

Chapter - IV

**THE PRIVATE FAMILY : ITS
IMAGES AND REALITIES**

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Until recently many social scientists, reluctant to acknowledge variation in family life, insisted upon the reality of a universal form of the family. "The family" was treated as a platonic essence of which real families in the world were only imperfect shadows. Despite its familiarity, the concept of the family is elusive. The current debates about historical changes in family structure - whether the family has become more or less nuclear, how to document and measure family change, and what a given set of findings can mean - reflect basic difficulties in conceptualizing the family. The protean nature of family life makes it difficult to create a framework for its study. F. Anthony Wrigby has suggested that efforts to establish a single definition of the family, or a clear and simple analysis of its functions, run to risk of distortion and artificiality. ("Reflection on the History of the Family" *Daedalus* 106, No. 2, Spring 1977, pp. 71 - 85).

The tendency to treat the family as an abstract essence has been exacerbated by the norm of family privacy. In contemporary society the family is a "backstage" area, where people are free to act in ways they would not in public. Family privacy has strong effects on family life and individual family members, and it makes research difficult. The gap between public norms and private behaviour can be wide; marital relationships tend to be

private and invisible. Wallerstein observes that the true nature of a couple's interaction is hidden from even close friends (Willard W. Wallerstein, *The Family As a Dynamic Interpenetration*, New York, Dryden Press, 1951). The impulse to maintain a public façade of solidarity persists even in those marriages which are deteriorating. The strong moral and legal norms surrounding family life have also blurred the distinction between image and reality. Judges and clinicians are likely to evaluate the families that come before them in terms of an ideal standard. Ethnographers have often written descriptions of family life in terms of the rules for family behaviour, a tendency which idealizes and camouflages family processes. Is there any reason to suppose that the concept of the family adumbrated by Manu ever corresponded to any reality at any stage of the history of society in India ?

Not only may the outside observer apply inappropriate categories to the families under study, people themselves may not be accurate informants about their own marital relationships. Anthropologists often find discrepancies between observable behaviour and the accounts people give of themselves. Marvin Harris, for example, observes that norms and events never quite match and that, not infrequently, the main function of the norms is to obscure the reality (*The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, New York, Crowell, 1968). Levi Strauss and others have taken discrepancies between imagery and behaviour as the starting

point for theoretical analysis. Rather than being signs of social crises, contradiction between ideology and behaviour are pervasive features of any society. In traditional societies there exists, what Keniston has called the "institutionalization of hypocrisy" (Kenneth Keniston, *Youth and Discontent : The Rise of a New Opposition*, New York, Highcourt Brace, 1971). In a rapidly changing society new cultural norms emerge without an accompanying set of rules to justify derivations.

The privacy of modern family life distinguishes it in another even more crucial way from family life in the past. In traditional cultures much of daily life within the family was visible to outsiders. Besides regulating family life through observation and the threat of gossip, the pre-modern community could often intervene directly. In a metropolis the family is a private institution; and the private family is a modern development which has occurred only within the last one hundred years.

The external influences on the family did not disappear with the emergence of the private family. They became more shadowy. Instead of pre-modern regulation by gossip and intrusion of neighbours, family life has come under the guidance of images and prescriptions derived from the mass media and form a vast literature of books and women's magazines, doctors, social reformers and professional experts.

The removal of family life from public scrutiny seems to have pushed family ideals and realities in opposite directions. The more behaviour is immune from observability, the more deviations from the norms is likely to occur. Barbara Laslett observes that the private family lacks both social control and social support, except in the unusual situation where family behaviour comes to the attention of the community - people are no longer censured for departing from the norms, nor are they supported by the community for fulfilling them ("The Family as a Public and Private Institution : A Historical Perspective", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 35, pp. 480 - 92, 1973). While family behaviour has acquired the potential for greater deviance, family norms have become more demanding. Privacy allows families to overestimate how much other families conform to ideal norms, since we have access only to other family's public performances. Moreover, the images and prescriptions for family life promoted by the new mass media are both vague and perfectionistic. Thus the modern family comes under pressure to live up to elusive and abstract standards.

The formulators of the modern ideology of the family did not consider the possibility that the idealized images of family life could introduce new tensions into the home. By prescribing inner states rather than behaviour, modern standards of family perfection make success almost

impossible to achieve. Family members, the spouses especially, are to be regarded as normal, healthy, adjusted, and so forth; are supposed to experience emotional states such as love, happiness, joy, fun and good organisms. Martha Wolfenstein has argued that such a concern for inner experience may paradoxically increase the strain on marital relationships ("Fun Morality" in *Childhood in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein, Chicago University Press, 1955, pp. 168 - 78). In former days, the proper performance of family roles was a matter of duty, carrying out tasks properly. By contrast, survey of modern middle class families reveal spouses in a state of anxiety and complaining about nuances of feeling that cannot be controlled voluntarily. A recent T. V. serial *Thoda sa Asman* by Dipti Naval visualized a wife in plight inspite of the fact that the husband was dutiful and had nothing to complain against his wife.

Within the social sciences there have been theories that see conflict and change as inherent aspects of social life. Also emerging from a number of fields is the view that family problems arise out of the processes of family life itself not necessarily from quirks of the individual psyche. We are witnessing a resurrection of the tragic view of the family, a return to the kind of models of family life suggested by Freud and Simmel around the turn of the century. Rather than viewing the family as a haven of perfect peace and tranquility, we have begun to realise that intimate relations

inevitably involve antagonism and hostility as well as love. Indeed two aspects are inseparable-intimate relations provide more occasions for conflict than less close relationships, and conflicts between intimates are usually more intense than those between non-intimates. (Suzanne steinmetz and Murray Straus, *Violence in the Family*, New York, Dodd, Mead, 1974). William Goode has argued that family structures are maintained not only by solidarity and love, but also by force, both personal and social. ("Force and Violence in the Family", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 33 (1971); p. 624 - 36).

In a variety of areas of family — study the old sentimental model of family is dismantled. Lowered expectations of family life may increase our ability to cope with the strains and irritations of marriage. Once we are no longer convinced that we may find heaven by withdrawing from the world, we may try harder to change it.