

## **IS THE FAMILY A UNIVERSAL SOCIAL INSTITUTION?**

---

**G.M.Sabestianpillai, M.A., M.Phill.,P.G., Dip.in.Ed.**

Senior Leturer in Sociology Gradel

Let me embark on the crux of the problem of this article straight away, i e, whether the family a universal social institution.

Though the family has been seen as a universal institution as an inevitable part of human society, recently, new perspectives on the family have questioned many of the assumption of the more traditional views. These approaches have not assumed that the family is not inevitable. One of the vehement opponents of the family as an institution is women's liberation movement during 1960s. It has begun to shake the foundation of the family by attacking the role of women within it.

Let us take into account what a well-known sociologist, George Peter Murdock has examined in this connection. He took a sample of 250 societies in a cross sectional manner from the primitive societies to the advanced industrial societies. He claimed that some form of family existed in every society and insisted on that the family is universal. His standpoint is that a family consists of a husband, wife and one or more offspring. He is also of the opinion that a family lives together and produces offspring moreover that nuclear family is a universal phenomenon.

But this finding is not fully acceptable, because significant portion of black families in the island of the West Indian central America do not include adult males. The family unit often consists of a woman and her dependant children sometimes her old mother. This shows that family is not universal. Murdock suggests statistics show that female - headed families in the USA.in 1971 were 29% of the black families. Whether to accept this statistics and come to a conclusion that female headed family is not a family as a social institution is a problem to be analysed very critically.

## **The Kibbutz :**

The family in the Israel's kibbutz poses another possible exception to Murdock's claim for the universality of the nuclear family. About 4% of the Israel's population live in about 240 kibbutzim settlements. Everything is collectively owned by this system. Main economic activity is agriculture along with some light industry. The family in the Kibbutz has been moulded by a number of ideological and economic factors. Kibbutz ideology emphasized sexual equality and rejected western pattern of parental roles. The life pattern in kibbutz can be summarized as follows.

- (a) Marriage is monogamous,
- (b) Only married couple can share an apartment i.e., one bedroom and one sitting. It is not shared by the children,
- (c) Children live in communal dormitories where they are looked after by "educators" or sometimes called "caretakers". They eat and sleep in the dormitories,
- (d) They usually visit their parents at least one hour a day or so,
- (e) Parents don't involve in the socialization process of the children,
- (f) All children are viewed and cared for as "children of the kibbutz",
- (g) Stanley Diamond, a sociologist says "The collective method of child rearing represents a rejection of the family with particular reference to parental roles",

In terms of Murdock's definition the family does not exist in the kibbutz on two counts. Firstly, family members do not share a common residence. Secondly, their relationship is not characterized economic cooperation. An anthropologist, M.E.Spiro is also of the opinion that in terms of Murdock's definition that the family does not exist in the kibbutz. However he says further that from a functional and psychological view point it is possible to see the kibbutz as large extended family.

## **David Cooper - An ardent critic of the institution of the family**

He is a Psycho trust who out rightly condemns the family as an institution. He sees the family as an institution which thwarts the positive personality development of the child. According to him to develop an independent self, the child must be free to be

alone, free from the constant demands made upon him in the family, free from the "imprisoning and ambiguous" which engulfs him. This leads to "the chronic murder of their selves". It appears that his views are the results of one or two cases which he could have come across in his profession as a psychiatrist. Hence, his standpoint is not fully acceptable.

### **The family - Marxian perspective**

It appears that many Marxian sociologists have overlooked the importance of the institution of the family as they were pre-occupied with the revolution of the proletariat. But Friedrich Engels whose view of family was a combination of an evolutionary approach with Marxian theory arguing that as the mode of production changed, so did the family. His view was that during the early stages of human life, that is the period of primitive communism, the institution of the family as such did not exist. But, instead of an institution there was sexual promiscuity, it means, sexual relationship was not regulated but freely practised. In other words, the society was the family. His view may not be in accordance with Holy-Quran or with the Holy Bible, but his assumption is not fully illogical. Engels argued that in the passage of time restrictions were imposed on sexual relationship and the institution of the family began to emerge step by step from polygamy to monogamy. He is of the opinion that monogamous nuclear family is the result of private ownership of property. He further states, "It is based on the supremacy of man the express purpose being to produce children of undisputed paternity, such paternity is demanded because these children are later to come into the fathers property as his natural heirs". It means that family, as an institution, particularly monogamous, is the result of capitalist system.

The above line of thinking became very popular during 1960s and 1970s when many feminist writers toed the line of Marxian concepts.

### **Ann Oakley**

Ann Oakley, a British and a supporter of the women's liberation movement comes down on the side of the culture as the determinant of gender roles and the present system of the institution of family.

She vehemently opposes the functionalists such as Tolcott Parson and Peter Murdock's view on family and the role of the expressive female within it. She accuses him of basing his analysis on the beliefs and values of his own culture and in particular on the myths of male superiority and the sanctity of marriage and the family. She is of

the opinion the mother roles is not necessary for the functioning of the family unit .It merely exists for the convenience of men .Her conclusion are as follows:

Gender roles are culturally determined rather than biologically. There are ample evidences to show that women can play any role like men and even more which men can't do. i.e.. child bearing. The mother's role is a culture construction. Evidences from several societies indicate that children do not reacquire a close, intimate and continuous relationship with a female mother figure. Hence the family sat up, as the functionalish stress is absolutely illogical.

## **Conclusion**

Man's life from the cradle to the grave is spent in the family in general. The ascetics are the exception to this norm. It gives a sense of continuity to life. Though patterns of family life differ widely, all families have aims and functions. All meet the basic needs of children and adults. Moreover all have certain common goals such as looking after the helpless child to grow and mature, socializing the child to suit the group life, providing them with the cultural frame work of obligations and relationship.

### **The family as a society as a social institution**

What is a social institution? " It is a systematic way of meeting a major group wide need provided by culture". Moreover the culture defines mutual obligation of parents and children. The role of parents, male children and female children are clearly defined by culture.

### **Family formation and marriage types.**

Families begin with the uniting of individuals in marriage. There have been and are always customs to guide mate choice and the number of mates she or he can choose.

Societies defer in finding their partners. If marriage must be within the tribal group it is called endogamy, if it is outside the group it is called exogamy.

Anthropologists studying marriage customs in various cultures have noted that many types are in Operation, example : Monogamy, one male and a female, polygamy, is more that single man and woman . There are types of polygamy.

(a) Polygyny the marriage of a man to two or more wives.

(b) Polyandry the marriages of a woman to two or more men.

In the most of the societies where marriage customs permit more than one wife, most men can afford only one legally. Whatever may be the formation of the family and the marriage types, in today's context one can't be isolated from a family set up. The married one who comes after a heavy work wearied in the field, factory, office or school, he or she takes refuge and consolation in the family.

Moreover the Vedas Holy Quran, and the Holy Bible insist on the family as a social institution.

### **Works Noted in this article**

1. M.Aderson (1971) - Family household and the Industrial Revolution.
2. M.Anderson(1983) - Family structure in nineteenth century Lancaster.
3. J.Bernandes(1985) - De we really know what the family is?
4. D.Cooper (1972) - The death of the family
5. M.Haralambos(1994)  
with R.M.Heald - Sociology thems and Perspectives.
6. A.Oakley (1974) - The Sociology of House Work
7. T.Parson (1959) - The American family
8. Paul Selfe (1987) - A level Sociology
9. Paul Landis (1978) - Sociology - Ginn and Lexington , Massachusetts.  
Oxford University Press, Delhi