BOOK REVIEWS

A. M. Shah, *The Household Dimension of the Family in India: A Field Study in a Gujarat Village and a Review of Other Studies*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, and University of California Press, Berkeley, 1973. pp. xx + 281, Rs. 37.50.

This book analyses a household census of Radhvanaj village, central Gujarat, which the author took in the late nineteen-fifties, compares these data with an 1825 census of the same village, and relates the conclusions of this micro-study to existing literature on the "household dimension of the family in India." It confines itself to the size and genealogical components of the household, intentionally setting aside its legal, religious, psychological and other aspects. The prospective reader must not be put off by this seemingly narrow intellectual base; for from it Professor A. M. Shah succeeds in exposing the confusions, and undermining some of the most deeply rooted notions, about the nature and destiny of the so-called Hindu joint family which have been shared by professional sociologists and the Indian educated public at large.

The instrument by which he gains purchase on that nebulous concept is a genealogical typology of households, fashioned to test the prevailing norm in Radhvanaj village, "the principle of the co-residence of patrikin and their wives." The average number of persons per household in this village is only 4.6, and nearly two-thirds of households are "simple" (containing all or part of one "parental family"), the minority being "complex" (containing all or part of more than one parental family). This gives the impression that the norm is widely flouted. But the analysis does not cease with the sorting of households into "simple" and "complex" categories, for Shah insists that this dichotomy has no sociological significance, having been constructed solely to provide continuity with the existing literature, in which the "nuclear/extended" dichotomy is so common. The meat of his typology is in fact to be found in the sub-groups within the simple and complex categories of households, against which the norm may be tested.

How well, then, do the villagers adhere to their professed norm? Many simple households will be simple not in violation of the norm of patrikin co-residence, but simply because they are at an early stage in the developmental process through which all households must pass, others because for demographic reasons they lack members needed to form complex households (e.g. one-son or no-son households), still others for a combination of the two reasons. But the question may be inverted, to show that only 35% of simple households and "core units" (or 25% of all households in the village) are simple as a result of partition, in direct contravention of the norm. Again, not all complex households uphold the norm of patrikin co-residence, for some contain non-patrilineal "accretions" such as the well-known *garh-jamai* (son-in-law of the house). Some 20% of complex households reverse the norm in this way (or a further 6% of all households in the village). Evidently the professed norm of patrikin co-residence has greater behavioural consequences than a mere average of the number of members per household, or the proportions of simple and complex households, can reveal, and conclusions which are drawn from such statistics are likely to be grossly misleading. As might be guessed, and as Shah documents with precision, the norm is more often violated by the lower castes than by the highest, though its correlation with caste rank is not exact. Although the 1825 census of Radhvanaj does not contain comparable specifics of genealogical composition and caste, comparison can show that whereas the number of households had nearly doubled in the interim, proportions of small, medium, large and very large households have remained practically the same. The householders of Radhvanaj are no less committed to the principle of the residential unity of patrikin and their wives than were their predecessors of a century and a half ago.

From this vantage, which forms the first third of the book, Shah goes on to survey the literature relevant to the household dimension of the Indian family in the middle portion. It is here that the larger significance of his Radhvanaj study comes home. From the times of Sir Henry Maine, scholars have turned the essentially legal notion of the Hindu joint family, Yajñavalkya's *avibhakta-kutumba*, into a multifunctional unit, imagining enormous households in

the classical past, and the progressive, ineluctible break-up of this family in favour of the growth of individualism. Shah shows just how unshakeable this belief has become. In the Census of 1911 it was noted that "the average population per house is 4.9 or much the same as in European countries. In the British Islands it ranges from 4.8 in Scotland to 5.2 in England and Wales" (cited in Shah, p. 126). The difference between the census figures and the imagined large households of antiquity was put down to their disintegration, and this conviction continued to be held even though the census data from decade to decade showed no decrease in average household size, but on the contrary a slight increase. Figures for Radhvanaj, 4.5 persons per household in 1825, 4.6 at present, parallel the national trend as revealed in the census.

At the bottom of this lies a general failure to maintain clear analytical boundaries between Hindu joint family (a legal co-parcenary between partilineally related males not necessarily residing in the same household), the household (a co-residential unit), the elementary/extended family (a multifunctional unit which may not reside in a single household), and the lineage (largely a genealogical concept). The result has been manifestly disastrous. The Dharma-sastras have been used to provide a picture of large households in antiquity, whereas their real subject is the legal co-parcenary; while data on household size in the Census and in the micro-studies of sociologists, which have been widely used to bolster the disintegration theory, show in fact that (1) the majority of households have been small in size over the period for which these data are available, and moreover that (2) there has not been a decline in average size, but on the contrary a modest increase, perhaps for reasons of the declining death rate. Shah further suggests that the prevalent view of the village as the strong-hold of the "joint family" and the town and city as its nemesis needs revision; he believes that urban centres, at least in the past, had more large households than the villages, not less, as a function of a greater proportion of upper castes.

The third and final portion of the book is given over to an annotated bibliography of the literature relevant to the Indian household, essentially a continuation of the preceding section.

Shah does not argue that other dimensions of the Indian family,

such as the concepts of the "extended family" and of "jointness," lack sociological reality, or that the character of the Indian household has remained unchanged over the past century or so. He does argue that the prevailing interpretations have lacked analytical clarity, have been too facile, and have rested on slender empirical underpinnings, or have even been upheld in contradiction to empirical findings. What is to be the destiny of the study of the Indian family emerges less clearly from his book. More micro-studies like Shah's of Radhvanaj, and further use of early local census material, could fortify or qualify his conclusions, and fill in the sub-continental picture. But it is not the author's intention, I take it, to establish the autonomy of its subject matter for indefinite replication in other parts of South Asia, with the danger that its relation to the other dimensions of family life may be ignored. The real service it performs is not to provide a model for imitation, but to clear away the intellectual undergrowth which has stunted the growth of the Indian family in general, and to devise sharper tools of enquiry.

It is a sheer pleasure to follow Shah take what appears to be an unpromisingly narrow aspect of the Indian family, and methodically develop from it a critique with far reaching ramifications. Its concentration of focus proves a great strength. There are, to be sure, limitations which attend such a strategy. It is correct, for example, to say that the *garh-jamai* custom reverses the principle of the residential unity of patrikin and their wives. Yet it is a recognized institution, with a native label and a significant frequency of occurrence. It is the complex fate of the *garh-jamai* that he satisfies some of the norms of patrilineal Hindu society by violating others. But this cannot be brought out by considering the norm of residence alone; the rules of inheritance must also be invoked. An analysis which examines the single dominant residential norm and measures deviance from it will rightly regard the *garh-jamai* as deviant, but will not be in a position to give a satisfactory explanation (i. e. one which takes into account its positive as well as its negative relation to current norms) of how it can nevertheless be an institution, a "recognized deviation" as it were. Much deviance of this type could be explained structurally, that is by reference to norms rather

than to contingent circumstances, I believe, if our notion of structure could be made to accommodate a plurality of norms within a single structure, some of which must contradict one another on some occasions. This is not said in criticism of Shah's book; the problem he set himself was to measure deviance from the norm of patrikin residential unity, not to explain that deviance. I mention it because I believe it is one of the areas of advance which Shah's book, especially its rigorous typology of households, makes possible.

An historian cannot say how sociologists will receive this book; I venture to think it will be taken as a landmark by future researchers. In any event, I hope that it will be read by historians. It is painful to be reminded in Shah's survey of the "Indological" study of the family how little attention has been given to the subject by trained historians, apart from historians of law such as Henry Maine, P. V. Kane and J. Duncan M. Derrett. Indeed, our understanding of the family in ancient India, inadequate as Shah shows it to be, is largely the contribution of sociologists with Indological interests, principally G. S. Ghurye and his circle (S. V. Karandikar, K. M. Kapadia, Irawati Karve).

One of the major implications of this book is that our view of household and family in ancient India needs re-examination. Shah takes a pessimistic view of the possibility of using "the classical literature for the study of changes in the family in modern times. It does not distinguish between 'family' and 'household'; nor does it contain any information on the different types of households and the frequencies of different types; and it does not reveal the differences that must have existed between the different sections of Indian society at different periods of time" (p. 131). Put in those terms, the situation is indeed hopeless. Yet there are largely unexplored avenues by which our knowledge of the family in ancient India might be advanced, even though census data is more than we can hope for. For example, story literature such as the *Kathasaritsagara* might be used in much the way a sociologist uses modern novels to elucidate the characteristics of family life and the implicit norms of the writer. We could do much better in specifying the scope of concepts equivalent to the various meanings of the English word

"family", such as *kuṭumba*, *grha*, *kula*, *vamsa*, being careful to note their genealogical components where literary contexts reveal them (N. K. Wagle has recently done some useful pioneering work of this sort in the Jatakas). We can, I believe, achieve a better and more accurate understanding of the conceptual, normative and (to some extent) the behavioural character of the ancient Indian family, if we look beyond the Dharmasastra, and if we make the careful analytical distinctions which this book does so much to promote; and although the results would not be of the sort that can be brought into direct relation to quantitative studies of modern families, they surely will be of interest to sociologists in establishing long term historical trends in some dimensions of the Indian family.

Shah's pessimism on this point must not be allowed to end such dialogue as exists between ancient and modern studies, and between sociology and indology. We need more and better interchange, not less. If his critique of the Indological study of the family were to have the effect of discouraging sociologists from taking an interest in the ancient past, that would be a pity. The Ghurye school, for all its sociological failings (and its failures of historical method are not even touched on in Shah's book) have nevertheless made a contribution in a most worthy field of inquiry which historians have by and large ignored. If historians should now belatedly take up the challenge which Shah's study renews, that of reassessing and refining the previous work on the ancient Indian family, his book will be an invaluable starting point, clarifying the sociological issues, exposing the confusions and unsupported assumptions which prevail, and providing a guided tour of the bibliography.

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Amita Dutta, *International Migration, Trade, and Real Income: A Case Study of Ceylon, 1920-38*, The World Press, Calcutta, 1973, pp. xii+171, Rs. 25.

Amita Dutta has made an admirable attempt to fill a gap in economic literature with her careful study of the effects of international migration on a country in which the export sector is large relative