

Family : A Social Institution

Family is a basic social institution existing in all periods of history. Simple means of Family is a social group consisting of husband, wife and their children. Family is a group of persons defined by sexual relations, and the people in it are related through the ties of marriage and blood. Family is a social unit as well as a biological unit. Different sociologists differently conceptualize family that is given below.

- Nimcoff defined “family is a more or less durable association of husband and wife with or without children, or of a man or women alone with children.”
- MacIver defined “family is a group defined by sex relationship sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children.”

Characteristics of Family

Family is a basic social institution it has certain characteristics which are given below :-

- **Universality:** Family is a universal institution in society. Family has existed in every age and in every society and is found in all parts of the world. No culture or society has ever existed without some form of family organization.
- **Emotional basis:** Family is a fundamental unit of human society. It is based on certain emotions like care, love, sharing, recognition etc.
- **Formative influence:** Family helps to form certain qualities like personality, socialization etc. The family exercises the most profound influence over its members. It moulds character of individuals. Family influences individual from childhood onwards.
- **Responsibility of the members:** Family is not merely a temporary collection of people, it is a functional group. Family is group constituted on the basis of marriage. Parents and children have certain mutual responsibilities. Each and every member has responsibilities for the maintenance of family as a primary institution.
- **Social regulation:** Social regulation means the control of society over individuals for regulating behaviour. Family is guarded by social customs and legal regulations. It imposes certain regulations over members to control the behavior of individuals.

Family is a basic institution in society. As an institution it has some specific

characteristics which are given above. The characteristics of family shows that the inevitability of family in society.

Types of Family

Family is an inevitable institution of society, it helps to the healthy maintenance of society. Different sociologists conceptualize the family in various ways. Family divided into different types on the basis of characteristics, structure of authority, pattern of residence, ancestry or descent etc. Some important types are briefly explained below;

❖ Classification Based on Characteristics

1. **Joint family**: Joint family is a type of family existed in early Indian society. The family in India does not consist only of husband, wife and their children but also grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles this system is known as joint family system. Large size, joint property, common residence, mutual rights and obligations, and productive unit, traditional occupation etc. are the important peculiarity of joint family system. Irawati Karve a well known Indian sociologist defined “joint family as a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food cooked at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common worship and are related to each other as some particular type of kindred.” The social developments like urbanization, industrialization, spread of modern education etc. destruct the joint family system.

2. **Extended family**: It is a type of family commonly found in early and present society. Extended family constituted by husband, wife their children and either the parents of husband or wife.

3. **Nuclear Family**: It is type of family commonly found in modern industrial society. The nuclear family constituted by husband, wife with or without children (unmarried).

❖ Classification Based on Authority Structure

1. **Patriarchal family**: It is the classification of family on the basis of authority structure. In patriarchal family the authority of family vested in a male member that may be a joint, extended or nuclear family. This type family is commonly existed in earlier and present day societies.

2. **Matriarchal family**: This is another type of family classified on the basis of authority structure. The authority of family is vested in mother or a female member, the best example of this type family is the families of Nair community in Kerala.

❖ Classification Based on Pattern of Residence

1. **Patrilocal family**: In this type family, after the marriage woman lives with her husband and his parents, it is a common and existing type of family system.
2. **Matrilocal family**: Matrilocal families are constituted by husband and wife living within wife's family. Matriarchal families commonly following this type pattern of residence system.
3. **Neo local family**: The term neo means new. In this type families, the husband and wife living in a new space. This type family is commonly found in modern industrial societies.

❖ Classification Based on Lineage or Descent

1. **Patrilineal family**: In this type family the lineage is passes through father or a male member. The patriarchal and patrilocal families are following this type lineage system.
2. **Matrilineal family**: In matrilineal family the lineage passes through mother of a female member. The matriarchal and matrilocal families following this type lineage system.

Functions of Family

Family is a small social unit composed by husband wife and their children. Family has certain characteristics like universality, nuclear position, social regulation, emotional basis; limited size etc. sociologists opined that family has certain functions to maintain society. The important functions of family are given below;

1. **Affection** : Family is a social group based on emotions like love, sympathy, caring etc. Human being has physical and mental needs, which are satisfied by the family. Parents love their children. The love of parents discloses the caring, recognition, and mutual sharing of feelings towards children. Through fulfilling the affection function child become very responsible in society and they can develop good personality.
2. **Recreational function**: It is the second most important function of family. In case of joint or extended families, the responsibility of children is not vested in parents alone. Grandparents, father's brothers, sister etc. also take care of children. The recreation (entertainment) chances like playing, storytelling, sharing the experiences etc are fulfilled in families so the families fulfill recreational functions.
3. **Religious function**: Religion is a social institution. Children get primary ideas about religion from family. Family has major role to shape the religious

beliefs of children. Religion is an agency of social control. It helps to control the behavior of children.

4. **Educational function:** Educational function of family means the socialization of children. Socialization simply means learning the social roles from family in early years of life. Family is the first school and parents are the first teachers of children. The first units of life like recognition, love, caring etc are studying children from family.

5. **Economicfunction:** Economic function means the primary function of family like food, clothing, shelter etc. Family is a social unit at the same time it is an economic unit. Family fulfills the economic function of its members. Even though certain changes are occurring in structure and nature of family, it exists as a basic institution in society. Sociologists opined that the functions of family changed in accordance with time changing especially the functions are transformed to secondary agencies like affection function fulfilled by day care centers, recreational function by parks and other playing spaces etc.