Chapter 25

THE FAMILY

Meaning and Characteristics of Family—Distinctive Features of the Family—Functions of the Family—Changing Family Patterns—Types of the Family: Matriarchal Family—Patriarchal Family—The Nuclear Family—Recent Trends in the Modern Nuclear Family—Functions of the Modern Nuclear Family—The Joint Family: Definition and Characteristics—Merits and Demerits of Joint Family—Causes for the Changes in the Joint Family System—Disintgration of Joint Family in India.

The family is the most important primary group in society. It is the simplest and the most elementary form of society. It is the most basic of all social groupings. It is the first and the most immediate social environment to which a child is exposed. It is an outstanding primary group, because, it is in the family that the child develops its basic attitudes.

Further, of all the groups that affect the lives of individuals in society none touches them so intimately or so continuously as does the family. From the moment of birth to the moment of death the family exerts a constant influence. The family is the first group in which we find ourselves. It provides for the most enduring relationship in one form or other. Every one of us grows up in a family and every one of us too will be a member of one family or other.

"The family, almost without question, is the most important of any of the groups that human experience offers. Other groups we join for longer or shorter periods of time for the satisfaction of this interest or that. The family, on the contrary, is with us always. Or rather more precisely, we are with it." *–Robert Bierstedt.*

The family, as an institution is *universal*. It is the most permanent and the most pervasive of all social institutions. All societies both large and small, primitive and civilised, ancient and modern, have some form of family or the other. No one knows, or can know, how or when the family began. It is safe to surmise that the family in some form will always be with us. With regards to the future as the mind can imagine, the family will continue to be a central and indeed a nuclear component of society. "There may be no families in Utopia, and none in paradise, but the planet we know best will probably always contain them." *-Robert Bierstedt.*

It may be noted that our purpose here, is not to give counsels on family relations but to acquire sociological knowledge regarding family. The family is a small group consisting ordinarily of father, mother, one or more children and sometimes near or distant relatives. It should be noted that it is not our purpose here to offer advice on the age at which people should marry, on how to choose a husband or a wife, how to get along with a difficult mate, how many children to beget, what to do about a mother-in-law problem, how to avoid divorce, and so on. Our study is confined to the family

as a social phenomenon. *Our approach is sociological.* We are interested in the family both as an association and as an institution, but we give no counsel or advice as to how to be happy though married.

1. MEANING AND CHARACTERISTICS

The word '*Family*' has been taken over from Latin word '*Famulus*' which means a servant. In Roman Law the word denoted a group of producers and slaves and other servants as well as members connected by common descent or marriage. Thus, originally, family, consisted of a man and woman with a child or children and servants. The meaning of family can be explained better by the following definitions:

1. *M.F. Nimkoff* says that "Family is a more or less durable association of husband and wife with or without child, or of a man or woman alone, with children".

2. *Burgess* and *Locke*. "Family is a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption constituting a single household interacting and intercommunicating with each other in their respective social roles of husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister, creating a common culture".

3. *Eliot* and *Merrill*: Family is "The biological social unit composed of husband, wife and children".

4. *MacIver*: Family is *"a group defined by sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children"*.

General Characteristics of the Family

(*i*) *A Mating Relationship*. A family comes into existence when a man and woman establish mating relation between them.

(*ii*) *Selection of Mates*. Wife or husband may be selected by parents or by the elders, or the choice may be left to the wishes of the individuals concerned. Various rules govern this selection.

(*iii*) *A Form of Marriage*. The mating relationship is established through the institution of marriage. Marriage is an institutional arrangement made by the society according to which the individuals establish marital relationships among themselves. Marriage may assume any one of the forms–monogamy, polygamy, polyandry or group marriage.

(*iv*) *A System of Nomenclature*. Every family is known or recognised by a distinctive name.

(*v*) *A Way of Tracing the Descent*: Every family has its own mode of tracing the descent. *Descent refers to the social recognition of biological relationship between individuals*. Descent may be traced through the male line (*Patrilineal Descent*) or through the female line (*Matrilineal Descent*) or through both the lines (*Bilateral Descent*).

(*vi*) *A Common Residence*. Family requires a home or a household to live in. After the marriage the wife may reside in husband's parental home (*Patrilocal or Virilocal Residence*) or she may stay in her parental home to which the husband pays occasional visits (*Matrilocal or Uxorilocal Residence*) or both of them may establish a separate home of their own (*Neolocal Residence*).

(*vii*) *An Economic Provision*. Family provides for the satisfaction of the economic needs of its members.

2. DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE FAMILY

The family is an organisation *par excellence*. Of all the social organisations, large or small, family is of the greatest sociological significance. It occupies the central position in our social structure. The family, unlike other institutions, enjoys a unique position in society. Its distinctive features may be noted here.

1. *Universality*. After having made an analysis of more than 250 societies, *Murdock* concludes that the family is universal. There is no human society in which some form of the family does not

appear nor has there ever been such a society. *B. Malinowski* writes: "The typical family, a group consisting of mother, father, and their progeny, is found in all communities, savage, barbarians, and civilised". *The irresistible sex need, the urge for reproduction and the common economic needs* have contributed to this universality.

2. *Emotional Basis.* The family is grounded in emotions and sentiments. It is based on our impulses of mating, procreation, maternal devotion, fraternal love and parental care. It is built upon sentiments of love, affection, sympathy, co-operation and friendship.

3. *Limited Size.* The family is smaller in size. As a primary group its size is necessarily limited. It seems to be the smallest social unit. The biological conditions have also contributed to its small size.

4. *Formative Influence.* The family is the earliest social environment which surrounds, trains and educates the child. It shapes the personality and moulds the character of its members. It emotionally conditions the child. It is the '*nursery of human nature*', *and the 'breeding ground of our mores and the nurse of our loyalties*'.

5. *Nuciear Position in the Social Structure.* The family is the nucleus of all other social organisations. The whole social structure is built of family units. It influences the whole life of society.

6. *Responsibility of the Members.* The member of the family has certain responsibilities, duties and obligations. The smooth running of family depends on how best the members discharge their responsibilities in co-ordination with the other individuals of the family. As *MacIver* points out, "*In times of crisis men may work and fight and die for their country, but they toil for their families all their lives*".

7. *Social Regulation.* The family is peculiarly guarded both by social taboos and by legal regulations. The society takes precaution to safeguard this organisation from any possible breakdown: by divorce, desertion or separation.

8. *The Permanent and Temporary Nature of the Family.* The family as an *institution* is permanent. Since it is based on the organic and emotional nature of man, it continues to exist. But family as an *association* may be temporary in character. These characteristics indeed reveal the *sociological significance* of the family.

3. FUNCTIONS OF THE FAMILY

The family as a social institution performs several functions. Various opinions have been expressed regarding the functions of family. *Kingsley Davis* speaks of four main functions of the family: (*i*) *Reproduction*, (*ii*) *Maintenance*, (*iii*) *Placement*, and (*iv*) *Socialisation*.

Ogburn and Nimkoff have mentioned six major functions of family: (*i*) *Affectional*, (*ii*) *Economic*, (*iii*) *Recreational*, (*iv*) *Protective*, (*v*) *Religious*, and (*vi*) *Educational*. *Reed* has described four functions of the family: (*i*) *Race perpetuation*, (*ii*) *Socialisation*, (*iii*) *Regulation and satisfaction of sex needs*, and (*iv*) *Economic functions*.

Primary and Secondary or Essential and Non-essential Functions

MacIver classifies the functions of family into two types: *Essential* and *Non-essential* functions. According to him, the essential functions include (*i*) the stable satisfaction of sex need, (*ii*) production and rearing of children, and (*iii*) provision of a home. Under the non-essential functions he includes, religious, educational, economic, health and recreation, and other functions.

The Primary Functions

Some of the functions of family are basic to its continued existence. They are referred to as *essential* functions by MacIver. They may also be regarded as *Primary* functions of family. They are explained below.

(*i*) *Stable Satisfaction of Sex Need.* Sex drive is powerful in human beings. Man is susceptible to sexual stimulation throughout his life. The sex need is irresistible also. It motivates man to seek an established basis of its satisfaction. Family regulates the sexual behaviour of man by its agent, the marriage. Thus it provides for the satisfaction of the sex need for man. Even Manu, the Hindu Law-giver and Vatsyayana, the author of *Kamasutra*, have stated that sexual satisfaction is one of the main aims of family life.

(*ii*) *Reproduction or Procreation.* Reproductive activity is carried on by all lower and higher animals. But it is an activity that needs control or regulation. The result of sexual satisfaction is reproduction. The process of reproduction is institutionalised in the family. Hence it assumes a regularity and a stability that all societies recognise as desirable. Thus family introduces a legitimacy into the act of reproduction. All societies surround this function with norms and support them with strong sanctions. By fulfilling its reproductive function family has made it possible to have the propagation of species and the perpetuation of the human race.

(*iii*) *Production and Rearing of the Child.* The family gives the individual his life and a chance to survive. We owe our life to the family. Th human infancy is a prolonged one. The child which is helpless at the time of birth is given the needed protection of the family. Further, family is an institution *par excellence*, for the production and rearing of children. No other institution can as efficiently bring up the child as can the family. This can be referred to as the function of '*maintenance*' also.

(*iv*) *Provision of Home.* Family provides the home for its members. The desire for home is strongly felt in men and women. Children are born and brought up in homes only. Though, often children are born in hospitals, clinics, maternity homes, etc., they are nursed and nourished in the homes only. Even the parents who work outside are dependent on home for comfort, protection and peace. Home remains still the '*sweet*' home.

(*v*) *Family–An Instrument of Culture Transmission and An Agent of Socialisation.* The family serves as an *instrument of culture transmission.* The family guarantees not only the biological continuity of the human race but also the cultural continuity of the society of which it is a part. It transmits ideas and ideologies, folkways and mores, customs and traditions, beliefs and values from one generation to the next.

The family is *an agent of socialisation* also. Socialisation is its service to the individual. Socialisation is the process whereby one internalises the norms of one's groups so that a distinct '*self*' emerges unique to the individual. The family indoctrinates the child with the values, the morals, beliefs, and ideals of the society. It prepares its children for participation in larger world and acquaints them with a larger culture. It is a chief agency which prepares the new generation for life in community. It emotionally conditions the child. It lays down the basic plan of the personality. Indeed, it *shapes the personality* of the child. Family is a mechanism for disciplining the child in terms of cultural goals. In short, it transforms the infant barbarian into the civilised adult.

(*vi*) *Status Ascribing Function.* The family also performs a pair of funtions–*(i) status ascription for the individual*, and (*ii*) *societal identification for the individual.* Statuses are of two kinds: *Ascribed* and *achieved.* The family provides the *ascribed* statuses. Two of these, *age* and *sex* are biological ascriptions. Others, however, are social ascriptions. It is the family that serves almost exclusively as the conferring agency or institution.

People recognise us by our names, and *our names are given to us by our family.* Here, the family is the source of our societal identification. Various statuses are initially ascribed by our families. Our *ethnic* status, our *nationality* status, our *religious* status, or *residential* status, or *class* status–sometimes our *political* status and our *educational* status as well–are all conferred upon us by our families. Of course, these may be changed later. Wherever statuses are inherited as in the case of royalty and nobility it is the family that serves as the controlling mechanism. Status ascription and

societal identification are two faces of the same process. The importance of family in this regard can hardly be exaggerated.

(*vii*) *Affectional Function*. Man has his physical, as well as mental needs. He requires the fulfilment of both of these needs. Family is an institution which provides the mental or the emotional satisfaction and security to its individual members. It is the family which provides the most intimate and the dearest relationship for all its members. The individual first experiences affection in his parental family as parents and siblings offer him love, sympathy and affection. Lack of affection actually damages an infant's ability to thrive. *A person who has never been loved is seldom happy.*

Secondary Functions of Family

In addition to the above described essential or primary functions the family performs some secondary or non-essential functions in some way or the other. Of these, the following may be noted.

(*i*) *Economic Functions*. The family fulfils the economic needs of its members. This has been the traditional function of family. Previously, the family was an economic unit. Goods were produced in the family. Men used to work in family or in farms for the production of goods. Family members used to work together for this purpose. It was to a great extent self-sufficient. A clear cut division of labour between sexes, that is, between men and women, was evident. But today, the situation has changed. The family members do not work together at home. They are engaged in different economic activities outside the home. They are no longer held together by division of labour.

The economic role of modern family is considerably modified. The process of industrialisation has affected family. The centre of production has moved from home to the factory. The factory is giving job only to the individual worker and not to the entire family. The factory is producing goods which are consumed within the family. Thus, family has become more a consuming unit than a producing one. Its members are busy with "earning wages" rather than with "making a living". Family is thus slowly transferring its economic functions to the external agencies. Still, the institution of property is embedded with the family.

(*ii*) *Educational Functions*. The family provides the basis for the child's formal learning. In spite of great changes, the family still gives the child his basic training in the social attitudes and habits important to adult participation in social life. "The manner in which he learns how to get along with his family will be carried over to his interactions with school authorities, religious leaders, the police and other agents of social control". When the child grows up, he learns to manage situations outside the home and family. He extends his interests to other groups. With all this his intelligence, his emotions, and his social habits develop until he weans himself from the original dependence on the mother, father and other family members.

(*iii*) *Religious Functions*. The family is a centre for the religious training of the children. The children learn from their parents various religious virtues. Previously, the homes were also centres of religious quest. The family used to teach the children the religious values, moral precepts, way to worshipping God, etc. Even today, it is in the family that the foundations are laid down for the moral standards that are to guide the children throughout their life. *The family meets the spiritual needs of its members.* It is through the family that the religious inheritance is passed on to the next generation.

(*iv*) *The Recreational Functions*. At one time, recreation was largely family based. It fostered a close solidarity. Reading aloud, visiting relatives, family reunions, church socials, singing, dancing, playing indoor games, etc., brought together the entire family. Elders would organise social gathering among themselves in each other's homes. Children would organise their own recreations among themselves or together with other children. Often parents and children would join together in the same recreational activities. The effect of this on the cohesion of the family was considerable.

Recreation is now increasingly organised outside the family. Modern recreation is not designed for family-wide participation. Whether in the form of movies, sports events, plays, cricket,

'kabaddi', tennis, dinner parties, or 'yakshagana', it is designed for the couple or individual participation.

4. THE CHANGING FAMILY PATTERNS