

UNIT 1 UNDERSTANDING KINSHIP STUDIES*

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- Explain what is kinship
- Discuss kinship studies in terms of Indian and western perspectives

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- Discuss the gender dimension to kinship studies

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Kinship Studies has been an integral part of both anthropological and sociological studies for the past hundred years. Sociologist and anthropologist like Peter G. Murdock, Radcliffe-Brown, Levi Strauss, Edmund Leach, Iravati Karve, K.M. Kapadia, to name a few, have contributed immensely to this subject. Before we begin our discussion on kinship studies let us first understand what kinship is. Kinship refers to a relationship that is based on marriage (affinal) or blood ties (consanguineal). Apart from establishing relationship between people, the kinship system also assigns roles and status which regulates behaviour of people. The role and status are often related to gender and age. Murdock one of the pioneers of kinship studies defines kinship as, “A structured system of kinship in which kin are bound to one another by interlocking ties.” (Murdock, 1949:93).

In this unit we look at how kinship has been viewed by different scholars. The unit is divided into western and Indian kinship studies because the western society is organised much differently from Indian society and the body of work reflects this difference.

1.2 KINSHIP STUDIES: WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

Studies on kinship started about hundred years ago marked by Morgan's work in 1875. Several different ways of studying kinship have emerged over the years; from analysis of kinship terms to study of differences and similarities between societies across the world. In 1960s, kinship studies saw a shift towards study of rules of descent, marriage, kinship terminologies due to efforts of Schneider, Edmund Leach and others. But by 1970s, kinship studies did not occupy the same importance in anthropology as it did earlier because of which the study of kinship was subsumed under larger areas of study such as political anthropology, feminist anthropology, and social history. Let us now try to understand some of the main studies done on kinship.

1.2.1 Lewis H. Morgan

In his book *Ancient Society* published in 1877, Morgan traced the evolution of kinship and marriage (from promiscuity to monogamy). He believed that the kinship terminologies contained the key to unravelling the kinship system of any society. Hence, he collected huge samples of terminologies from American Indians tribes and compared them to Asian socie-

ties. Morgan's work *Ancient Society* was an attempt to explain the emergence of family, property and government as we know it today. Morgan's interest in kinship was largely due to his intensive research on the American Indian tribe of Iroquois. He believed that the kinship system was based on biological descent and that family and marriage were ways of ensuring the continuity of humankind. In *Ancient Society*, Morgan writes that marriage rules determine family organisation and the growth of family.

For Morgan, the terminologies used in a society reflect the social organisation. Morgan is also known for his contribution of classificatory and descriptive system of kinship.

Box 1. Classificatory and Descriptive Systems of Kinship

The classificatory system of kinship is that in which the same term is used for direct and collateral kin. By collateral kin, we mean father's brother or father's sister or mother's sister or mother's brother. The descriptive system, which according to Morgan, uses separate terms for lineal and collateral kin, that is mother and mother's sister are referred to by different kin terms.

In many kinship groups, different terms are used for parallel cousins (children of the same sex sibling of parent, for example father's brother's children are parallel cousins) or cross cousin (children of opposite sex sibling of parent; for example, children of mother's brother children are cross cousins). This distinction is important in societies where there is a custom of marriage among cousins. In India this is prevalent in some communities in South India

1.2.2 A.R. Radcliffe-Brown

Radcliffe Brown used the term kinship system to denote relationships that arose due to marriage and affinity. According to Radcliffe-Brown, the elementary family consisting of man, wife and their child/children; a compound family comprising of man with several wives (**polygynous**) or even by a second marriage. He also clarifies that there is no single pattern of a family as it may differ from society to society. He further adds that, "In any given society a certain number of these relationships are recognised for social purposes, i.e, they have attached to them certain rights and duties or certain distinctive modes of behaviour. It is the relations that are recognised in this way that constitute what I am calling a kinship system" (1941:2). The kinship system thus refers to a network of social relations that is expressed through the family, clan, lineage groups or moieties. He also speaks of the difference between clan and lineage. A clan is usually a group of people, who claim to belong to a kin group on

the basis of an ancestor who they may or may not have existed. This reminds one of the *gotra* system in India, of which we will speak in the next section. Lineage on the other hand consists of people who can trace back their ancestry to a common ancestor.

Radcliffe-Brown says that kinship nomenclature is an integral part of the kinship system and also a part of language. Nomenclature also indicates generation and relationship. He says there is an attitude of respect towards a particular generation (usually the first ascending generation) and also that of subordination. Another feature he mentions is certain categories within which several relatives of a single person can be grouped or in other words “a single term is used to refer to a category of relatives” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1974: 6). This is explained through the example of the category – Uncle. He speaks of the British usage of the word uncle for both maternal (mother’s brother) and paternal (father’s brother) uncle. In the Indian context, in some societies, Mother’s brother is referred to as *mama* and the father’s brother as *tauji*, *bade papa* (if elder), *chacha* if younger to father. Radcliffe Brown says the nomenclature of uncle is also reflective of the social relationship where there is no particular difference in the relationship of the nephew with his paternal or maternal uncle/aunt. Whereas in the Indian society, the father’s elder brother is considered to be like a father and the mother’s sister is like a mother, *Mausi*. Radcliffe-Brown refers to this as the classificatory terminology, where distinctions are created according to age, gender and seniority as we have seen in the case of father’s elder brother and younger brother in the case of India. Radcliffe Brown relates what he calls sibling solidarity to practices of **levirate** (marriage with brother’s widow), **sororate** (marriage with wife’s sister), **sororal polygyny** (marrying two or more sisters) and **adelphic polyandry** (marrying two or more brothers).

1.2.3 C. Levi-Strauss

Claude Levi-Strauss’ contribution to kinship studies is marked by his focus on studying the structural significance of ties underlying marriage and alliance (not descent). In his work, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Levi-Strauss speaks of the principle of exchange of women through marriage. He believed that each society had its own distinct kinship system and the kinship system in each society was to be separated from other aspects of the society. He also wrote that, “Kinship systems, marriage rules, and descent groups constitute a coordinated whole, the function of which is to ensure the permanency of the social group by means of inter-twining consanguineous and affinal ties. They may be considered as the blueprint of a mechanism which “pumps” women out of their consanguineous families to redistribute them

in affinal groups, the result of this process being to create new consanguineous groups, and so on.” (Levi-Strauss 1967,a:302-303).

Also, for Levi-Strauss, the basic unit of kinship was siblingship, derived from the relationship between two siblings. For Levi-Strauss, the kinship system of societies is based on certain universal elements of organizational structures such as prohibition of incest, exogamy, residence after marriage etc. He sees marriage as the key in the system of kinship of which reproduction is an essential part. This is questioned by Schneider and Boon, in reference to societies such as the Zulu, where marriage takes place between two women even though they might be impregnated by a man. Similarly, among Plain Indians (Native Americans inhabiting the Great Plains of America and Canada) marriage often takes place between men and transvestites.

1.2.4 Jack Goody

In his work *The Oriental, the Ancient and the Primitive*(1990), Jack Goody focuses on kinship and marriage in preindustrial societies in Eurasia. He comments on the kinship systems in the Orient-China, Tibet, India Sri Lanka and parts of Middle East. Goody challenges the anthropological studies of nineteenth and twentieth century that have analysed Eastern kinship system from the lens of primitive societies and further reinforced the divide between East and West.

Goody revisits the idea of marriage and the role of women in agrarian societies in Asia. He says that the perceived role of women in these agrarian societies is seen to differentiate these societies from the western societies. He refers to Levi-Strauss’ exchange of women, to point out that theories such as these seem to suggest that women have no agency of their own and are merely pawns in building alliances through marriage. Goody argues that contrary to this view, married women in patrilineal societies in the East (China, India and Middle East) have moral and material rights in their natal home. He writes that the complete assimilation of women into their marital kin groups implies separation from their natal kin group which is not a true account by Western anthropologists. He acknowledges that gender inequality does exist in Asian patrilineal societies but the differences between them and the western societies are not so wide.

Goody’s own work is seen as a critique of Levi-Strauss and Morgan, who according to him apply models and concepts meant for the study of primitive societies to complex, heteroge-

neous societies as found in the East. Goody's writes that any analysis of kinship system is incomplete without examining it in the context of mode of production, influence of state and judiciary and religion of the society under study. Peletz (1995) writes that it was Goody and his new approach which gave a new lease of life to the study of kinship system. He further adds that Goody's method of study is useful in explaining the variation in kinship systems due to class, caste and religion. In addition to this it can also be used to understand practices of infanticide, polyandry, polygyny, adoption etc.

1.2.5 David Murray Schneider

American anthropologist, known for his monograph, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (1968), provides insight into the kinship system of North America and Britain. Schneider calls his work a cultural account because for him the kinship system is a system of symbols and meaning and not just roles and status. Schneider collected and analysed data based on the question: What is the distinctive feature which makes someone a relative. He used cultural symbols like: the home, family and love to categorise relations based on blood and marriage. Needless to say, that Schneider's approach was much criticised for delinking kinship from household organization, divorce and sexuality. He says the American kinship system is a single system across gender, class and even other ethnic groups.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What according to Radcliffe-Brown is the difference between clan and lineage ?

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2) According to Morgan the study of holds the key to understanding kinship

3) Affinal relationship is based on while consanguineal is based on

1.3 KINSHIP STUDIES: INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Kinship studies in India represent the diversity of India as a country and how kinship organization vary from region to region. Indian anthropologists were influenced by the work of

western anthropologists like Malinowski and Rivers. Between 1940s and 1970s, kinship was one of the key areas of research led by Ghurye, Srinivas, Kapadia, Shah, Gore and Karve to name a few. Kinship was studied within the context of the village, caste and religion and rarely in isolation.

1.3.1 G.S. Ghurye

G.S. Ghurye in his book *Family and Kin in Indo-European Culture* (1955), compares the kinship terminology and associated behaviour in Indo-Aryan, Greek, and Latin cultures. It is noteworthy that the initial work on kinship, family, marriage was based not much on field work or ethnography but on the basis of literary, mythological, and religio-legal sources, also referred to as the Indological framework. Ghurye's next work, *Two Brahmanical Institutions: Gotra and Charana* (1972), was also within a similar Indological framework. Ghurye's student K.M. Kapadia's followed in his footsteps. His book *Kinship* (1947), is a detailed analysis of Brahmanical texts and their positions on various aspects of kinship like household, organisation of kin, marriage, adoption, inheritance, succession, and death impurities. In his next book, *Marriage and Family in India* (1955) Kapadia sets the tone for fieldwork and also points out the lacunae in terms of exclusion of Muslims and tribal communities and primary data through field work.

1.3.2 Iravati Karve

Iravati Karve is known for her extensive work on kinship. For the purpose of understanding kinship in India she divided the country into four main zones based on language: North, South, East and Central. She acknowledged that kinship behaviour and patterns are not uniform across the region and may differ from village to village or from caste to caste. Some of the key features of kinship organization as pointed out by Karve are as follows:

North Zone: She observed that in this zone, In north India, there are terms for blood relations, and terms for affinal relations. There are primary terms for three generations of immediate relations and the terms for one generation are not exchangeable for those of another generation. Four-gotra (sasan) rule, that is, avoidance of the gotras of father, mother, grandmother and maternal grandmother is generally practised among Brahmanas and among other upper castes in north India. However, some intermediate and most of the lower castes avoid two gotras, namely, that of father and mother.

Central Zone: Karve speaks of great similarity between the North and Central zone in terms of kinship organization. Like in the North, the kinship terms used denote respect to elders and kinship relations is often marked by giving and receiving gifts, marriage is exogamous though she cites the example of Gujarat where certain follow the practice of marriage with the mother's brother(mama) and the practice of **levirate**(marrying the brother of dead husband). Karve also points out that certain caste groups like the Marathas and Kunbis practice both the system of dowry and bride price. She writes that the Maharashtra kinship organization shows the influence of north and south zones.

South Zone: The Southern zone is again interesting because it presents before us a kinship pattern not common in the North or Central zone. It is complex to study the southern areas as they are dominated by the patrilocal and patrilineal system and in some areas matrilineal and matrilocal systems, like among the Nayars of Kerala; we will learn more a +eal system among the Nayars in our subsequent units.

The preferential marriage system in the south is among the cross cousins, that is the children of the brother and sisters marry; that is an **ego's** (the person in reference) mother's brothers children or fathers sisters children. Thus, the strict separation between family of procreation and family of marriage which exists in the North and central Indian kinship is not present in the South Indian kinship system. The South Indian kinship stress the bilateral kin relationships of brother and sister through their children.

The Eastern ZoneThe area consists of a number of Austro-Asiatic tribes.All the people speaking Mundari languages have patrilineal and patrilocal families. The Ho and Santhal have the practice of cross-cousin marriage. But till the father's sister or the mother's brother are alive, they cannot marry their daughters. This condition makes cross-cousin marriage a rare phenomenon. Many of the tribes, like Ho and Munda are divided into exogamous totemistic groups, where marriage has to be outside the totemic group or clan. Some of the tribes have practice of bride price. In this zone there are matrilineal communities like the Nayars of Kerala .But unlike them the husband and wife live together in small household of their own and the property is inherited by the youngest daughter. The Khasis have clan exogamy. Marriages of parallel cousins are not allowed. Cross-cousin marriage is also quite rare.

1.3.3 T. N.Madan

Prof Madan's work titled '*Family and Kinship: A study of the Pandits of Rural Kashmir*', is a pioneering work on kinship in India. It is based on his field work in the village of Utrassu-Umanagri in 1957-58. He writes the kinship rituals of the Pandits are a combination of both Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic rites and ceremonies.

The Pandits are divided into two main subcastes which determine endogamy for marriages. These two subcastes are the *Gor* (those who are involved in priestly duties) and the *Karkun* (roughly translated as workers). These two sub castes cannot intermarry. Endogamy within the sub caste and exogamy outside *gotra* is followed and marrying outside the religion is seen as polluting. In case a good alliance is received from a same *gotragroom*, the mother's brother who belongs to a different *gotra* may give away the bride thus technically circumventing the *gotra* principle. Village exogamy was also practiced. Reciprocal marriages were also common where daughter is given in exchange of a daughter-in-law. Madan also mentions that apart from reciprocal marriages another type of marriage that took place sometimes involved bride price, where the groom's family paid a certain sum of money to the bride instead of the usual practice of taking dowry.

The basic unit is called the *gara* (household) or *chulah* (hearth group). The family would consist of paternal grandparents, brothers and their children. The eldest brother of the family, in absence of parents, was the patriarch often taking decisions for the children of other brothers. The *kotamb* on the other hand referred to a larger group which included the extended kin.

Madan speaks of another concept, the *kol* which he says is the backbone of the kinship structure. The *kol* according to him is the patrilineage (lineage based on descent through the father's kin). The wives in the family though active participants in kin and family life, however do not maintain close relations with their natal family post marriage. Madan writes that the husbands do not count the wives natal family as kin. There is a certain degree of inequality and hierarchy where the natal kin is supposed to be subservient to the groom's family. But if the natal home is rich and powerful, the groom's family shows off their affinal ties.

Madan speaks of the bias against girls in the Pandit community at the time of his fieldwork. He says how there are sayings and proverbs denoting that the birth of a daughter brings sadness while the birth of a son brings joy to the family. Girls are expected to help their mother in household work and many were denied education.

There are several aspects of the kinship system in the rural Kashmiri Pandit family which are unique. Upon the death of the father, the sons may divide the property, as the mother has no rights over the property. This is a unique feature as in most societies, after the death of the husband, the widow is the natural heir to the property. Secondly, in case of a sister in the family, if she is married and stays in the marital home then she doesn't have any right over the property and nor do her children. But if she stays at her natal home, due to a failed marriage or widowhood then she has claims over the property, though her children do not. In most communities, the *Mama* (*maternal uncle*) finds a special mention. Among the Pandits, it is the father's sister who plays an important ritualistic role in the ceremonies accompanying the birth of a child. It is she who leads the ceremonies by lighting up a bark of a birch tree and blessing the child (her niece or nephew).

Madan points out that core to the kinship idea among Pandits are differentiating between those who were born into a kin and those who are married into it. It is because of this that while the wife is expected to integrate into her conjugal family, her husband is a guest at his wife's house. He doesn't have any rights, legal or ritualistic, with regard to his affinal kin. But with passage of time, due to the relation of the children with the mother's family and vice versa, certain rituals come up which involve the husband.

1.3.4 M.N. Srinivas

M.N. Srinivas is one of the pioneers of Indian anthropology. His Master of Arts (MA) thesis was on *Marriage and Family among Kannada caste in Mysore* (1942). In this he explored not only kinship terminology but also marriage practices such as rituals, bride price, dowry and the family structure. Another work of his based on intensive field in Coorg, "*Religion and Society among Coorgs*" though not exclusively on kinship but does speak of the idea of lineage among Coorgs. Srinivas writes about the Coorg household, built on ancestral land would sometimes comprise of about 250-300 people. Srinivas gives insight into the life of a village in Coorg, religion- beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, family life and structure and lineage. Srinivas makes an interesting observation that the Coorgs did not follow any Vedic practices or rituals. They were economically and politically powerful. The ancestral property is treated as sacred and there is an ancestral shrine in every estate.

The Coorgs have a system of **patrilineal** (where lineage is traced through the male side of the family) and **patrilocal**(a custom where the married couple are expected to reside in the husband's family) . In the Coorg society, the Okka is the basic unit .We mentioned earlier on

about the household comprising of about 250 members. Srinivas compares the Coorg family structure to that of matrilineal Taravad of the Nayars and the patrilineal Illam of the Nambudris. Every village has its own headman and this position is hereditary and a council of elders. The Coorgs are patrilineal to the extent that only male members have any right in the right ancestral estate and it is the son who carries the legacy of the Okka. The division among men and women is quite sharp in the Okka, with special spaces designated to each gender. The verandah is used by the men and the women use the kitchen or other inner rooms to meet their guests. After marriage, women are no longer members of their natal Okka. Even in the natal Okka they do not have rights. In case of widowhood, women can remarry and there is a system of **levirate**(a marriage custom where the widow marries the brother of the deceased husband) in Coorg. Interestingly, while men need to be skilful in hunting, they also love to dance and they do so during the harvest festival and other religious festivals, while women watch from afar.



(Ceremonial dance by corgi men. Source:wikicommons)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The main sources for study of kinship in India in the initial years wereand
- 2) Name two Indian societies that are matrilineal

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3) What were the two main differences between the Indian and Western study of Kinship

1.4 KINSHIP STUDIES AND GENDER

The earlier studies on kinship described terminologies, family organisation, descent and lineage and relationships. In later days, there were several new perspectives like the Marxist, postmodern and the feminist were added to the study of kinship. The Marxist and feminist perspectives pointed out the inherent inequalities in the kinship system. There are several examples which reflect this inequality- bride price, gender specific rituals, gift giving and its nature, leadership etc. When we speak of women and kinship, what we are essentially talking about is the role played by women in family, marriage, property rights, lineage and descent. In short the role and status of women within the kinship system.

Leela Dube one of India's leading anthropologist, writes about her own life story to highlight the connection between gender and kinship. Dube recalls how girls were expected to learn household work as a preparation for married life. Single women (unmarried women) were rare, but Dube also mentions several of her teachers who were single women. She says that in her cultural set up women were asked to get education only to help them in case of unforeseen difficulties like widowhood. Women were further socialised into their expected role through religion and other customs. She also mentions that women were not allowed to visit their natal homes after marriage nor were the bride's family welcomed by the groom's family. The system of kinship was clearly in favour of the men with emphasis on patrilocality and the kin group of the husband.

During her field work with the Gonds, Dube saw a different kind of system. In the Gond society, widows remarried, there was bride price instead of dowry. She observed that the Gond women had more freedom than upper caste women. But she also observed that older women who did not have any source of income were dependent on their children and were expected to contribute to looking after the family irrespective of their age. So we see that lack of in-

come, and affected women's role in the kinship system as pointed out by anthropologists studying other societies as well.

Another aspect of gender which has been explored largely by American sociologists, is that of impact of gay and lesbian relationship on the concept of family. Researchers say that the current understanding of a family is that of man-woman and children, however a gay or lesbian couple do not fit into this box. The question that comes up then is how do you then define and understand kinship which may not involve family, procreation or descent in the traditional understanding. A family based on gay/lesbian relationship raises the question on whether kinship can only be defined by blood ties or genetics.

Activity 1

Write down some beliefs and sayings that capture the birth of a girl child in a family, gather this information from the elders in your family and from the anecdotes in the family. Compare your anecdotes with others in the study centre.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) The home that women are born into is calledand the one they are married into is the
- 2) Marriage practices like and point towards gender inequality
- 3) Leela Dube gained a different perspective towards gender in kinship by studying the

1.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit traced the development of kinship studies in the West and in India. Lewis Morgan, initiated a formal study of kinship, focused on kinship terminology. Subsequent anthropologists like Radcliffe-Brown were concerned about not only kinship terminology but also relationships and the method of analysis. It was Levi-Strauss who changed the way kinship was studied with his focus on abstract modelling and exchange of women. In India, the study of kinship was a part of the larger aspect of Indian society. Kinship was studied along with family and marriage and it is reflected in the works of Ghurey, Karve, Madan and Srinivas. But the main difference was that in India, unlike the West, the initial work on kinship was based on literary and religious texts. In recent times, the scope of kinship has been expanded to look at gender, division of labour, gay/lesbian relationship. The role of women in the kin

group has an impact on the nature of relationship not only between individuals but also between families.

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1.7 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) According to Radcliffe-Brown, clan is based on ancestry traced to a mythical ancestor. Lineage on the other hand, traces descent through either the male or female line of ancestry.
- 2) For Lewis Morgan an integral part of the study of kinship was: kinship terminology, which he thought pointed at the organization of the society itself
- 3) Affinal relationship is based on non-blood ties while consanguineal is based on blood relation

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The main sources for study of kinship in India in the initial years were religious and literary texts
- 2) Two examples of matrilineal societies are the Khasis and Nayars

3) Indian kinship studies are located in the context of family and marriage and also often caste and village. Initially, Indian kinship studies were not based on fieldwork. In the West, on the other hand, kinship studies were based on fieldwork and are differentiated from the studies on family and marriage.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) The home that women are born into is called their natal home....and the one they are married into is the marital home
- 2) Marriage practices like dowry and bride price point towards gender inequality
- 3) Leela Dube gained a different perspective towards gender in kinship by studying the Gonds



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