlier (Mukherjee, 1977; Chakrabarti and Bhowmick, 1983). Table 4 shows that the relative proportions of 'complex' families increase with the increase in the age of the head of family.

Table 4

DISTRIBUTION OF 'COMPLEX' FAMILIES BY HEAD'S AGE—GROUP AND TYPE

Head's age-group (in years)	Type of kin/affine			Percentage of 'complex' families	
	Patrikin	Matrikin	Total	In each group	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
39 or less	21	19	40	6.46 (619)	23.53
40—59	48	37	85	13.64 (623)	50.00
60+	31	14	45	19.30 (232)	26.47
Total	100	70	170	11.52 (1474)	100.00

When the heads attain the age of 60 or above, there is the maximum occurrence of this type of family. And, there is a qualitative transformation of adhesions too. While the younger heads of families provide shelter and susten-

ance to their affinal relatives i.e., matrikin in larger proportion, the older heads do the same more to their patrikin. This will possibly become clearer from the following analysis.

In Table 5 we have examined the relationship of the 'complex' families with the types of basic family units with which they adhere to. We find that with progressive elaboration of the family structure there is a commensurate increase in 'complex' families. But the matrkin occur more frequently in the nuclear structure. The heads of these families, on further examination, were found to

Table 5 DISTRIBUTION OF 'COMPLEX' FAMILIES BY BASIC STRUCTURE TO WHICH THEY ADHERE AND TYPE

Basic structure	Type of kin/affine		
	Patrikin	Matrikin	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Single member unit	4	1	5
Nuclear family	41	44	85
Extended family	55	25	80
Total	100	70	170

be mostly young. Because of the non-nuclear joint base of the family tree the 'complex' families were more frequently of three-generation and less frequently of two-generation structures.

It thus appears that the occurrence of 'complex' families in Calcutta varies in relation to religion-caste, education, age of the head of household and type of basic structure, but not to occupation class. The findings that the relatively young (44 years or less) heads of families, having education beyond school final level and engaged in non-manual "white collar" occupations possess relatively more matrikin also highlights the importance of societal factors in the formation of 'complex' families. Table 6 summarizes the overall findings in this respect.

DISCUSSION

We have analysed a sample of 'complex' families in Calcutta in terms of their kinship composition and some socio-economic characteristics and found that the 'complex' families conformed to the basic pattern similar to the patrilineal joint families in structural articulation and elaboration, thereby reinforcing Mukherjee's (1977) observation from entire West Bengal and of Shah's (1974) findings from Radhvanj village in Gujarat. There are, however, a few families

Table 6

EDUCATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF 'COMPLEX' FAMILIES

Educational characteristics	Percentage to total of each religion/caste-group			
	High caste Hindu	Muslim	Other Hindu and Scheduled caste/tribe	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Higher educated (school final or above)	16.95	26.66	20.73	18.61
families with heads 45 years of age or above	(177)	(15)	(82)	(274)
Lower educated (below school final) families	7.01	25.71	14.61	15.47
with heads 45 years of age or above	(114)	(105)	(130)	(349)
Families with any level of education	6.06	18.42	4.62	7.63
but heads 44 years of age or less	(379)	(148)	(324)	(851)

predominately of a nuclear base which accommodate male and female matrikin and thus show neither matrilineal (Murdock 1949) nor any other pattern of family structure.

We have noted that the 'complex' families are more frequent among the Muslims in Calcutta. This indeed is an interesting finding in view of the fact that when all communities—major or minor—have tried to avoid the immediate obligation of their kin and affines (in order, perhaps, to retain their locally functioning family units patrilineal), this community has deviated from the central norm of patrilocality. The need of an elderly woman for looking after the household, while the other members of the base family are out for work, does not quite explain the situation for, seldom a Muslim wife goes out to earn a living and the female adhesions in the families under study are not always elderly women. The higher occurrence of 'complex' family among the Muslims therefore, calls for other explanations. One of such explanations may be the institution of marriage under which according to the *mihir/mohar* system a girl given in marriage is guaranteed of her right of money and sustenance. The *mihir* is the money given to the woman by her husband as a part of marriage contract and economic security (Mujeeb, 1967 : 226). As such, a widowed or a divorced woman finds it more easy to live in her parental home than in a strained atmosphere in her conjugal home. She cannot possibly live with members of her husband's parental home because there would be nobody to restrain them in exercising their authority over her. The parental family while providing asylum to them also receives economic benefit from its adhesion. In this way the family property, whatever may be its worth, remains within the family. Another factor which appears to have a role in this context is the prevalence of cousin marriage and the higher rate of divorce among the Muslims (Harman, 1977). The cousin marriage among the Muslims has usually

been assumed to be associated with the desire to maintain property within the family in the face of Koranic rules of inheritance (Ahmed 1978). This also explains why there is a larger incidence of father's brothers's daughters in their families.

Variations in the occurrence of adhesions by education also pose some interesting questions. For instance, with increase in the level of family education the chances of forming 'complex' families increase, and this is found in both the migrant and the non-migrant families.

It is usually held that the family in a metropolitan, complex individualistic society is shorn off all other functions and is reduced to a group defined by a sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children. This applies more to the educated city people. The results of our study, however, suggest beyond this. For instance, we have noticed a simultaneous operation of two counter processes here: in one, the general trend gets re-inforced, in another it diffuses. Otherwise, how can we explain the formation of so many 'complex' families among the highly educated section? Again, could it be that there has been some loosening of the patrilineal authority structure among them due to parallel rise in the women's status? The inclusion of the female adhesions in relatively higher proportion by the educated people is the only indicator that we can adduce to at the moment. The preponderance of wife's sister, wife's mother or wife's brother in the families of the educated group, rather than widowed or divorced sister, daughter, etc. and their progeny, which depends largely on specific situations, may be due to both domestic and socio-psychological factors. Among the clerical, professional and managerial people, there is a greater possibility of wives being engaged in service and hence a need exists for persons to look after the house when the couple is out for work. It is also socio-psychological, because it helps keeping the intra-family tension low. When a widowed sister lives with her brother tension often generates between her and her brother's wife. Thus, in such families the affinal relatives enjoy greater access and preference than the lineal kin. In many families, wives being educationally highly qualified and earners, exert influence over the household management in including in decision-making as to who would constitute the co-resident and commensal members. Educated housewives in urban areas seem to have a dominating status in nuclear families and as such their preference for selecting the grafted members of such 'complex' families has to be adhered to, to maintain domestic peace. Her preference, naturally, may go to the matrikin. Even if a member of the husband's family of orientation or his agnate has to be given shelter, her consent has to be obtained. These factors may indicate that a matrifocal trend is gradually emerging, particularly, among the educated section with the alteration of woman's status in the family.

Carrier-making and elevation of one's personal status by identifying oneself with the wife's family, if it is rich and influential, can also be a motive in a

few cases where the husband acts under his wife's advice and direction. This is expected to occur mainly in educated middle class urban families.

However, the change in the familial value-pattern may also shape the structure and composition of family. There is a growing trend among the younger generation to come out of their patriarchal bondage and the young men are now found to have lesser patriarchal attachment than in earlier days. A sort of "social polarisation" seems to have started, which has not yet taken a definite shape, but the slant towards affinity is visible among the urban people both in their action and behaviour

We do not know to what extent the urban set-up, type of economy or such other factors generate matrifocal tendency among the individuals, but each of these seems to have a role to play in its growth. The nature and extent of this phenomenon need a detailed study and analysis involving the role-relational dimension.

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