

# Changing Family Structure in India

Dr. K.V Amarnath

Former Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology, Sri Krishnadevaraya University,  
ANANTAPUR 515003. Andhra Pradesh. India.

## Abstract

The family as a social institution has been undergoing change. Both in its structure and functions changes have taken place. In India, as in many traditional societies, the family has been not only the center of social and economic life, but also the primary source of support for the family members. The increasing commercialization of the economy and the development of the infrastructure of the modern state have introduced significant change in the family structure in India in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Specially, the last few decades have witnessed important alterations in family life. India's fertility rate has fallen, and couples have begun to bear children at a later age. At the same time, life expectancy has increased, resulting in more elderly people who need care. All of these changes are taking place in the context of increased urbanization, which is separating children from elders and contributing disintegration of family-based support systems. This paper critically examines the impact of various contributing factors on Indian family structure.

**Keywords:** Family size, Fertility, Mortality, Migration.

## Introduction

The institution of family is the basic and fundamental institution in the life of an individual. It is the basic primary group and an important agency of socialization. Historically, the institution of family has undergone many changes. The term family has been defined by many sociologists and anthropologists. Murdock (in 1949), after studying about 250 multi-cultural societies, defined family as a social group that is characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both the sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship and one or more children are owned or adopted by the sexually cohabiting adults.

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A family, according to MacIver and Page, is a group defined by a sexual relationship that is sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children.

Family, basically, is made up of individuals who are related by blood, marriage (or some other agreed upon relationship) or adoption who share the primary responsibility for reproduction and caring for members of society. Some of the important definitions of the family as given by various sociologists are enlisted as under:

**MacIver** defines family as “a group defined by a sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children.”

**Burgess and Locke** define family as “a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, bond or adoption consisting of a single household, interacting and inter communicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister, creating a common culture.”

**Davis** argues that family is “a group of persons whose relations to one another are based upon consanguinity and who are, therefore, kin to another.”

In contemporary time, family across the world is undergoing changes in terms of its structure as well function. Similarly, the changes in joint family system in India took place in the first half of twentieth century though this was in existence since ancient time. This has resulted in the emergence of the nuclear family system. Joint family left an emotional bond between two generations, which kept its members united in all situations. The tradition and culture was passed on through generations, which made them uphold ‘collectivism’ as a predominant social value in their life. On the contrary, ‘individualism’ is much sought-after principle by the freedom loving couples in the nuclear family. This paper critically examine the impact of various contributing factors on Indian family structure.

**Change in Fertility:** The reduction in average annual rate of population growth primarily occurred due to reductions in fertility levels. An inevitable outcome of declining fertility rates and increasing age at first birth in most of the countries in the world, including India, is a reduction in family size. Fertility declined due to the combined effect of substantial socio-economic development achieved during the last two decades and the effective implementation of family planning programmes. Hence, it has become irrational for many people to have large families as the cost of children is increasing. A main, emerging feature of modern family is the changing attitude towards the value of children. In traditional societies, where human labour was a source of strength to the family, more children were preferred to fewer. But as the economic contribution from the children in a family decreased, because of a move away from agriculture, the need for large numbers of children decreased. Improvements in health care and child survival also contributed. The emphasis was on the quality of life rather than the quantity of children, a new concept added to family values.

**Change in Age at marriage:** In many countries in world where significant declines in fertility are being experienced, reductions in the proportion of people never married have often coincided with or preceded declines in marital fertility. A substantial increase of the proportions never married, among both males and females, at young ages, has been noted in many countries. A consequence of the increase in the proportion of never married young adults is the gradual upward trend of the average age at marriage. The highest increase in average age at marriage of females during the period 1970 to 1990 was observed in India. A higher median age at first birth is an indicator of lower fertility. Postponement of marriage among females resulted postponement of childbearing with reduction in family size.

**Change in Mortality:** Mortality declines, particularly infant mortality, everywhere preceded the decline of fertility. Improved survival rates of children mean that when women reached the age of 30 they increasingly had achieved the completed family size they desired. Earlier, much larger numbers of births were required to achieve the desired completed family size. . In the last three decades infant mortality has declined significantly in every country and this trend undoubtedly influenced the fertility decline. Mortality decline, followed by fertility decline, altered the age structure of the population and also the structure within individual families.

**Change in family Size:** In India, the reduction of the family size could be attributed partly to economic difficulties, low levels of income, the high cost of living, the costs of education of children and the desire to maintain a better standard of living, which is best achieved within the more

affordable smaller size family. Consequently, the nuclear family with its Parents and children became the model of society and soon ruled out the traditional, extended family usually constituting three generations. In the mean time, female headed households have become a steadily growing phenomenon and increasing in India.

**Marriage Dissolution:** It is no longer the case that all marital unions, whether formal or informal reach final dissolution through death. A considerable proportion of unions are disrupted suddenly for reasons such as desertion, separation or divorce. An obvious failure in family relationship is where husband and wife cease to live together. Those women who are divorced at latter ages mostly remain single for the rest of their lives and live with their dependents. The idea that when a couple has children it will be less likely to divorce is widely accepted in most societies. However it is believed that in the last couple of years even in most of the Asian cultures, including India, a growing proportion of divorces involve couples with young children.

**Participation of Women in Economic development:** The commercialization process which opened markets in many developing countries has succeeded in replacing the traditional co-operation in economic relationship, with that of competition. In this process, the social institutions in these countries found themselves in conflict with the key aspects of the new economic systems. The economics of the family and the sexual division of labour within the family are very much determined by opportunities in the labour market. The developing economic of system India has facilitated the freeing of women from household chores and their entrance to the labour market. The declining ability of men to earn a 'family wage' along with the growing need for cash for family maintenance has resulted in an increasing number of female members (particularly the wife) in the family engaging in economic activities.

**Impact of International Migration on the Family:** The migration of married persons in substantial proportions and delayed marriage of women have had an impact on patterns of growth of the population in India. Transfer of the dependency burden of the family from the younger to older generations in the short run is an immediate outcome of the migration of prime working age members of the family with increase in the proportion of older persons. Migration has changed the age composition, with a skewed effect in the direction of a larger proportion of older persons in the family. The workers long absences from their households - especially in the case of married persons with young children - made it necessary for them to seek the assistance of parents or other siblings to attend to the needs of the young children and to assist the spouse left behind. One outcome of short term overseas migration for employment is that grandparents are called upon to play a significant role as members of the extended family. The extended family system, which was virtually collapsing due to lifestyle changes brought in by various urbanization and westernization processes, has risen again.

**Internal Migration:** Rural to urban migration enhances the process of urbanization and is inevitably linked to the process of economic development. The flow of people from rural to urban areas occurs largely for economic reasons. There are other reasons, such as the better educational or health services available in urban areas, that function as pull factors to draw people from rural to urban areas. Social and economic disparities and lack of job opportunities in rural areas have resulted in increased rural to urban migration in the country with a remarkable change in the family structure.

**Effects of Urbanization on Family:** The increased proportions of population residing in urban areas of country have been observed during last the two decades. This urbanization processes have a tendency to stabilize the nucleation of the family system because urban congestion and housing patterns, particularly of the low income groups, discourage large households. A gradual collapse of the extended family system tended to create new problems of family support for the young

dependents and older persons in the family. Moreover, consequent to rural to urban migration and rapid urbanization processes, a small average household size is observed for urban areas, compared to rural, almost in every part of the country.

**Impact of Ageing on Family:** Caring for older persons seems to have other implications that are an outcome of changing societal norms and the resultant changes that had taken effect within families. The traditional obligations towards parents and the duty, to provide them with the love and care that they deserve, are now difficult to fulfill. The prospect of the younger people living with their parents is becoming increasingly difficult if not impractical, as the search for employment opportunities takes them away from their homes and to distant lands. Changing outlooks and the need for adult children to move in search of employment is result in declines in coexistence of multi generational members of the family. This is particularly the case in the event of rapid urbanization, where the members of the extended family living in rural areas are left behind in rural areas, as children move to the cities. This is an important process affecting the family structure. Further, western values of individualism and self realization are making the younger generation less willing to sacrifice time to provide physical care for elderly parents. This may be a major problem in the family in relation to care giving aspects of support for older persons in future. Further, Population ageing leads to increased health care costs. After the age of 65 years or so, the probability of disability or of impairment in general functioning increases dramatically. As the number of disabled older persons increases, these individuals will need additional support in order to maintain themselves.

**Impact of Globalization:** Globalization accelerates the free flow of labour across continents. Globalization and open economies have created opportunities for migration and this has influenced the family to change its structure. Specifically skilled men and woman in large numbers are migrating to middle-east countries seeking employment. As a result, the traditional decision making responsibility of the male head of the family, in a patriarchal society started collapsing with foreign employment and improved economic status of women. In most of the families, with overseas employed women, the husband become “house husband” as opposed to the “bread winner” of the family; he in fact was dependent on the wife and it has affected changes in traditionally defined familial relationships, roles and duties of the house hold.

**Concept of Nuclear family:** In recent decades, globalization has tended to promote the nucleation of family units. Difficulties of child bearing and rearing due to formal sector employment, lack of government incentives, global cultural influences, and rural to urban migration have diminished the importance of the extended family. The nuclear family has a high capacity for mobility. This capability is advantageous as families move from one place to another within short periods of time due to the instability and working routines involved with new kinds of jobs. Another adaptive method of coping with new trends is for families to consume services they no longer provide directly to their members. Moving towards substitutes for familial functions and services is marked by a growing number of day care centers, super markets and take-away restaurants, homes for the aged, and paid hospitals for health care. So as we try to understand how families in this region respond to the process of globalization, we are left with only one general conclusion which implies that the future outcome will be nothing but complete nucleation of families and westernization of family norms and structure with emerging family types such as single parent families.

### **Conclusion**

Family has been recognized as a basic unit of society and is a link between individual and community. The structure of the family continues to be patriarchal. A number of changes have been observed in the patterns of marriage such as age at marriage, inter-caste marriage, etc. A relative increase is noticed in divorce cases in urban areas. It was quite common in the past but at that time

families were more stable and provided adequate security in terms of physical, social and emotional needs. Current trends indicate that there is a definite change in the basic system of family, especially the role of elders and disharmony in husband-wife relationship. Divorce rates are testimony to the increasing fragility of husband-wife relationship. Migration has major implications on women and children.

The increasing tendency of couples in nuclear families to total independence in life may likely to pose a threat to the sustainability of nuclear family in a distant future. This tendency may perhaps change their attitude to family and marriage to the extent that they prefer to live alone or choose to lead a conjugal life outside marriage. Consequently, they may tend to modify the norms of family and marriage flexibly in order to suit to their changing life style. As a result of this, an increasing number of them may likely to prefer “live in relations” after some generations from now. The nuclear family as it exists now may not cope with this eccentric and transitory living arrangement. It may likely to degrade family system in a remote future and eventually make it unstable because of its unsuitability at that point in time.

In light of present study and other research review it can be concluded that majority of families of middle socio-economic status are has brought about radical changes in family composition, family structure (role, power and status and familial relationships) and family practices (marriage patterns and other family practices). Urbanization of families is continuously causing for change in structure, composition and practices of family but still family ritual care for younger and older in family, supporting working/non-working member and some other family practices are untouched even modernization has been added to families. Evil like financial exchange during marriage is also present in most of the families. Their needs create awareness among families regarding importance of joint families, family structure and practices.

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