

KINSHIP IN AN URBANISING LOWER CLASS INDIAN COMMUNITY IN WEST MALAYSIA

R. RAJOO

Some preliminary observations:

One of the major concerns of anthropological research has been with regard to the kind of change that the traditional kinship system undergoes in those societies which have been brought under the impact of modernisation, i.e. through industrialisation and urbanisation. It is contended that the corporate nature of the kinship system found in the traditional societies is suited to, and evolved under conditions in, a subsistence agrarian economy and that such a system cannot withhold itself in complex situations created by large-scale industrialisation and urbanisation. Those who advance this theory point out that the western societies in which the nuclear family has become the prevailing form of kinship system now has indeed been preceded by the corporate kin group now found in the non-western societies. In fact, following Weber, there are even those in the non-western societies. evolution of the nuclear family is a pre-condition for those societies which desire to modernise themselves in order to attain a high level of economic achievement or "take-off", as the economics would put it, and political integration. However, whether the kinship system in the non-western developing societies would become nuclear on the western model and whether this is even a necessary pre-condition for modernisation of these societies has become an interesting topic of debate.

Be that it may, investigations hitherto undertaken in the developing societies indicate that the traditional kinship system does make certain definite adjustment in the urban situation. In the urban situation the scope of kinship rights and duties are narrowed and become more uncertain while the kin circle itself is reduced. Geographical dislocation affects the closeness of interaction between kin members. In the peasant society characterised by subsistence economy every member of the family works in the land belonging to the family and contributes towards the common interest of the family. Opportunities outside the village were non-existent. In the modern industrial economy members of the family occupy different occupations and draw income from different sources. There is the emphasis on individual achievement and effort. There is also the stress on independence and self-reliance, in supporting oneself. Under such circumstances kin members no longer have a strong mutual interest in the management and maintenance of a jointly held estate.

Nevertheless, several studies suggest that kin relations continue to occupy an important place in the urban contexts. However, it is viewed that kin-based ties are likely to have different functions in towns and cities than in the rural setting. For instance, in the urban setting kinship forms an important source of interpersonal social network for individuals to draw affective and instrumental needs. Viewed from this perspective, kinship network, like all other forms of social networks, has a transactional element which stresses the norm of reciprocity. It serves as an important adaptive strategy for the urban migrants for their survival. It is for this reason kinship is seen to be resilient to urbanisation. Of course, in this regard the traditional kinship values and norms serve as an important moral basis.

In this paper an attempt is made to discuss briefly the role of kinship in a lower class Indian settlement in an urban migrant situation using the above conceptual framework. The data is based on an intensive fieldwork carried out by the writer between 1981 and 1983 through participant observation method and interviews.

The Settlement:

The settlement chosen for this study is located about 12 km from Kuala Lumpur and lies on the fringe of Petaling Jaya – the modern satellite residential cum industrial town. It is about 30 years old comprising some 2000 settlers living in about 330 house-holds squatting on a piece of state – owned land. The settlers are predominantly Indians with the exception of a few Malays. The majority of the settlers are south Indian Tamil speakers belonging to the second and third generation local-born and have come from estates from different states in search of better opportunities or alternative means of survival in the urban centre. Most of the residents work in the local multi-national companies located nearby, government and quasi-government departments and occupy unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. A few are clerks while another few have ventured into new fields by becoming vendors and provision store owners.

Among the settlers kinship constitutes the basic and most important unit of their social organisation. The principles in the kinship organisation are, of course, based on certain deep-rooted traditional Indian kinship values pertaining to bonds as kinsmen and filial piety. But the basic pattern of the family and kinship structure found among them are indeed conditioned by the imperatives of their position *visa-vis* the larger urban environment as would be shown below.

Household composition and the Family:

Based on the composition of persons with kin ties living under a single roof and shared common cooking and expenses, the households in the settlement belonged to the following categories:

Complete Nuclear	52.5%
Sub-Nuclear	6.3%
Supplemented	29.2%
Extended	10.8%
Miscellaneous	1.2%
Total	<u>100.0%</u>

By definition, a complete nuclear household consists of parents (married or simply living together) and unmarried children; a sub-nuclear household with a single parent and unmarried children; a supplemented nuclear household with a complete nuclear plus with other unmarried kin members; an extended household with two or more lineally or laterally linked married couples with their children and/or other kin members; and a miscellaneous household with single persons unrelated to one another or two nuclear families unrelated to one another. It is to be noted that broadly a household also constituted a particular type of family, that is, nuclear, sub-nuclear, supplemented or extended.

It is evident from the data on households that almost all the households in the settlement consisted of persons related to one another by ties of marriage and blood. Single person households were non-existent while households with non-kin members were negligible (there were only 4 such cases).

As shown by the data, the majority of the households (52.5%) comprised nuclear families. Several factors influenced the emergence of the nuclear families. First, many of the settlers are recent migrants to the city whose parents were still engaged in employment elsewhere (namely, estates). According to the informants, they would likely be joining them sooner or later when they were retired. Secondly, the size of the dwellings which is usually small, economic and other considerations also influenced adversely the maintenance of large families. Thus, as the size of the family expanded, kin members, especially married sons, shifted out to avoid overcrowding and congestions. Besides, the majority of the informants also claimed that generally when sons married they preferred to have their own families as this was considered would avoid tension and conflict arising from disputes on matters relating to sharing of the family budget and household chores. However, there was a tendency among the settlers to live together as an extended family under the same roof in cases where members of the family,

that is, parents and children and brothers who were involved in joint economic enterprises such as business. But even in such cases the extended family tend to split at certain point of time at a later stage whereby family members chose to live in separate dwellings. Such a split was considered to be a natural process among the settlers. The different types of households in the settlement thus show only a stage in the developmental cycle of the family at a particular time. A nuclear family expands itself into an extended family and then splits itself into smaller families in course of time. But the splitting of large families does not cause severance of ties between kin members living in separate households unless the split has been caused by a serious dispute. Though there were cases whereby extended families have split due to serious disputes and were not even in talking terms, but these were very few. With the exception of such few cases, close ties were maintained between kin members living in separate dwellings.

Kinship roles among the settlers in the urban context:

Kinship is found to play an important role among the settlers in their urban adaptation. Briefly, in the nuclear families the husband plays the role of the provider while the wife cooks, upkeeps the house and tends the young children. In many households the wives and children too, work and add to the family income. Under such circumstances, both or one of the parents of the husband or wife is invited to look after the young children and take care of the house while both the spouses are away at work. Aged parents are in return cared by the married son or sons. There is thus the reciprocal interaction in kin relations within the extended family.

There is a great deal of co-operation between kin members living in separate dwellings. This co-operation includes mutual aid in domestic activities, financial assistance and so forth. Kinsmen have helped each other in urban migration, providing initial accommodation and finding jobs and permanent residence later. Kin ties have thus resulted in "chain migration". There were indeed several instances of seven or eight households with ties of kinship located often close to one another, within the settlement. The settlers perceived that the presence of a large circle of kinsman is a source of strength in the strange and anonymous urban setting. This has consequently led to the emergence of a common ethnic neighbourhood. At the local level the presence of a large kin group is also utilised in the mobilisation of political support in situations of competition.

Change in the kinship structure in the urban context:

(a) The ego-centric kin network:

The kinship structure is found to have undergone certain significant changes in the urban context. For instance, in the traditional kinship system

the significant kin member in the family is also the most senior member of the family. But in the settlement the significant kin member has been found to be not necessarily the senior person but one who is influential and capable and from whom the other kin members could draw various kinds of help and support. Most often thus the kin network is centred on this person rather than the senior member of the family. The senior member's role, however, is continued to be seen on ritual matters.

(b) Affinial ties and bilaterality:

Urban migration has brought about a significant effect on the traditional consanguineal kin relations, too. For example, there are cases where the consanguineal kin is not adequately represented in the settlement and city. On such instances there are cases when a son-in-law is helped by the wife's parents and/or brothers in providing initial accommodation and other forms of help. In such instances there is closer interaction between members of the affinal kin which results in exchange of goods and services. Besides, there are also instances where a man helps to care the parents or the unmarried siblings of his wife. Some anthropologists consider this phenomenon as a trend towards the bilateral kinship system in urban setting among people who come from a patrilineal and patrilocal society (cf. Southall 1961: 220; Vatuk 1972: 140-4). My impression is that this is becoming an important trend among the lower class Indian settlers.

Friendship and quasi-kin:

Not all settlers have a significantly developed associates of kin circle in the settlement and the city under conditions of migration. Even if one has a large number of kinsmen, there are many needs in the new situation to which an individual has to turn to others for help. For one thing it is not necessary that in every kin group there are kin members who are influential and capable enough to get things done. In such a situation friendship has been found to have significant alternative among the settlers as it operates on the same ideology as kinship and is based on common interest. Ethnicity has been an important factor on this as it enhances communication through the same language and culture as well as on the perception of occupying the same politico-economic status. When friendship becomes strong friends address each other by using traditional native kinship terminologies in a metaphorical sense. Friendship is thus used as an important source of personal network to enhance mutual interest and solve common problems. Among the settlers friendship network is also used to form

'action-sets'¹ (Mayer 1966: 108-119) in the local arena to mobilise support for political action. It was noted earlier that kinship, too, is used by the settlers to mobilise political support at the local level. In this sense kinship is also used to form 'action-sets' in competitive situations.

Conclusion:

The focus of this paper is on the role of kinship in an urbanising lower class Indian settlement in West Malaysia. The data based on the field-work suggest that the kinship structure has undergone certain adaptive changes among the settlers under the impact of urbanisation. However, there is less evidence to show that the kinship structure is becoming nuclear on the western model. On the contrary kinship is used as an important strategy of adaptation among the settlers. Kinship thus continues to serve an important role among the settlers as it helps to cope with the demands of the complex and competitive urban setting. This may be seen as an adaptive response to the changing situation.

But in a complex urban situation kinship is not the only organising principle. Where it is less effective, other forms of organising principles such as friendship emerge to serve need fulfilment in urban adaptation.

¹According to Mayer (1966:113), an 'action-set' has a transactional element. This may be of two types: patronage and brokerage.

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