

## THE HEAD OF THE HOUSEHOLD : SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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### Introduction

It appears from the vast literature available on household that no serious effort is ever made to identify the head of it. It is also clear that the concepts of 'household' and 'family' are taken as interchangeable. The head is normally assumed to be the oldest member, the decision-maker, the controller of resources, etc. But is it wise to be so casual about these concepts? Perhaps not, specially for anthropologists and sociologists who deal with these concepts more often than other human or social scientists.

I intend to raise here some of the methodological problems relating to this exercise. This, I presume, is necessary because if our basic concepts are wrong the results may be misleading too. The recent concern about the disintegration of families in India may be one such example of misplaced research.

### The Eldest ?

In many anthropological and sociological studies, the head of the household is identified with the eldest member living.

For instance, writing on the Lepchas of Sikkim, Gorer mentions that the head of the household is "usually the oldest man in the prime of life in the family" (1984:105). While the question of equating the household with family may be taken up later, let me cite another example where a similar statement has been made. Gerald D. Berreman, on the basis of his study in a

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peasant village in north India called Sirkanda, writes: ".....the eldest active male is the household head. This man is in the relationship of father or elder brother to other adult males in the family" (1974:166). Berreman adds 'active' as a qualification to becoming the head besides being the eldest. In fact, even Gorer indicates towards that when he uses the phrase 'in the prime of life'.

Being 'active' or 'in the prime of life' is a subjective issue and therefore may be debated. But scholars seem to take this for granted. For instance, Berreman writes: "when an old man becomes senile or inactive or when he dies, he is replaced by the next in line" (1974:166). With the advance in bio-medical sciences, longevity of people has been increased considerably, which has resulted in an ever bloating category of septuagenarians and octogenarians. Such persons may be active but may not be in the prime of their life. Even when they are not active they may still be acting as the notional heads.

This leads us to the question of notional and actual heads, which is difficult to resolve indeed. The notional may be actual in certain contexts such as deciding about the rites and rituals the household has to perform whereas the actual head may actually be heading the household in economic and political matters. The active eldest may not necessarily be actual head of the household in all contexts.

It has also to be noted that the eldest person in the household may not belong to the right sex. In other words, it may be a male in a matrilineal society and a female in a patrilineal one. Writing on the patrilineal Todas, Anthony Walker makes a relevant point here: "A widow with young sons is seen simply as the custodian of the household property until the boys reach manhood. Apart from her personal jewellery she owns nothing in her own right" (1986:76). Even when there is a male eldest in a patrilineal household social customs may be such that someone else is recognised as the head. For instance, Firth writes: "In discussions of this kind the eldest son has a prominent place. In the kinship terminology there is a special word for eldest, *te uru matua*, shortened to *te uru*. This latter is an ordinary word for "head", hence the eldest child may also be referred to as *te uru o fanau*, the head of the family" (1936:178). Hence, age is not always the deciding factor nor is being active concerning the headship.

### The Decision-Maker?

It may be stated at the outset that decision-making in most households, whether tribal or non-tribal, is a complex process and often involves more than one person. Hence, it is rather difficult to isolate one person from a household and identify him or her as the decision-maker. This is well illustrated by Firth in the following words:

“The position of the father in the Tikopia household is not so autocratic as appears at first sight. In theory he is the head of the family; in practice he agrees to the wishes of the rest of the household to a very large degree. In domestic matters in Tikopia father, mother and children commonly act as an informal family council, constituting a unit much as in our own society. The father assumes the initiative and voices decisions, the mother assents, contradicts, qualifies, moulds her man’s opinions, the children listen greedily and comment sagely and often inopportunately on what is said” (1936:178).

The picture in Srirampur seems to resemble the one found in Tikopia. For instance, Srinivas writes: “There was a widespread belief that the male head of the household made all the crucial decisions. ....However, reality was somewhat different from belief. Women did exercise some influence on the man’s decisions, though covertly, and the quantum of influence varied from household to household” (1976:141).

The situation in the Toda society seems different, as brought out by Walker: “He is the arbiter in household disputes and the delegator of duties. Although his wife, by no means takes a passive role in deliberations, his voice is supreme” (1986:96). Quite a similar situation is also reported from Sirkanda by Berreman. He writes:

“He is responsible for all decisions in the family, and his is the final authority, whether it be in matters of allocating lands to crops, performing worship, or arranging a marriage. The father is not always the authoritarian family head as ideally described. .... In most instances the family head acts on family matters after consulting with other males and often his wife as well, but this is not necessary nor prescribed” (1974:166).

The task of identifying the head of the household is perhaps even more elusive in matrilineal societies than in patrilineal ones. Though matriarchy theoretically leads us to assume that the authority rests in the hands of the female head of the household, in practice, it is not always so. Here, one should not only

appreciate the role of the husband as the 'bread-winner' but also the special status accorded by tradition to the maternal uncle. Though the husband may have no authority over his own household members or property he is the most widely accepted head of his sister's household. Thus, every household is likely to have, by rotation, an invisible authority; someone who is formally outside the household but informally not only within it but also its head.

### **The Controller of Resources?**

The fight for control over resources is as old as human civilisation. Though norms have been established by every society regarding who has the right over resources and who has not but such norms have been breached time and again. In most societies of the East, group control over resources has been found to be more functional than individual control though the former has seldom existed without tension and conflict among the legitimate members of a group. Also, in many societies, different types of resources are controlled by different individuals in the household, as illustrated by the following example from the Suku of Congo:

"A husband has no legal right to his wife's livestock nor can he use her stored food without permission. If the wife is a potter, or if the husband is a basketmaker or blacksmith or carver, the money each accumulates from these trades is not shared. If the wife sells agricultural produce, half the proceeds belong to the husband; this is explained as the result of 'partnership' between her labour and the hoe he has supplied. But once the division is made, each person's share is entirely his or her own" (Kopytoff 1964:101).

Similar situation has been reported from the Lepcha tribe of Sikkim (Gowloog 1995). It is found among this tribe that the women not only control the land and animals which they have received as bride-wealth from her natal home but also over her private animals and jewellery. Another study on the War Khasis of the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya (Lyngdoh 1993) shows that even in a matrilineal set up the practice of collateral system of inheritance is common. But elsewhere in India, the control over resources seems more institutionalised than what appears from the above instances. For instance, among the Todas of the Nilgiri Hills, Walker writes:

"He (head) is the owner of the household property and is expected to manage it for the benefit of his household. This property consists of the house and its equipment, family heirlooms

(including ornaments and bells for buffaloes as well as personal jewellery), buffaloes and, in recent years, a definite portion of the hamlet lands. Some of this property, particularly buffaloes, may be distributed to the household head's sons when he retires from active herding" (1986:75).

Srirampur, Srinivas's 'remembered village', seems to show a similar situation: "It was the man who exercised control over the domestic economy. He made the annual grain-payments at harvest to the members of the artisan and servicing castes who had worked for him during the year. The huge container (*tombe*) of split bamboo in which paddy was stored after harvest was sealed by him with straw and earth, and only he broke open the seal when necessary" (1976:140).

### An Overview

The points raised above regarding the three principal criteria of deciding the head of the household are perhaps enough to drive home the point that identification of the head is no easy task. The problem deepens further when we consider the following facts.

First, headship does not mean the same power and privileges in nuclear as well as extended households. In the former, the members being relatively few the competition for power and authority over the resources of the household is rather limited but in the latter there is unlimited scope for the same to exist and even threaten the existence of the household itself. Headship of an extended household not only means more power but also greater liabilities and responsibilities. He or she has to satisfy the needs and aspirations of a much larger number of individuals than the head of a nuclear household. Therefore, the headship is more liable to be either autocratic and/or unstable in the extended than in the nuclear households.

Second, headship is not really the same in matrilineal and patrilineal societies. In the latter, the head's position is relatively less ambiguous than in the former not only because of social customs and traditions but also of sheer biological facts. In the patrilineal societies, the physical superiority of the male over the female coincides with the principles of descent and inheritance of property but it is not so in the former. Though the principles of descent and inheritance clearly favour a situation where the female serves as the head of the household, other social customs demand

that the male be the head directly or indirectly. This is indicated by Chie Nakane's study of the matrilineal Nayar society. She writes: "A traditional Nayar *tarwad* was a property group consisting of matrilineal lineage exclusively, headed and represented by the senior male member, called *Karanavan*. Normally the members of a *tarwad* formed a distinguishable domestic unit. Spouses of the members of a *tarwad* resided in the *tarwad* where they were born, and a husband visited his wife at her *tarwad* at night and returned early morning" (1963:17).

Finally, it is perhaps necessary to briefly dwell upon the concepts of 'household' and 'family' which in most anthropological and sociological literature are used as synonyms. Conceptually, a 'household' is defined as "the people living under one roof, sharing a common hearth and managing their financial affairs as a single unit" (Walker 1986:75). In this sense, it is more an economic unit than a social institution constituted by members who are governed by certain rules, regulations, obligations, norms and values. A group of students living in a house and sharing the same kitchen may, by definition, qualify as a household but never as a family. The members of a family are bound together not only by emotion but by marriage and blood relationships. A servant, in this sense, is not a member of the family but he or she is definitely a member of the household where he or she works.

Further, the members of a family need not necessarily share the same house and hearth: the father may be away working in a distant place and the children living in hostels for education. Yet they continue to be members of the same family. Being a social institution, a family also has to fulfill certain functions such as bearing and rearing of the children, which are not necessary in order to qualify as a household.

One can draw many more distinctions between these two concepts but this is perhaps enough to suggest that a family is not quite the same thing as a household is and vice versa. Yet the practice of equating the two goes on. As a result, most of us end up studying households even when we claim to be studying families. This is perhaps a methodological myth that needs to be discarded by the academia otherwise, most of our observations regarding families are bound to be methodologically wrong.

## Conclusion

Two things emerge from the foregoing discussion. One, the

concepts of household and family are better separated at least at the conceptual level. And second, identification of the head of the household requires more methodological rigour than usually found in anthropological or sociological studies. Of course, there can be no universal criteria for identifying the same but this does not mean that the exercise is not worth taking seriously. Unless we understand the principles and practices which guide the becoming of a person as the head of a household or family, we cannot proceed further in our understanding of the social structure. And if we do not understand this we do not understand the society.

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