

Changing Patterns in Family as A Social Institution: A Sociological Analysis of Chandigarh

Ms. Vyany Dey Arora

Guest Faculty (Sociology); Ph.D. Research Scholar (Sociology) Institute of Social Science Education and Research Panjab University, Chandigarh

Abstract

The family, as a fundamental and primary social institution, plays a crucial role in shaping individual identities, socializing members and children; and maintaining societal cohesion. Traditionally characterized by joint the family, modern contemporary society is witnessing a significant transformation in family forms due to numerous socio-economic changes such as industrialization, urbanization, and rising individualism. The present study explores family as a social institution in Chandigarh, with a specific emphasis on the shift from joint to nuclear families; as well as the emergence of diverse forms of family including single-parent families, neo-local families, cohabiting couples, blended/reconstituted families, transnational families, and childfree households. The study further highlights how these changes in the family are perceived by the society and whether or not such changes are accepted widely. Finally, the present paper aims to critically analyze and examine the implications of emerging family dynamics, providing a nuanced understanding of how traditional social structures and modernity intersect within the Indian family system.

INTRODUCTION

The family is the fundamental social institution and primary unit of social organization. It serves as a structural framework that fulfills the essential needs of individuals within a society. Sociologically, the family is defined as an intimate domestic group bound by kinship, either through biological ties or legal relationships, functioning as a core unit of socialization and that satisfies the basic needs of individuals in a society.

Family is defined as ‘a group defined by sexual relationship, sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children’ (McIver and Page, 1949). Family can further be defined as ‘a more or less durable association of husband and wife, with or without child or of man or woman alone, with children’ (Nimkoff, 1947).

As a fundamental social institution, the family exhibits several defining characteristics. It is universal and the foundational unit of society, present in all societies in some form or the other (Murdock, 1949). Family members are interconnected through emotional bonds, cooperation and mutual affection, with structured obligations that facilitate social stability. Traditionally, these roles manifest through gendered divisions of labor, where men engage in economic activities while women manage domestic responsibilities (Mondal, 2012). The family further fulfills critical functions, including biological reproduction, the continuation of lineage, and the primary socialization of children, transmitting cultural

norms and values across generations (Parsons, 1956). Additionally, the family provides individuals with a social identity, such as a family name, while serving as a primary source of emotional and social support throughout the course of one's life (Mondal, 2012).

The structural transformation of the family has been significantly influenced by social processes such as urbanization and industrialization. A predominant trend observed is the process of nuclearization, characterized by a shift from joint family structures to nuclear family units (Singh, 2005; Ahmad et al., 2015; Bhoje, 2016). This transition has led to the disintegration of joint families (Rao, 2012) and an increase in single-member households (Singh, 2005). The rise of individualism, marked by a heightened emphasis on personal aspirations and autonomy, has further contributed to this shift, reducing emotional dependence on extended kin networks; further leading to the emergence of isolated nuclear families which witness a complete disconnection from immediate family members as well as extended kin (Parsons, 1956). A nuclear family is defined as a household comprising of parents and their dependent children, either biological or adopted (Priya, 2023). Compared to joint families, nuclear families offer advantages such as improved status and autonomy for women, fewer children, reduced interpersonal conflicts, greater privacy, and strengthened marital bonds (Rao, 2012). The nuclear family model, originally prevalent in western societies, has gained prominence in developing nations (Goode, 1963). A key feature of nuclear families is the relatively equitable division of labor and balanced power-sharing between spouses, contributing to a more symmetrical family structure (Willmott and Young, 1975).

In contemporary society, the evolution of family structures has resulted in the emergence of various new family forms that were previously uncommon. Single-parent families, often a consequence of divorce or the death of a spouse, have become increasingly prevalent (Kolenda, 1987). The normalization of divorce and rising divorce rates have contributed to the growth of 'broken families' (Kolenda, 1987). Additionally, blended or reconstituted families, in which couples cohabit with their biological children as well as children from previous relationships, have become more widespread. Cohabitation, as an alternative to marriage, has also gained acceptance, indicating a shift in the institution of marriage (Bhoje, 2016). Furthermore, inter-caste marriages, once rare in traditional societies, have seen a notable increase (Ahmad et al., 2015). Further, dual-earner households, where both partners contribute economically, challenge traditional gender roles and have led to the rise of Living-Apart-Together (LAT) families, wherein partners reside separately due to professional obligations while maintaining their relationship. If one partner resides in another country for work, such families are termed transnational families (Dommaraju, 2015). A growing number of couples are also opting for childfree or childless family structures, prioritizing career, financial independence, and personal growth over parenthood (Dommaraju, 2015). Furthermore, filo-centric families, in which children's preferences and aspirations are central to family dynamics, have also emerged as a recent trend, fostering early independence among children (Agrawal, 2019). Additionally, there has been an increase in neo-local family structures, where married couples establish independent households separate from their parental homes (Singh, 2005). These transformations reflect the dynamic nature of family structures in response to socio-economic and cultural changes in modern society.

Giddens has said, 'forever love has given way to love till further notice'. In the light of this statement, the changing patterns in the social institution of family shall be analyzed more specifically to study these trends and patterns in Chandigarh.

Review of Literature

The literature reviewed for the purpose of the present study primarily focused on the social institution of family and how it has evolved over time, introducing to the society its various new and emergent forms.

Mondal (2012) elaborated on the meaning and nature of family as a social institution and provided the basic introduction to the concept of family in detail. Similarly, **Rao (2012)** explored the concept of family and emphasized on its features, and functions and the gradual disintegration of the joint family.

Farooq and Kalyani (2015) highlighted the shift of the family from conservative to contemporary patterns in Punjab, further discussing the transition from the joint family system to the nuclear family in recent times. **Ahmad et al. (2015)** conducted a study in Punjab to analyze the changing trends in family and highlighted increased inter-caste marriages; and a shift from joint families to nuclear ones. Likewise, **Braver and Lamb (2018)** also discussed the recent trends and emerging patterns seen in the family.

While **Dommaraju (2015)** discussed the emergence of dual-earner households and Living-Apart-Together (LAT) families in recent times, **Agrawal (2019)** highlighted the rise of filo-centric families which prioritized children who were thus the centre of family dynamics. Finally, **Priya (2023)** emphasized on the further rise of live-in relationships, same-sex partners and even divorced individuals living either alone or along with their children.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research are as follows:

- To explore the current perspectives on family dynamics in Chandigarh.
- To analyze the newly emergent family structures in Chandigarh.
- To assess the level of societal acceptance towards the newly emergent family structures in Chandigarh.

Research Methodology

The present study followed a **mixed-method approach**; and primary data was collected from **40 participants** residing in Chandigarh belonging to the age-group of 18-22 years of age. **Quantitative data** was collected with the help of a **survey**, and aligned with the objectives of the research both close-ended as well as open-ended questions were formulated. Further, **20 semi-structured interviews** were carried out with willing participants to collect **qualitative data** for the study.

Results and Discussion of the Survey

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Table 1.1: Age of Participants

Age	Responses %
18-22 years	100%

All, i.e. 100 per cent of the participants belonged to the age-group of 18-22 years of age.

Table 1.2: Sex of Participants

Sex	Responses %
Male	20%
Female	80%

In the present study, while only 20 per cent of the participants were males, 80 per cent of them were females.

Table 1.3: Educational Qualification

Educational Qualification	Responses %
Senior Secondary	30%
Under-graduation	70%

30 per cent participants of the present study had completed their senior secondary education and the majority, i.e., 70 per cent of them were pursuing their under-graduation course.

Table 1.4: Type of Family Structure of Participant

Type of Family Structure	Responses %
Nuclear	65%
Joint	25%
Broken (Single-Parent/Separated/Divorced)	10%

The participants' families followed various structures with nuclear families at the top with a 65 per cent response. Only 25 per cent of the participants lived in the joint family structure. Finally, only 10 per cent of the participants lived in a broken family setup.

Current Family Dynamics of the Participants

Table 2.1: Decision Making Power in Family of the Participant

Decision Making Power	Responses %
Father	40%
Mother	25%
Collective Decision Making	35%

Although the decision making power among families has revealed to be maximum in the hands of the father with 40 per cent response and only 25 per cent in the hands of the mother, 35 per cent of the participants have stated that both the parents nowadays take decisions collectively for the family.

Table 2.2: Response of Participant's Neighborhood to Divorce

How the Neighborhood Responds to Divorce	Responses %
They accept it	65%
They consider it morally wrong	20%
Other	15%

The concept of divorce was understood and accepted by 65 per cent of the participants; however, 25 per cent of them still believed that divorce was considered morally wrong.

Table 2.3: Permission Granted to Women in the Family to Work

Permission Granted to Women in the Family to Work	Responses %
Yes	95%
No	5%

In the families of 95 per cent of the participants, women in the family were allowed to work. However, 5

per cent of the participants revealed that the women in their families were not allowed to work.

The Newly Emergent Family Structures and their Societal Acceptance

Table 3.1: Acceptance of Newly Emerging Family Structures

Acceptance Of Newly Emerging Family Structures	Responses %
Yes	40%
No	60%

While 60 per cent of the participants felt the society did not accept the newly emerging family structures, only 40 per cent of them felt that the society accepted the newly emerging family forms and were aware of the new diverse family forms in society.

Table 3.2: Thoughts on Neo-Local Family Set-ups

Thoughts on Neo-Local Family Set-ups	Responses %
Preferred	90%
Not preferred and Patrilocal residence is the better alternative	10%
Not preferred and Matrilocal residence is the better alternative	NIL

As many as 90 per cent of the participants revealed that they favored neo-local family set-ups and that the newly-weds should live independent of either of the parents' residences. However, 10 per cent of the respondents believed that patrilocal residential set-ups were more preferable. There were no responses to favor matrilocal families.

Table 3.3: Thoughts on Single-Parent Households

Thoughts on Single Parent Households	Responses %
Acceptable	95%
Not acceptable, the family should live together	5%

Single-parent households were found to be accepted by 95 per cent of the participants; while only 5 per cent of the participants felt that such families were not acceptable and the members should live together.

Table 3.4: Attitude towards Same-Sex Partners

Attitude towards Same-Sex Partners	Responses %
Yes, accepted	95%
No, not accepted	5%

95 per cent of the participants believed that same-sex partners were acceptable in the society. However, 5 per cent of the respondents believed that same-sex partners were not acceptable in the society. Such a response further highlighted the current thought process and limited acceptability of such families in modern day society.

Results and Discussion of the Interviews

The interviews conducted were more in-depth and provided deeper insights into the perspectives of the participants towards the emerging family forms in society.

Majority of the respondents agreed with the notion that there has been a shift in family structure from a joint family system to a nuclear family structure in Chandigarh. A few reasons mentioned included the rise of the individualistic lifestyle as well as urbanization. Most participants further mentioned that marriage still had a significant role to play in the family as well as in the society; whereas few of the participants mentioned that the role of marriage in the family is nowadays only limited to satisfaction of needs and is no longer a sacred ceremony.

Discussing about the new family structures emerging in Chandigarh, the participants shared that they as well as people around them were aware of these new emerging trends. However, there is some reluctance seen towards accepting these trends. While a section of the society is not willing to accept these new patterns, most individuals are much accepting of the new family structures emerging such as single-parent families, live-in relationships and even same-sex partners.

Divorce has also normalized in Chandigarh in recent times. Therefore, most participants accepted that if they were informed of a close one who recently divorced their partner, they will be accepting of it, not neglect that individual; and also provide social and emotional support. Reasons for the high rates of divorce as revealed by participants included extra-marital affairs and inability of the partners to spend quality time with each other.

A final yet significant segment of the interviews was related to the impact of new family structures on the children in that family in Chandigarh. Most participants stated that the impact of such emerging trends of broken families, single-parent families, and even Living-Apart-Families (LAFs) was negative on the child. Participants felt that it was necessary for a child to grow up within a complete family structure else will not be able to understand, follow or internalize the norms, beliefs, values, morals, ethics and traditions of the family and society and thus, will not be able to pass it on to the next generation either. Further, the participants felt that such children will suffer socio-emotional issues while living in such family systems.

Thus, the interviews highlight a clear shift in family structures in Chandigarh, reflecting growing acceptance of non-traditional family forms despite underlying societal hesitation. However, concerns remain about the potential impact of these changes on children's socialization and value transmission; as well as on families on a whole.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study provides valuable insights into the evolving family landscape in Chandigarh. The findings highlight the visible transition from the traditional joint family structure to more diverse and individualized family structures, including nuclear families, living-apart-together families, single-parent households, transnational families, live-in relationships, and even same-sex partnerships. While these emergent forms of families are increasingly noticeable and acknowledged, societal acceptance towards them remains varied—ranging from cautious openness towards them to dissatisfaction and outright resistance. Nonetheless, the present research highlights a gradual shift in attitudes, particularly among younger generations, reflecting the broader influence of urbanization, individualism, and changing social norms on contemporary family dynamics in Chandigarh.

Recommendations for Further Research

Sociologists may further explore the emerging patterns in family structures to gain deeper and more comprehensive insights into their underlying causes. For instance, the increasing prevalence of nuclear

families raises numerous questions: Is this trend solely a result of social processes such as urbanization and modernization, or does it also reflect underlying interpersonal tensions or challenges associated with living in extended family households? Do joint families experience a perceived loss of independence or privacy that contributes to their disintegration? Such questions can be addressed through future sociological research and studies focused on family dynamics.

Psychologists, too, play a crucial role in complementing sociological analysis. By examining the cognitive and emotional dimensions of family disintegration—such as the psycho-emotional reasons behind marital breakdowns or the impact of divorce and separation on children—psychologists can offer valuable insights into the consequences of these structural shifts. Such an interdisciplinary intersection between sociology and psychology has led to the development of practical implementations of the blend of the two disciplines, including family counseling, relationship therapy, and child guidance services, all of which address the psychosocial impacts of the newly emergent family structures in society.

Future researchers can build upon the current study by expanding the scope geographically as well as demographically. Conducting similar studies in other Indian states would help determine whether such trends are localized or widespread. Additionally, replicating this study within the same city, i.e. Chandigarh with a larger sample size can possibly help enhance the validity and generalizability of the current findings. Finally, further research could also be directed towards studying and examining similar transformations in other social institutions, such as caste, kinship, or marriage practices, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the overall changing landscape in society.

References

1. Ahmad, K., Farooq, A., & Kayani, A. K. (2015). Marriage and family structures in the rural Punjab: A shift from conservative to contemporary patterns. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 35(5/6), 306-324.
2. Braver, S. L., & Lamb, M. E. (2018). Shared parenting after parental separation: The views of 12 experts. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 59(5), 372-387.
3. Collins, D., Jordan, C., & Coleman, H. (2010). *An introduction to family social work*. Thomson Brooks/Cole.
4. Kautilya, K. (2015). *Ugc-net/Jrf/Set sociology (Paper-II)*. Upkar Prakashan.
5. Mondal, P. (2012). Family: Meaning, characteristics, function and types. Retrieved from <https://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/speech/family-meaning-characteristics-function-and-types/34966>
6. Rao, C. S. (2012). *Sociology: Principles of Sociology with an Introduction to Social Thought*. S. Chand Publishing.
7. Agrawal, A. (2019). Contemporary families in India Issues and challenges. *Think India Journal*, 22(13), 952-959.
8. Bales, R. F., & Parsons, T. (1956). *Family: Socialization and Interaction Process* (1st ed.) Routledge.
9. Bhoje, G. (2016). The changing trends in family structure. *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 343-353.
10. Dommaraju, P. (2015). One-person households in India. *Demographic Research*, 32(5), 1239-1266.
11. Goode, W. J. (1963). *World Revolution and Family Patterns*. The Free Press of Glencoe.
12. Kolenda, P. (1987). *Regional Differences in Family Structure in India*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
13. MacIver, R. M., & Page, C. H. (1949). *Society: An Introductory Analysis*. New York: Rinehart & Company.

14. Nimkoff, M. F. (1947). *Sociology*. New York: D. Appleton-Century-Crofts.
15. Nimkoff, M. F. (1959). The family in India: Some problems concerning research on the changing family in India. *Sociological Bulletin*, 8(2), 32-38.
16. Priya, A. (2023). Hurling towards nuclearisation: Sociological reflections on the transforming patterns of family as a social institution. *Society and Culture Development in India*, 3(1), 21-28.
17. Singh, J. P. (2005). The Contemporary Indian family. *Handbook of World Families*, 129-166.