

THE FAMILY IN INDIA *

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The traditional patriarchal family of India was bound together by the caste system and especially by the belief in progressive trans-migrations of the soul. Because the rituals necessary to such trans-migrations could be performed only by a male child, the birth of a son was essential to family continuity.

Being of the joint type, the typical Indian family consisted of several married couples and their children, who lived in the same household. All of the men in such households were related by blood, while the women were their wives, unmarried daughters, and perhaps the widow of some deceased relative. This family type is still common in certain Indian provinces. In some cases four generations may be living under one roof, and the entire family group may thus number into the hundreds. The kitchen then is owned by everyone and there food is prepared for all. Under such circumstances privacy is, of course, practically nonexistent.

The property of the joint family is owned collectively, the senior male being its manager. Legally, however, he is merely the representative and trustee of the other members. The women have no ownership.

The social status of the female was very low in the past. At home, for instance, she was isolated to such an extent that she could not even eat with her husband. Furthermore, because a girl was considered an economic liability, female infanticide was quite extensive even until recently. Then, since a woman's husband was her god and teacher in all things, she was expected to be slavishly submissive and completely devoted to him. She could never demand a divorce even if her marriage were unhappy. Moreover, it was her duty to tolerate

* Part of a major study dealing with comparative family sociology. For detailed references, see Panos D. Bardis, *Dating Attitudes and Patterns among Foreign Students at Purdue University*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University, 1955, pp. 100-7.

the usually cruel treatment which she received from her mother-in-law. Also, when her husband died, she was required either to follow him to death on the funeral pyre (*suttee*¹ custom) or to remain a widow for life. In addition, when a woman was barren, her husband was allowed to practice polygyny. Finally, the wife's unhappiness and insecurity were intensified considerably by the antagonism of her sisters-in-law, who competed with one another for the mother-in-law's favor. Such rivalries were so intensive that, very frequently, they resulted in the breakup of many joint family households soon after the parents had died. That is why, according to a Kanarese proverb, «a thousand mustaches can live together, but not four breasts».

The *purdah*² system has also been common in India, especially among the higher castes and the Muslims. Under this system, women are secluded from the sight of all men but their closest relatives. This practice has frequently led to an increased concentration of the mother's zeal on her son—an attitude typical of practically all Indian women and reinforced by the higher status acquired by them at the birth of their sons. As a result of such attachment, some authors believe, the son tended to identify with and depend on his mother so extensively that later, since he usually sought in his wife a mother rather than a mate, his married life was dominated by frustration. According to other authors, however, the large size of the joint family, the lack of serious barriers between adults and children, and other similar factors have usually resulted in a rather satisfactory general adjustment for the Indian child.

Arranged marriage has also been one of the most characteristic features of the Indian family. The search for a mate, usually begun by both parents long before their child's puberty, was confined to one's own caste. Marriage between relatives was frequently prohibited. *Hypergamy*³ was also a rather common feature. Under this sy-

1. Modification of the Sanskrit *sati* : faithful wife. *Suttee* is defined as: 1) a Hindu widow who immolates herself on the funeral pyre of her husband, and 2) the self-immolation of a Hindu widow in this manner.

2. Hindustani word for «curtain», taken from Persian *pardah*, and meaning : 1) a screen hiding women from the sight of men or strangers, and 2) the system of such seclusion.

3. For a criticism of Folsom's related concept «mating gradient», see Panos D. Bardis, «Four New Concepts in Family Sociology», *Alpha Kappa Delta*, 27 (Winter, 1957), p. 16. *Hypogamy*, the opposite of *hypergamy*, is defined as «marriage to a person having a lower socio-economic status than your own» (*ibid.*).

stem, women were permitted to marry into castes higher than their own.

Like arranged marriage, child marriages were also very common. Most girls were married before they were fifteen. This practice, notwithstanding the Federal Sarda Act of 1929, which prohibits the marriage of girls below fourteen and of boys below eighteen, is still dominant. In fact, the Sarda Act has never been enforced effectively.

After a mate had been selected, the parents usually consulted an astrologer concerning the future of the couple's marriage. If the signs were not favorable, then the wedding was cancelled and a new mate was sought.

After the wedding ceremony, the wife followed her husband to his home, where she brought her dowry. This was the so-called bridegroom price, which characterized primarily the upper social classes, where the bride price was mostly typical of the lower social strata. The later type of price, according to some authors, was not different from bride purchase. This assumption, however, is incorrect, in view of the fact that the bride price was rather aimed at ascribing a higher status to the wife, in her new home. At the present time the bridegroom and bride prices are still typical of the Indian family.

In her new residence, the Indian woman became an outcast, if she did not bear children, for children, especially boys, were very desirable. That is why, in case of barrenness, the husband took a second wife or the couple adopted children from other families. This practice explains why a woman's son was so much her stake in life, and why mother's-in-law were hostile, or at least ambivalent, toward their sons' brides.

The divorce rate among Orthodox Brahmans has been very low, for marriage among them was considered almost indissoluble, except where the wife was unfaithful. In such a case, the latter was thought dead and a funeral rite might be held. Among non-Brahmans, however, divorce laws have been less strict.

Among Brahmans remarriage of widows was about as uncommon as divorce. Non-Brahman widows, however, often remarried. In the province of Madras, for instance, in 1891 this kind of remarriage was permitted among 60 per cent of the population. One may safely assert, however, that in general remarriage was rather disapproved by the Indians.

All of the above mentioned features are still dominant in India—

at least to some extent ; yet some new characteristics are now becoming part of the Hindu family system.

The large joint family household, for example, is becoming less common, while the number of smaller joint families with a shorter duration is constantly increasing. Remarriage of widows, especially «virgin widows»—those whose husbands died before their marriages could be consummated—is less disapproved at the present time. Male children have been given property rights. Child marriage and female infanticide are gradually being legislated out of existence. The *pardah* system has been weakened. The *suttee* custom has been prohibited. The family is no longer functioning as an economic unit. Finally, in the area of courtship, young people are enjoying more freedom today, increasingly emphasizing romantic love, while premarital contacts between the two sexes, including practices such as «necking», have become rather common, especially in urban centers.

The above and other similar changes undergone by the Hindu family system have been brought about mainly by industrialization, the introduction of the automobile, increasing secularization, improved education, and finally by the influence of the West ¹.

1. In a statistical report dealing with dating among foreign students, for instance, the present writer found that American customs had influenced the attitudes of young Indians studying in the United States. Indeed, the latter made an average dating liberalism score (theoretical range : 15.00–75.00) of 30.63, while that which they attributed to Americans in general was 68.22. The difference between these two averages was statistically significant, as a t-test indicated, yet the Indian value was found between the American average and that which these students considered characteristic of their home towns' people, back in India. See Panos D. Bardis, «Attitudes Toward Dating among Foreign Students in America, «Marriage and Family Living, 18 (November, 1956), p. 341, Table II. For the social distance between Indian students and various races and nationalities, including Americans, see Panos D. Bardis, «Social Distance among Foreign Students», *Sociology and Social Research*, 41 (November–December, 1956), p. 113. Finally, for a comparison of the Indian average dating liberalism score with that made by a group of young Americans, see Panos D. Bardis, «Attitudes Toward Dating among the Students of a Michigan High School», *idem*, in press.