

THE POSITION OF THE WOMEN
IN THE HINDU JOINT FAMILY

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The old Indian social structure subordinated the individual to the group. It was based on three principal institutions: the village self-government, the caste system, and the joint family.

The joint family "springs universally out of the patriarchal family, a group of natural or adoptive descendants held together by subjection to the eldest living ascendant."¹ In the joint family, also, the eldest living male is the head. However, as he is never the parent of all the members, he becomes more a manager than a paterfamilias.

There are two forms of joint family prevalent in India. The one is matrilineal and the other, patrilineal. The matrilineal family provides certain preferential rights for women. This makes their social, economic, and educational status better than that of women in patrilineal families, but there is no reversal of the position of the sexes.² Men are not dominated by women as women often are by men in the patriarchal family. This familial pattern thus offers less strain to all

¹ Maine, 1888, p. 116.

² Appadorai, 1954, pp. 44-45.

members concerned. As the position of women is quite different in these two types of families, the present discussion will be limited to the patrilineal and patrilocal joint family. It will also be confined to the region of Maharashtra.¹ There are some differences in the family pattern along caste lines, but they are not very significant with reference to this paper.

The joint family is formed by a parent couple, their unmarried daughters, sons, daughters-in-law, sons' children, and so on. Very often such a family includes even distant cousins and their families, thus forming a group of 25 to 30 or even more people living under the same roof. It is a family "joint in food, worship and estate." All members of a family have a common ancestor. They worship the same deity, cook their meals in the same kitchen, and pool all economic resources together. The eldest male is the head of the family. His wife supervises all matters concerning the household.

In the earlier times it rarely happened that sons divided up the property after their father's death. But it did happen and they lived separately, often in different parts of the same house. In some cases, even when the father was alive, a son could ask for his share of the ancestral property and go away from the family. Usually, though, the eldest son inherited the property and became the head of the family after

¹ Maharashtra is the linguistic region where Marathi is spoken. It is made up of central Bombay State, eastern Madhya Pradesh, and northern Hyderabad. Karve, 1953, p. 2.

his father's death.

From the above description the following appear to be the good points and the drawbacks of the joint family system from the individual member's point of view. The joint family provided economic and psychological security to all members. It is said that the caste system and the joint family between them have made any organized poor relief unnecessary.¹ Joint family "enables the more gifted members to pursue their interests--public, literary or scholastic--without financial embarrassment and it mitigates the hardships of unemployment for the less gifted."² But providing a minimum to all also involved a process of levelling down. It must have encouraged parasitism in some members and generated dissatisfaction in the more ambitious members.

Rearing in a joint family minimized egocentric attitudes in a child.³ A friend, who comes from a joint family of over 30 people, writes that his father had to treat all the children of the family alike even though he may have loved his own child more. He said that he never had any consciousness of a separate family unit formed by himself and his parents.⁴ In such a family a child has to share everything. A father cannot give his own child a toy without giving a similar

¹ Chatterjee, 1948, p. 44.

² Moraes and Stimson, 1943, p. 138.

³ Nehru, 1946, p. 112.

⁴ Letter No. 3.

present to all other children. It is easy to see how this kind of training can serve as apprenticeship in larger social sympathies.

However, in spite of any useful purpose the joint family may have served, it is on the point of disappearing completely. It has been disintegrating at least for the past 40 years. In the '30s, when the fall in agricultural prices sent the farmers to seek work in cities, the break-up of the bigger families became pronounced. During the Second World War industrialization, and with it urbanization, received a further push. In the big industrial cities housing shortage and a high cost of living made it impossible for industrial workers to support joint families. Besides, the men in one family went to different parts of the country, and it was only natural for them to take only their immediate families with them. In almost all income brackets, incomes remained more or less inelastic while the cost of living rose. These reasons made it more economical to break up a joint family into several units.¹

The legal system of the British helped in this process. Sir Henry Maine refers to the widespread principle of modern law, "No one can be kept in co-ownership against his will," as being "irreconcilable with archaic usage."² The

¹ Appadorai, 1954, pp. 65-66.

² Maine, 1886, p. 263.

government recognizes only natural families in its regulations, and since the numerous government employees are more mobile than ever before, the establishment of natural families is inevitable.

The main concern here is the role of women in the joint family. It is possible, in the case of the Hindu joint family, to give a complete picture of the women's life without making more than a passing reference to men. A unique feature of this family pattern has been the separate worlds that men and women lived in. Even as children, girls and boys received different kinds of treatment and training. The adult male and female shared their duties in such a way that there was not much overlapping. They did not interfere with each other's fields. They did not sit or even eat together. The greater part of a woman's life was thus spent in the company of the other women of the family and of children.

In the Hindu society a woman was customarily considered inferior to man. It was perhaps as a result of this notion of women's intellectual inferiority that they received little formal education. A young girl received whatever oral traditional education her mother could give her, and the art of housekeeping. Her chief training, however, consisted in the teaching of an attitude or way of behaviour. That most girls received no formal education until recently is shown by the census returns of 1901 when only one out of every 144 women was literate. This lack of education and contact with the outside world naturally circumscribed their field of interest.

The almost complete separation of the worlds of men and women has produced an interesting and unusual phenomenon: a wealth of literature created by women for the benefit of women. Among other things this literature consists of:

(i) songs to be sung while performing certain household tasks like grinding grain or rocking a baby; (ii) songs sung usually on ceremonial occasions when women gather together; (iii) narrative songs which often tell stories taken from the epics, puranas, etc. Besides these there is a lot of prose literature which borders on rhythmic verse. This includes the various proverbs and epigrams which formed a vital part of the conversation of most women and which can be looked upon as condensations of their daily experiences.

This literature shows all the three stages of versification. The first stage is putting words together so that they can be said rhythmically. It is found in all the songs that are sung as an accompaniment to some play activity. Here the words are partially or totally meaningless. They are used mainly for their sound. We cannot really call these compositions songs. They have no tune. The help of rhymes is taken probably because they are easier to commit to memory than straight prose. There is no poetry in these rhythmic compositions. The form is all important. Whatever meaning they may have emphasizes fun and jesting.¹

¹ Deshpande, 1948, pp. 14-29.

The next stage is represented by songs sung while engaged in a more leisurely activity. Women might sit on a swing and sing songs or join hands and sing while walking in a circle. They might just have a competition of composing verses on a particular subject. These activities take up less energy and attention than strenuous play activities. In these songs we find more coherence. Rhyme and rhythm still play a greater part than the meaning, even though the use of meaningless onomatopoeic words is much more restricted than in the first category of literature. These can be more rightfully called songs, as they are sung. Also, in this type we find many songs telling some story in a serious vein and drawing a moral from it.¹

In the third stage are the songs that are rich in meaning and more developed in form. However, we still come across a verse here and there in which the first two lines may be used simply for the sake of rhyming and may not have any meaningful relationship with the last two lines. They still would not contain just some meaningless syllables thrown together. They have meaning, only the meaning may not be necessary to complete the sense of the whole verse. These verses are more tightly knitted together than the first two types of verses. They fall under a recognized form of poetic expression. Mrs. Deshpande believes that these verses were composed to convey some particular meaning. They can be called

¹ Ibid.

poetry proper. They are equally rich in their language and their emotional quality. The greater part of the women's literature is formed by these songs, and they will be drawn upon most heavily in this paper.¹

This literature may have been modified or added to in places by men, but in the bulk it is the women's creation. It is full of words and phrases that men would not normally use. It has been preserved almost entirely by being handed down orally from generation to generation. In this process the language and sometimes the subject matter were being changed slightly as new verbal usages and social customs came into practice. New verses were added, and some of the old ones dropped off.

References to women singing songs while doing housework are to be found as early as the 11th century, but these cannot be the same as the ones that are sung today. As Mrs. Deshpande points out, the songs last only as long as the social setting remains approximately the same. The social conditions in this case did not remain the same for more than 100-150 years. Thus the time limits for this literature can be set for the beginning of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century.²

A lot of this literature has been published before for religious purposes or just as collections. During the last

¹ Ibid., pp. 54-58.

² Ibid., pp. 11-13.

15-20 years, however, more and more attention has been given to its analysis and interpretation. Kamalabai Deshpande, Malati Dandekar, Sarojini Babar, and Sane Guruji are a few of the people who have tried to reconstruct the life of the women who created the folk literature. The specific inquiry of this thesis has not been pursued by anyone to the author's knowledge.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse part of this literature mentioned above along the following lines:

1. The separate worlds of men and women in a joint family
2. The ideal role-relationships in the joint family
3. Actual conflicts arising directly or indirectly out of the roles played by women.

It is also the purpose of this paper to discuss briefly the social function of the women's literature.

In addition to the categories mentioned before, occasional use will also be made of (i) Kahanis, which are stories to be read at the termination of a Vrata;¹ (ii) unpublished material from the author's memory; (iii) personal interviews with former or present members of joint families obtained through correspondence.

The two main collections used in this paper are Stri-Jivan by Sane Guruji and Lokasahityache Lene by Mrs. Dandekar. The first book has about 2,500 verses collected by going from house to house. The verses were written down as they were

¹ A kind of discipline followed for a certain end.

sung by women for the author. They represent the Brahmin women's literature. Mrs. Dandekar's collection also has about 2,500 verses. These are rural songs. She took down the songs as women sang them while working.

The other books contain an assortment of verses, stories, sayings, and other forms of prose literature. All the collections represent different parts of Maharashtra. Still there is a lot of repetition. The Brahmin and non-Brahmin literature presents similar ideas even though the language is slightly different. There must be a lot of the folk literature of Maharashtra still remaining to be collected. However, the literature used here represents a fair sample of it and justifies any generalizations based on it.

CHAPTER II

THE SEPARATION OF THE SEXES IN A JOINT FAMILY

The very fact of the existence of a large literature which was created by women exclusively for the benefit of women shows that men and women did exist apart from each other in a joint family.

We have already noted that the division of labour in a joint family was made in such a way that there was not much overlapping. For example, in an average joint family the head controlled all economic resources. On a farm all the members of the family worked together. In a case where the family did not own any land they worked separately, but they all had to give their earnings to the head of the family. He determined what portion went toward satisfying each of the family needs. The oldest woman of the house received part of the money for household expenses. In that realm she had control of all the affairs. She supervised the buying of supplies, upbringing of the children, and division of duties among the various women of the family. Without such a division of labour a large family cannot operate harmoniously.

There was also a physical separation of the sexes. As Vatsyayana describes it, "The main building (of the house) should have two portions--the outer and the inner ones. The

inner portion will be for the women and the domestic affairs."¹
 The outer room, usually on the street side, was occupied by men when they were home. They entered the inner part of the house only for meals or to worship the family gods. They rarely ever entered the kitchen.

Men and women never ate together in a joint family. All children were fed first. The men were served later in the dining room, and the women were the last to eat. They had their meals in the kitchen.

The custom of men and women of the same family coming into as little contact with each other as possible is reflected in the folk literature. There are sayings which speak derogatorily of a man who mixes among women.²

A woman was not as a rule supposed to speak her husband's name, whether she was directly addressing him or referring to him in the third person. This implied a certain distance between husband and wife. An exception was made to this rule on ceremonial occasions when women gathered together and pressed a newlywed to speak her husband's name. She consented after much persuasion and incorporated the name in an elaborate epigram.

Mrs. Rangnekar mentions the story of a bride who wants to go on a visit to her parents. Her husband gives her his

¹ Basu, 1943, p. 12.

² Rangnekar, 1954, p. 5. The slang used in this saying will not mean anything if translated in English, but the general sense of it is that a man in a group of women is a laughing stock.

permission right away saying, "Bring a comb, fix her hair, and let my queen go to her parents' house." The mother-in-law is angry on hearing him grant the permission so readily and in such open and shameless words. Her son proves himself a weak person who depends on his wife's decisions.¹

The above anecdote sounds the note that women are inferior to men. This idea is quite common in Marathi as well as in Sanskrit literature. Manusmriti, the ancient book of law, contains perhaps the best exposition of the idea. A wife is required by Manu to be faithful to her husband in life and death. She should obey and worship him even though he may not deserve it. A double standard is applied here. A husband, under certain circumstances, can leave his wife, for instance, when she cannot give him a child. A wife, however, can never leave her husband. Manu regards a woman as a totally helpless and dependent creature. In her childhood she depends on her father, when she is young on her husband, and in her old age on her son.²

In the Vedic period women were considered the equals of men so far as education, penance, and powers of philosophical discussion were concerned. Later, in the Brahmanas, Mahabharata, etc. they were thought to be more emotional and less rational than men and hence intellectually inferior to them.

¹ Rangnekar, 1954, p. 19. The word used is 'बाबागुरुका', which means one who relies on his wife's wisdom. This term has a very bad association in Marathi.

² Valavalkar, 1939.

For a man there was salvation through lifelong celibacy and religious contemplation, but that path was closed to a woman. She had to marry and have a child, preferably a son, in order to attain salvation. In short, she could not achieve it apart from a man. The premium put on giving birth to a son is also indicative of the social superiority of the male sex. A woman could not become a priest and direct religious ceremonies. She could not even participate in such ceremonies during her menstrual period. A son, and not a daughter, performed a father's funeral rites and inherited his property. The birth of a son insured heaven for the parents, while the birth of a daughter was looked upon with comparative indifference, if not unhappiness.

It is the parents' responsibility to get a daughter married. She thus forms a source of constant worry to the parents. "A daughter grows up. She increases her parents' worries. The worries continuously cause them tears."¹ But there are some compensations, too. Since the marriage of a daughter is so important, giving her away in marriage brings great religious merit to the father. It is considered equivalent² to giving away the earth.

This of course does not mean that all authorities agree on the inferiority of women. We find some references which

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 110.

² According to the Hindu philosophy, giving a gift to somebody is of very great religious importance. The greater the gift, the greater the virtue of the giver.

place woman on a pedestal, or at least on the same level with man. The Mahabharata, for example, says that "A man's half¹ is his wife. The wife is her husband's best of friends." Each must try to be a perfect psychological complement of the other. In the same epic, there are also examples of women who achieved prominence through their intellectual excellence. The same book thus holds contradictory views about women, but the idea of their inferiority dominates.

Both these points of view are interestingly illustrated in the story of Anasuya as told in a woman's song. The wives of the three gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh² were jealous of Anasuya because of her fame as a great woman. They persuaded their husbands to cause her trouble. The gods went to Anasuya in the guise of beggars and demanded that she give them alms after taking off all her clothes. This presented a dilemma. On the one hand she would lose her character; on the other, her religious merit as it is a great sin for a Hindu to turn a beggar away from the door without fulfilling his wishes. Anasuya lived up to her fame. She found an ingenious way out of the dilemma by converting the gods into little babies and then fulfilling their demands. The song ends with the moral, "This is the fate of the men who are

¹ Valavalkar, 1939, p. 225.

² This is the trinity that represents the creator, preserver, and destroyer of the world.

henpecked."¹ The story illustrates both types of women. Anasuya, who was a woman and a mere human being, was more powerful than the gods. The goddesses, on the other hand, depict the idea of an average woman who is jealous, petty, and small-minded.

Women of good families were not supposed to talk to strange men, or to behave in such a way as to attract their attention. A mother gives wise advice to her daughter, "How many times should I tell you? You should wrap your dress properly around your neck. A stranger's eye travels far."² A sister tells her brother about a prospective bride, "She will walk the whole length of the street, but even her right arm cannot be seen. She will keep your good name."³

This kind of aloofness was extended to the men relatives and the husband as well. A husband and wife were traditionally so restricted in their behaviour toward each other that they could not openly discuss even matters that concerned them most, such as a baby. A very telling example is the

¹ Joshi, 1949, pp. 9-13.

² Deshpande, 1948, p. 58.

³ जाईल उभ्या बिदी न दिसे उजवी भूज ।
रसनील कुळ मुझे भक्त्या ॥

Unpublished. To understand the implication of this, it is important to know that in the Indian dress as the women a generation ago used to wear it, there was never any question of the left arm being seen. However, if a woman was particular about covering her right arm also, she was considered to have a very good character.

husband who has to ask his wife secretly when she is expecting their baby. "The husband asks behind a wall, how many months have passed?"¹

A husband and wife were rarely seen together in public. She received her women friends in the inner part of the house and he his friends in the outer room. Men and women rarely went visiting together. I used to know a couple who liked to take a walk every morning. The husband would start first and the wife would walk a hundred yards behind him. Only when they rounded a curve would they walk together. They did not live in a joint family after their marriage, but their behaviour was probably the effect of earlier bringing up. "A generation ago . . . the spectacle of an Indian couple walking down the street was exceptional. All this has changed for the better, though to many Europeans fresh to India there may still appear to be a marked lack of comradeship between the two sexes."²

Mrs. A. writes that after she got married she hardly ever spoke to her husband while she was living with her in-laws. The fact that she was only ten years old when she married might have had something to do with it. However, she mentions that even afterwards when she and her husband lived away from the joint family, they spoke to each other very little. It was not until after their children had grown up

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 154.

² Moraes and Stimson, 1943, p. 53.

and married that they occasionally sat and talked together.¹

Mrs. B. says that in their joint family, men and women never talked to each other without some purely practical reason. Men usually sat in the outer room and came into the house only when called for meals, etc. In the house her grandmother-in-law controlled everything and ran the family smoothly without any interference from the men.²

Mrs. A's letter also mentions the kind of relationship she had with the older men of the family. If such a man relative entered the room that she was in, she had to stand up and remain standing until he left. She did as she was told and was not expected to say more than "yes" or "no" when a question was addressed to her. Aside from that, there was no occasion to speak to the men relatives who were older than she. However, she was always on friendly terms with her brothers-in-law who were her age or younger. She used to sit and chat or even joke with them.³

A husband and wife thus did not share their daily life. It must be remembered, though, that quite a large part of the poetry of the women is devoted to the expression of their love for their husbands. This love poetry is tender but never passionate. Following are some of the examples.

A wife describes her lonely feeling when her husband is

¹ Letter No. 1.

² Letter No. 2.

³ Letter No. 1.

away, "In the gardener's garden there are bananas and coconut palms (standing side by side) like sisters-in-law. In between, O Rose, is your fragrance. But he who should appreciate it has gone away."¹ When her husband comes back she feels as if the moon has come to her doorstep, "My husband has come home. The moon has risen in my doorway."²

A wife is very proud of her husband and tends to exaggerate any qualities he has. She warns a passer-by who stops by her house and tries to talk to her, "Traveller, do not stop your horse here. My sweetheart is counting a tigress's teeth in the jungle."³

She thinks that her husband gives meaning to her life. His importance in her life is expressed in the following verse: "A parents' house without a mother, an in-laws' house without a husband--looks barren like a pasture without rain."⁴

But these feelings are one-sided in many cases. The husband-wife relationship starts out in a one-sided way as seen in the "looking-over" ceremony. Before a marriage is settled, the prospective bridegroom and his parents come to the bride's home. The bride is dressed up by her mother. Her only role in the ceremony is to sit in a corner with her

¹ Babar, 1951, p. 19.

² Dandekar, 1952, p. 157.

³ Babar, 1951, p. 19.

⁴ Kothari, 1951, p. 12.

head bowed, while the visitors critically look her over and ask her questions as to whether she can cook and sew and do other household tasks skilfully. They may be shown some of her handiwork or served something she has cooked. Under these circumstances the bride-to-be naturally appears at her worst. In addition to that, she rarely even looks at her future husband and in-laws. The visitors then go away and the girl and her parents wait anxiously for their decision. The girl, especially if she is not particularly good looking, does not have any say in the matter. The Hindu girl is brought up to be adaptable so that if her husband and in-laws are kind and good-natured, chances are that she will have a fairly happy married life. But if the husband is no good, she has no way out of the marriage. Now, since the Hindu code bill has been passed, a couple can get a divorce but the social pressure is still against it. A wife has to stick by her husband whatever treatment he may give her. The wife's plight when her husband is interested in another woman is described in the verse, "The wife in the house is like a pool of clear water, but he is ready to sell his house for the sake of another woman."¹

When a girl goes back to her parents for the first time since her marriage and meets her childhood friends, she shares her married experiences with them. If her husband does not deserve her love and respect, she says unhappily, "He has

¹ Dandekar, 1952, p. 149.

neither looks nor beauty. He does not possess a single virtue. And it is my fate to live with him." She describes him picturesquely as "a cobra who has wound himself around a sandalwood creeper night and day."

The one-sidedness is also seen in the fact that a wife is considered as a man's possession, while she cannot make any such claims. Dharma, the Mahabharata king, lost his wife to his adversary in gambling along with all his other possessions. A harassed woman words her feelings, "Do not make me a woman, god, because I shall be another's servant all my life."

A wife thinks that she loves unreservedly but her husband does not return her love: "Womankind is naive, men have little love." The one-sidedness involved a double standard, which only widened the gap between man and woman in the Hindu joint family.

Even the father-daughter relationship was usually not very close, although there are some references to a father being fond of an only daughter. The mother-son and brother-sister relationship was almost invariably close. On the whole, a woman was closer to her blood relatives than to her in-laws. This raises the question of how a woman was trained

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 183.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 147.

⁴ Deshpande, 1948, p. 63.

to behave differently toward the two sets of relatives. There were, of course, certain specific instructions given to her from time to time by her mother. But the chief conditioning was probably brought about by the words and phrases used in reference with the in-laws and the general attitude created in an unmarried girl about strangers. A girl also had the example of her mother's behaviour before her eyes.

CHAPTER III

IDEAL ROLE-RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THE WOMAN'S WORLD

The ideas about the ideal relationship can be reconstructed from the descriptions of the ideal woman found in the literature reviewed, and also of the kind of training given to a girl to enable her to become a good wife, mother, and so on.

The mother-daughter relationship is always seen as very close and affectionate, as illustrated by numerous verses. The following are some examples.

"The father is the sun, the mother is the moon. A child feels affection for its mother."¹ This clearly characterizes the role of the father and the mother in a child's life. Even though the mother brought up the child, the father was indirectly or directly the disciplinarian. Even in cases where he came into very little contact with the child, his name was used to create fear in a child's mind. Even in today's nuclear families one can find mothers who say, "Let your father come home and I will tell him how naughty you were." The father may rarely scold or spank the child, but the threat seems to serve its purpose. The mother emerges from such a situation as a gentle, loving creature.

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 87.

"The waters of the ocean dance day and night. So does a mother's heart for her child."¹ This is a picturesque example of the descriptions of an ideal mother. A mother is always referred to with gratitude.

"In how many songs shall I sing the debt I owe to my mother? Who can count the grains (of sand) in a desert? In how many verses shall I sing my mother's virtues? Who can count the waves of the ocean? In how many songs shall I sing of my mother's love? Who can circle the boundaries of the sky?"²

A mother's love is supposed to be entirely unselfish and undemanding.

The idea that a mother will sacrifice anything for her children is seen in the verse where a mother says, "Ganesh, [the name of a god] make my life shorter, and give it to the husband of my dear Ushatai."³

A woman's relationship is similar with her other women blood-relatives. Ideally her relationship with her brother's wife is that of a sister or, if the latter is older, that of a mother. "The older sister-in-law is like a mother."⁴ A woman is sometimes found admiring her sister-in-law. "My

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 89.

² Ibid., p. 89.

³ The literal translation of the second line is "Give it to my Manutai's bracelets." Wearing bracelets is a symbol of being married. The name "Ushatai" does not have any particular significance. The singer can substitute any other name in its place. Ibid., p. 127.

⁴ Ibid., p. 32.

sister-in-law is more of a jewel than my brother."¹ "Among all sisters-in-law, my sister-in-law is calm. My brother is like the sun."² But such examples are rare. Mostly we find an antagonism between sisters-in-law.

If a girl was lucky, the treatment she received from her in-laws was the same as that she received from her blood relatives. About two generations ago, most girls were married before the age of 12-13. A girl started receiving a special kind of training at a very early age. It went on later even after marriage, as she frequently visited her parents. This training consisted of learning by heart the old epics and other traditional religious poetry, learning to count as that was essential for many purposes like keeping household accounts, etc. The chief purpose of this training was to equip a girl with all the skills needed for housekeeping like cooking, sewing, grinding grain. She was also given a general idea of how she should behave in her husband's house. She was taught certain norms of behaviour by following which she could meet most of the conflicting situations in her married life.

In the story given by Mrs. Rangnekar we find a passage describing a newlywed girl who was too timid even to pet her own child in front of her in-laws. She had two sons but "during their childhood she was a young daughter-in-law so that she was too embarrassed even to kiss her own children

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 33.

² Ibid., p. 32.

in anybody's presence." Seven years later she had a daughter. At that time, as her parents-in-law were dead, her husband was the head of the family and she used to devote all her time to her daughter.¹

A married girl has reason to thank her mother if she had given her good training in household tasks. One bride says, "I have been taught in my mother's school that I should always do my work on time."² "Grinding and pounding are like playing a game to me. My mother has brought me up well," a girl tells proudly.³

Some references are found regarding the kind of treatment she should receive from the in-laws. The sentiment on the mother-in-law's part is that a stranger's child has come to live with them for her son's sake, and everyone should treat her affectionately. As most girls married early, the mother-in-law was actually a second mother to them. In Mrs. B's letter there is a reference to the fact that she was only ten years old when she married. Her mother-in-law was very fond of her. She used to wash her hair and do some of her work like washing clothes.⁴ Mrs. A's letter also mentions that even though she had her appointed tasks to do, she was never asked to do heavy work like drawing water from the

¹ Rangnekar, 1954, p. 2.

² Sane, 1940, p. 148.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Letter No. 2.

well. Her mother-in-law or an older sister-in-law (husband's brother's wife) used to do her hair. She was given breakfast with the other children of the family, while the older women never ate early in the morning.¹

"I do not know any ill-treatment at my in-laws. She is not my mother-in-law but my mother."² This explains the ideal relationship that can exist between mother- and daughter-in-law. "My mother-in-law and father-in-law are the gods in my temple. We (my husband and I) shall offer flowers to them together."³ A woman places her parents-in-law on a high pedestal if they are kind to her.

A woman felt a certain affinity to the wives of her husband's brothers as they are also strangers in that family. "Even though the brothers quarrel, the sisters-in-law agree with each other."⁴

The ideal attitude toward a husband's sister is expressed in the following: "Even higher up than the mother-in-law is the place of the sister-in-law. She will keep the good name of any aristocratic family."⁵ "From among the whole tribe of relatives my sister-in-law is my favorite."⁶

However smooth her married life may be, a woman must have a few unpleasant things to face. It is her duty, however,

¹ Letter No. 1.

² Dandekar, 1952, p. 139.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 143.

⁵ Ibid., p. 142.

⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

never to hear any criticism about her in-laws without defending them. She cannot allow even her parents to say anything against her in-laws. Above all, she is not supposed to complain about her lot to an outsider. In the olden days a mother used to give an earthen pot to her daughter at the time of her wedding. If the daughter received any ill treatment at the hands of her in-laws, she could speak out all her complaints to the pot when she went to the river to get water.¹

A bride should bear anything in silence rather than have people blame her parents for not bringing her up properly.

Says she, "The words of the in-laws are like cups of poison. But for your sake, Mother, I act as if they are sweet."²

"Father, for the sake of your name I shall subject myself to sawing like sandalwood."³

An adaptive woman was respected in a joint family. The ancient book of law, Manusmriti, expects much more of the wife than of the husband in the way of adaptation, which is perhaps natural in a patrilocal society. It is much easier for one person to adjust herself to the established traditions of a family than for the family to modify its ways of life. A young bride should pay due respect to all the elders and try to please them by obeying their every wish. She should be quick to learn new ways and fit herself perfectly in the

¹ Rangnekar, 1954, pp. 28-29.

² Sane, 1940, p. 146.

³ Ibid., p. 147.

pattern of her husband's family. Mukerji claims that such requirements were not difficult to fulfill because of the functional training that girls used to receive. From childhood their level of aspiration was kept low, and their circle of contact strictly circumscribed.¹ They were taught to feel proud of themselves if they could perform household duties expertly. "A mother looked with such admiration at her little 3 or 4 year-old daughter when she proudly started grinding sand from their backyard with a wooden grinder."² It was a thing to feel proud of if a girl evidenced interest in these activities from such an early age.

Even in their historical and patriotic songs the women remind one of their own life circumscribed by their home and family. Says one verse, "While grinding and pounding; while soothing a little infant, one should remember the Moratha, Shwaji."³

One woman proudly describes her brother who was a follower of Gandhiji in the fight for independence. "In my backyard there are green vegetables. My brother is a wearer of a Khadi cap."⁴ The first two lines have no meaningful connection with the last two lines. They are there only to complete

¹ Appadorai, 1954, p. 71.

² Babar, 1951, p. 1.

³ Shwaji is the favorite hero of Maharashtra. He was a Maratha king who very gallantly defended his territory against the Moghuls. Sane, 1946, p. 72.

⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

the form of the verse and rhyme with the latter half of the verse. The singer could have put anything there, but she thought only of her kitchen garden with which she might have been concerned at the moment.

As the women had no formal education and little or no contact with the outside world, they had no aims and ambitions apart from their homes. They knew of no other way of life different from their own. They therefore took for granted customs that a modern educated woman might question, such as that their place was in the home and not outside. As a result I believe that they met with few real frustrations and were able to be more efficient as homemakers than modern women. They were taught from their childhood that they will get all the benefits of the life in this world and hereafter only by achieving perfection in their several roles in the family. They were familiarized with the kinds of problems they would possibly have to face and ways of solving them. Mukerji says that girls were "conditioned from their childhood to become sisters, daughters, wives, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law ... Dolls, stories, plays, etc. created an attitude of mind among girls which enabled them to pass through the wide range of status with ease."¹ As a contrast to this, modern girls are inadequately equipped to play all the above roles successfully.

¹ Appadorai, 1954, p. 71.

According to ancient canons, a woman must be faithful to her husband not only during his lifetime but even after his death. However, once the husband is dead, she loses her importance in the joint family. "What use is the wealth of brothers and brothers-in-law? A woman looks poor without her husband."¹ One of the cherished wishes of a married woman is to die while her husband is still living. "The thought of dying unwidowed is pleasing."²

The same kind of respectful behaviour which is prescribed toward the in-laws is extended to the husband. A wife should never argue with her husband. Even when he is angry she should try to keep calm. "Just as boiling milk settles down with water, a husband's anger, my friend, vanishes by your smile."³ Even if a wife succeeds in pleasing her husband, she is not necessarily on a good footing with his relatives. However badly she may be treated by the others, she should always be pleasant and smiling in her husband's presence. "All my pain I shall keep in my mind. I shall smile sweetly at my husband."⁴ "Let anything happen to me. I do not care about it. Let my husband be satisfied."⁵

Thus we arrive at what seems to be a contradiction of ideas. A woman's whole life is woven around her husband even

¹ Dandekar, 1952, p. 325.

² Deshpande, 1948, p. 27.

³ Sane, 1940, p. 184.

⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

⁵ Ibid.

though she comes into very little actual contact with him.

From the above discussion it is clear that a woman's first and foremost duty is to her husband and his family. There is a story which tells about a king who wanted to fill a Shiva temple with milk. Everybody in the town brought all the milk they had. But it was no use. Finally came an old woman carrying a small pot of milk. She had given milk to everybody in the family and satisfied them. And when she poured the remaining milk into the temple, it filled with milk.¹ Thus to keep her family happy is even more important for a woman than worship of a god. In fact, the best way to satisfy a god is by doing her duty toward her family.

The mistress of a house is supposed to bring all the members of the family together. She should not quarrel with the others or let them quarrel among themselves. This skill in handling people is especially required on occasions like weddings when there are many possibilities of conflict. In the story of Sundri's wedding all her relatives had gathered together. All the women used to sit in the kitchen preparing sweets and other eatables for the wedding. At this time they used to compose and sing songs. One example is somebody taunting Sundri's aunt by saying, "The aunt says, I shall come only for the bread. It is my Sundri's wedding," implying that she did not want to help but just wanted to partake in the wedding feast. The remark created a feeling

¹ Godbole, n.d., pp. 10-11.

of tension. But Sundri's mother cleverly steered everybody's attention away from the subject. "Indeed, to make enemies is easy but to bring (people) together is so difficult." The story comments that if Sundri's mother-in-law had witnessed this incident, she would have been sure that Sundri was going to make a good housewife, being trained by such a mother.¹ Traditionally, the bridegroom's people tend to act superior. The bride's mother has to treat them with friendliness in spite of their fault finding attitude. She has to remember not to take offense or be rude to them for the sake of her daughter's future happiness.

To compensate for all the duties, it is the privilege of a woman to be considered the symbol of the family as she has the power of procreation. The joint family emphasizes the continuity of group life. "The continuity of Indian life, without which one's own momentary existence is meaningless, is conceived naturally in terms of fruitfulness . . ."² A woman has great importance in that she can keep this continuity of the family. Women were created to be mothers says Manusmriti. As such they should be respected by their men relatives. It is considered lucky to see a mother of five children before going on an errand.

Naturally, a childless woman is denied this privilege. Nobody can envy her lot. A son is more important than a

¹ Rangnekar, 1954, pp. 9-10.

² Murphy, 1953, p. 32.

daughter. But to give birth to a daughter is better than being absolutely childless. Since ancient times a husband has been considered perfectly within his rights to leave a wife who cannot bear a child. "My little child," says a mother, "you are auspiciousness incarnated. Because of you my life sees fulfilment. The infant is born, my luck has risen, the whole world is submerged in happiness."¹

There are numerous descriptions of a child and what it means to its mother. "The ropes of the crib are like strings of pearls. The crib decorates the house."² "Just as lotuses bloom in a lake, so do children in a house."³ "The fireflies are like the eyes of the wood nymphs. They have opened those eyes at night to see my child."⁴ "There are stars in the sky. Why do their lips move? They are singing songs to my baby."⁵ "Are you covered with dust? It is becoming to you, my son, just like the blemish to the moon."⁶

Women followed various kinds of religious discipline in order to have a son. "Ushatai goes round the banyan tree all the time, asking for a child."⁷ "Ushatai worshipped Shiva and gave Nandi a new dress. She asked for a son."⁸ It was

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 57.

² Ibid., p. 63.

³ Ibid., p. 64.

⁴ Ibid., p. 78.

⁵ Ibid., p. 79.

⁶ Ibid., p. 83.

⁷ Ibid., p. 152.

⁸ Ibid. Nandi is the bull who serves as the vehicle of the god Shiva. His image is always placed at the entrance of a Shiva temple.

common practice to make a promise of a special offering to some god or goddess with the hope of having a child.

There are examples of strong-willed and bossy women. Even the men of their families bow to their wishes. There are stories about famous women in Indian history whom the women's literature would glorify. But bossy women seem to be out of favor. Two favourite examples are Anandibai and Kaikeyi.

Raghunathrao, who was the uncle of the ruling peshwa, Narayanrao, was bossed by his wife Anandibai. She was a very ambitious woman and wanted her husband to become the peshwa. She finally induced her husband to hire killers to kill Narayanrao. After the plot succeeded, Raghunathrao's fate was not very happy. The people turned against him. The song also attributes the final destruction of the kingdom to this action of Anandibai. "Anandibai created a rift among the people. That gave the Englishman his chance."¹

This suggests the analogy that "Anandibai was a second Kaikeyi."² Kaikeyi was one of the three queens of Dasharatha, the Mahabharata king. Once she saved her husband's life. He told her to ask any favor of him. She asked him to send his eldest son Rama into exile for 14 years and make her own son Bharata the heir to the throne. Dasharatha had to keep his word and comply with her wishes. However, shortly after Rama

¹ Sane, 1946, p. 74.

² Ibid.

left, the thought that he may never see his beloved son again broke Dasharatha's heart. His death was a blow to Kaikeyi. Her retribution did not stop here. Her son Bharata refused to take the place that rightfully belonged to Rama. She thus had reason to regret her interfering with political affairs and being so jealous and small minded.

Aside from these, there must have been a number of examples of compromise between husband and wife where the wife may not have been as black as painted above. However powerful tradition may be, it is impossible to find a uniform pattern of family life in any society. But on the whole the ideal woman is conceived as dutiful, soft spoken, hard working, paying respect to all her elders, and placing the comfort and happiness of others before her own. It will be interesting to note at this point the description of women in a joint family through the eyes of a man. Mr. C., who is a member of a joint family, says that the seven or eight women in his family have never entertained the thought of breaking away from the family to his knowledge. He attributes it partly to their lack of education and almost complete economic dependence, and partly to their upbringing. They may not be perfectly happy. If anything makes them particularly unhappy, the most they would do is to sigh and say that it is a woman's lot and she must bear it, come what may. "They

think," says he, "neither about their happiness nor about their unhappiness but simply about their duties toward every-¹one."

¹ Letter No. 3.

CHAPTER IV

ROLE CONFLICTS WITHIN THE WOMAN'S WORLD

When many people live together as one family there are bound to be conflicts among them. The women in a joint family stayed at home all the time and came into constant contact with one another. There was thus an opportunity for developing friendliness as well as animosity. All the women came from different families. Each one probably had a different background, each had been brought up to believe in a certain set of principles. These backgrounds differed at least a little, even though people tended to marry within their caste and even subcaste. Hence the importance of early marriages. A girl of ten is much more adaptable than one of 20. By the time she is 20 and old enough to form opinions of her own, she has lived with her husband's family for ten years and absorbed their customs and traditions. Still, we find some inherent conflicts in a joint family life. By inherent is meant conflicts arising directly out of roles to be played. Two such conflicts are between sisters-in-law and between mother- and daughter-in-law.

The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law antagonism was both-sided. A mother had a special attachment to her male child. She naturally resented anyone who was likely to take her son's affections away from her. In the joint family

system the daughter-in-law was under her jurisdiction and she could give her a bad time if she wished to. On the daughter-in-law's part, she felt many misgivings based partly on remarks heard about in-laws. She must have been aware of the stories about the ill treatment given by in-laws to a newly-married girl. During the wedding ceremony, which in the old days used to last for eight days, the bridegroom's family had the upper hand. They many times made the bride's parents feel inferior by finding fault with them. Sometimes, on instructions from his parents, the bridegroom refused to proceed with the ceremony until he was given a certain gift.

"The son-in-law is angry and will not go up the step to the verandah. He is asking for a pearl necklace." ¹ "Even though he was given a dowry of a hundred-thousand, the son-in-law is still sullen." ² Such incidents must have produced a fear and antagonism toward the in-laws in the bride's mind. Later on the antagonism became centered on the person she came into most contact with, her mother-in-law.

The attitude of a woman toward her "Sasar" (in-laws' house) is best expressed by way of comparison with her "Maher" (mother's house). For a long time after her marriage a girl failed to feel part of her husband's family. Young age was one factor. Also in a big family one particular member, especially a young girl, could not feel solely responsible for

¹ Dandekar, 1952, p. 130.

² Ibid.

the housekeeping. Thus she could afford to go to her parents' house frequently. That made the process of getting attached to the Sasar even slower. "We women! Our in-laws have great wealth but we still feel affection for our parents' house and want to see our mother and father."¹

Sometimes we find exaggerated descriptions of how good a Maher is and how bad a Sasar is. "My Maher is so good, it sends me things to eat. My Sasar is so cruel, it locks me up and beats me."² "The words of the in-laws are like bitter gourd. They will never become sweet, whatever I do."³ "The words of the in-laws are like knots of a silk thread. Nothing can undo them from around my neck."⁴

"The brothers-in-law scold as they are brothers-in-law. The sisters-in-law speak scornfully."⁵ "The old father-in-law becomes red with anger. Who will go near a fire?"⁶ Everyone seems to have the right to mistreat a bride. On top of it she has to bear everything in silence. The only appeal she can make is to her mother-in-law. "Do not treat me so badly, mother-in-law. For the sake of the 'Chapha' in your yard, this Jasmine has come from a distant country."⁷

¹ Joshi, 1949, p. 18.

⁴ Ibid.

² Rangnekar, 1954, p. 14.

⁵ Ibid., p. 146.

³ Sane, 1940, p. 145.

⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

⁷ Chapha is an Indian flower possessing heavy fragrance. Jasmine is a delicate smelling white flower. The singer says that she has come to live with her mother-in-law only for the sake of her son and she should not take advantage of the situation. Babar, 1951, p. 20.

When a girl has kind and affectionate in-laws, she considers herself unusually lucky. She thinks that it is the fruit of the religious merit she accumulated by pleasing the gods.

"What good deed have I done? My brother-in-law is like a brother. I worshipped god Rama with lotuses."¹

"What good deed have I done? My sister-in-law is like a sister. I worshipped god Krishna with lotuses."²

"What good deed have I done? My mother-in-law is like a mother. I worshipped goddess Amba with lotuses."³

These are mentioned as if they were exceptions rather than rules. As against these sentiments is the picture of the Maher and all the relatives there.

"The road to Maher is covered with soft and cool grass. On the road to Sasar one is pricked by thorns."⁴

"I shall go to my mother's house and sit on a bed. At my mother's house I get rest."⁵ While at her in-laws' house a woman is like a "bull in the house"⁶ who had to do all the work.

"At my mother's house nobody is refused anything. There is always some guest. At my Maher the door is always open. Any passerby is entertained."⁷

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 173.

² Ibid., p. 174.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 176.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 147.

⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

Then, too, says the singer, her mother is so kind that she does not treat her daughters-in-law badly. "At my mother's house nobody receives ill-treatment. They treat daughters-in-law like daughters."¹

When a girl comes to visit her parents, her mother cannot do enough for her. She says, "You have come to your mother's house. Now, my child, laugh and be gay. Spend your time happily."² Then again, "You have come to your Maher. What shall I do for you? Shall I cut a ripe mango? Tell me what I should give you. Eat the cream on the milk."³

To a young girl of under 15 this treatment appeared in strong contrast with the treatment she received from her in-laws and particularly from her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law may not necessarily treat her cruelly, but simply the lack of any special consideration amounts to cruelty. After marriage, a girl had to take some responsibilities beyond her age. They were enough to feel like a burden but not enough to bind her to her husband's family. Her mother-in-law and not she herself was the head of the household.

Some of these descriptions may be exaggerated, but one cannot help feeling that they are based on real emotions. In all the literature about in-laws, the antagonistic relationship dominates.

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 175.

² Ibid., p. 174.

³ Ibid.

The relationship between sisters-in-law (a woman and her husband's sister or her brother's wife) is anything but friendly as revealed in the women's literature. As we have noted before, the relationship between a brother and sister is very close. The sister naturally regards her brother's wife as somebody who comes between them. Yet she reluctantly makes friends with her brother's wife. The idea, however, is that she "should preserve the rag for the sake of the gold,"¹ the rag being the sister-in-law. She has to put up with her sister-in-law because she needs her brother. "My fair sister-in-law speaks arrogantly. (But) I have need of my dear brother."²

She tries to find fault with her brother's wife. I remember a story in which a girl used to spy on her brother's wife constantly and report her mistakes to her mother. The brother's wife says, "There are many kinds of designs in the month of Chaitra. My husband's sister is disdainful."³

The sister thinks that she knows her brother better than his wife does. She gives the latter advice, "Sister-in-law, do not put on kumkoo while standing up. My brother is the

¹ Deshpande, 1948, p. 81.

² Sane, 1940, p. 30.

³ The designs refer to the patterns drawn on the floor by dropping a certain kind of white stone powder through the fingers. The drawing of these designs is very common in the month of Chaitra which corresponds roughly to the month of May. There is no connection between the two halves of the verse. Ibid., p. 32.

fruit of many prayers."¹

"Fair sister-in-law, how insolent is your speech. You hurt my brother's sensitive heart."² Any wife will resent this attitude of possessiveness on the part of her husband's sister. She naturally thinks that she does not need anybody else to tell her how to take care of her own husband.

Once the sister marries, the scales are turned. Then it is the brother's wife who has the upper hand. Once a woman is married, she has no rights in her parents' house, especially after her parents are dead. Yet her only refuge away from her in-laws is her brother. His wife does not like her frequent visits. "Brothers say, our sisters have come to visit with us. Sisters-in-law say, your sisters have come to rob us."³ The brother's wife resents it if he buys any gifts for his sisters. "My brother is in the market. The sister-in-law calls after him, 'Do not buy a costly blouse-piece for my sister-in-law.'⁴"

The attitude of women toward their husbands' married sisters is humourously expressed in the following:

¹ Kunkoo is the red dot that Hindu women put on their forehead. It is a symbol of being married. Putting it on while standing up brings bad luck to one's husband. The sister says that her brother is all the more precious because he was born only after prayers on the part of her parents. His wife, therefore, should be careful not to bring him ill luck. Sane, 1940, p. 30.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p. 31.

⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

"Brothers say, 'Give my sister a board' (to sit on).
Sisters-in-law say, 'Go your way, sister-in-law.'¹"

"Brothers say, 'Do my sister's hair.' Sisters-in-law say, 'A rat stole the comb.'² "The brother says, 'Sister, come into the house.' The sister-in-law says angrily, "She is all right in the doorway.'²"

All through the folk literature a mother's love seems to be the most cherished memory in a woman's mind. She realizes that after her mother's death nobody can give that love to her, least of all her sister-in-law. She says,

"How can a sister-in-law give a mother's love? Jasmine flowers will droop without water (i.e., I am lost without my mother's love). In my mother's lifetime I ate cream on the top of milk. Under my sister-in-law's rule I do not even have the right to drink buttermilk."³

One of the most pathetic stories is about sisters-in-law. A brother brought his married sister home on a visit. His wife hated her. Once the sister borrowed a dress from the wife. When she returned it, there was a stain on it. The wife got angry and told her husband that she will not be pacified until he killed his sister and dyed the sari in her blood. The brother consented. He told his sister that he was taking her back to her husband. On the way he killed the unsuspecting sister and dyed the sari in her blood.⁴

¹ Sane, 1940, p. 31.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Unpublished.

All these conflicts stem directly out of the role relationships. If the joint family is split up, the reasons for most conflicts are removed. The realization of this possibility may have been an undercurrent which helped and is still helping toward the dissolution of the joint family. For an educated woman who is much more self-opinionated than her sister of the last generation, such conflicts are more numerous and less bearable. The age at which she marries also makes complete readjustment more difficult.

Then, too, the functional training that a girl used to receive a generation ago is avoided in the education a girl receives today in a school and college. The percentage of illiteracy among women is still great, but the spread of education, both formal and indirect, is rapid. The Western values of individualism and romanticism which permeated the Indian society have affected women's thinking also. These ideas work against the ideals of a joint family. The training received by the older women was not individualistic. It taught them to adapt themselves to all situations. It did not hurt their pride too much to bend under the wishes of others, which made it easier for them to resolve the conflicts in their lives than it is for the modern Indian women.

CHAPTER V

A FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE WOMEN'S LITERATURE

Social function is understood here as the contribution of a particular social trait or custom or usage toward the total social life. Ogburn says that any feature of culture other than material objects satisfies some psychological need.¹ Some features of culture, however, satisfy needs that are primarily social, and are psychological only in a derived sense. For instance, the marriage ritual in a particular society may or may not afford any direct and immediate satisfaction to the needs of the individuals concerned. Yet it has a social function in the sense that only on the completion of these rituals will the society recognize the couple as man and wife. Some such ritual is necessary in a society where sexual promiscuity is taboo. The ritual contributes more directly toward preserving the social organization than toward pure psychological satisfaction of individual members. Thus the function of a feature of culture is its contribution toward a "more closely knit social texture."²

Linton speaks in terms of trait complexes. The function of a trait complex is to continue a tradition. He defines the

¹ Ogburn, 1950, p. 154.

² Malinowski, 1944, p. 170.

function as the "sum total of its contribution toward the perpetuation of the social-cultural configuration."¹

Individual habit patterns as well as social institutions have a certain resistance to change. The various social customs, beliefs, art, literature, etc. help this inertia. Through their transmission the social pattern remains comparatively unchanged as long as its different parts can remain in harmony with one another. When an important part does change, the other parts adjust to it by changing themselves.² The women's literature analyzed in this paper contributed toward the perpetuation of the joint family traditions.

Each trait serves several needs, and each need in turn is served by several traits.³ There is no one-to-one correspondence between needs and traits. Moreover, each aspect of culture does not necessarily have a function. It may be a survival which at one time served a useful purpose. A usage can outlive its utility or can have no important function toward the institutional complex with which it is connected. I do not agree with Malinowski's statement that when a habit ceases to be useful, it simply drops out.⁴ The hypothesis of social function "does not require the dogmatic assertion that everything in the life of every community has a function." It may

¹ Linton, 1937, p. 404.

² Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 181.

³ Linton, 1937, p. 417.

⁴ Malinowski, 1944, p. 142.

have one, however, and anybody is justified in trying to discover it.¹

The functional relationship of the women's literature to their life in the joint family is manifold.

One of the main functions it served was to lighten the burden of work. The women in a joint family worked together on many occasions. They sang songs as an accompaniment to their work. Singing makes any chore seem more rhythmical and therefore more pleasant. Grinding grain was a daily chore and it still is in rural areas. A large number of the women's songs were sung as an accompaniment to this activity. Usually two women sat opposite each other with the grinding stone in the middle. Then, as they gave it turns, they sang verse after verse either alternately or in unison. The singing formed such an integral part of the grinding that when an older woman taught a young girl to grind, she gave her the singing lessons along with the grinding lessons. Miss Babar mentions that women could only remember these songs while they were grinding and not otherwise!² Mrs. Dandekar says that some of her rural friends told her they could only remember these songs while turning the grinding stone, and if she wanted any songs she was welcome to go to their houses and listen to them. She has taken down songs which were sung while pounding dried chilies, threshing sorghum, preparing foods, rocking a baby, etc. All

¹ Radcliffe-Brown, 1952, p. 184.

² Babar, 1951, p. 3.

these activities have their own more or less distinctive accom-
¹panying songs. She comes to the conclusion that while doing household chores which are more or less mechanical, the women were free to think and to remember things. The creation of the songs which told about their memories, thoughts and feelings, and the singing of the songs made their work easier and at the same time provided them with an outlet to their feel-
²ings.

The function of providing an outlet must not be confused with that of providing an escape. This folk literature has been called a "social mirror."³ It is something which reflects life as it was lived and not something that represents an unrealized ideal. A lot of modern fiction in Marathi is of this latter type. It presents, for instance, an ideal of romantic love which the average Indian girl likes to read about but rarely experiences. When she reads and enjoys it, she is only finding an escape from her own life. The women's literature reviewed in this paper, however, is far from that category. It was created not to cater to a public, but for the purposes of entertainment and an expression of actually lived or felt experiences. We find in it an expression of dissatisfaction with certain conditions and relationships within the family life, but we never come across an ideal presented by

¹ Dandekar, 1952, Foreword, p. 6.

² Ibid., Introduction, pp. 1-4.

³ Ibid., p. 2.

way of daydreaming. It did provide an outlet to certain thoughts and feelings which could not otherwise be expressed. A woman could not tell her in-laws that she was being treated badly by them. But, while working, she could sing a song about a cruel mother-in-law, a song that is the common property of all women. It is a well-recognized principle of practical psychology that by giving some sort of expression to one's troubles one can make them seem lighter. A woman could also put into a song her tender sentiments about her husband, which she was too shy to tell him about.

The third and less obvious function probably served by this literature was to help continue a certain tradition in family life. The songs and all other types of literature were either picked up by small girls from their older women relatives, or taught to them purposely. Even though the songs may not have been taught specifically for the sake of their subject matter, the learners could not have helped being influenced by it. When one hears or sings the same song again and again, the outer form of the song becomes overlearned. Singing it becomes mechanical. It is possible that the process of singing remains at the mechanical level entirely. But what seems more likely is that the contents of the songs make an impression on one's mind without the aid of conscious analysis. After a while, whatever is learned through these contents is taken for granted in one's scheme of beliefs. Thus through these songs, proverbs, etc. one generation handed down to another certain norms of behaviour which helped to perpetuate

tradition. For example, a young girl was made to feel that it was her duty to be gentle and patient with her husband. She should never talk back to him or to any member of his family. She should not complain about her troubles to an outsider. She should hide a tear in her dress and not expose her husband's poverty in public.¹ Even if her husband is a weak person who does not work and earn his living, she should keep in mind that once she marries him he is her only refuge. "Weak is the husband. Let him be weak. (Even though my) parents are wealthy, I have no rights in their house."² If a girl has the misfortune to have such a husband, she should provide the energy that he lacks.

This attitude was a preparation for marriage. A girl always expected the road to happiness to be rough. By following certain rules of behaviour, she worked for her happiness and achieved some measure of it. Through the wealth of folk literature that she inherited from her mother she learned that her ideals were women like Sita. Sita was the wife of Rama (the hero of the epic Ramayana). When his father sent him into exile for 14 years, she gave up all the comforts of her life in the palace and followed her husband faithfully through all kinds of hardships and dangers.

Lady Hartog remarks that "the first and most important change that would strike a person who died in India a hundred

¹ Dandekar, 1952, p. 167.

² Ibid.

years ago and came to life again today would be the revolution in the position of women.¹ It is true that there has been an almost sensational change in the position of women in the family and in the society as compared with their position a century ago. Their contacts and fields of interest have widened. In urban areas their educational level is nearing that of men rapidly. They have achieved more individuality and made a name for themselves in the fields of literature, medicine, politics, education, etc. to a much greater extent than they ever had in the past. But so far as their marital status is concerned, sociologists are doubtful whether they are happier than the women of yesterday. In spite of spectacular changes, the social conditions are still not comparable with those in most Western countries. Men and women still have a very limited contact with each other. Under these conditions, it is not possible for most girls to experience romantic love before marriage, which is the ideal placed before them by the modern forms of entertainment like the movies and fiction. This situation is what Mukerji calls a cultural vacuum. The Western ideals of romanticism and individualism have driven the old social values away without replacing them.² Mazumdar claims that in the old system a woman's happiness was judged by material things, and no

¹ Hartog, 1945, p. 71.

² Appadorai, 1954, p. 69.

emotional satisfaction was guaranteed to her.¹ But in most cases, women built their happiness on the basis of material things and judged it by them. Then the chances of her frustration were few.

Mukerji has drawn a picture of an average educated woman in Bengal today which I think will fit Maharashtra with a few modifications. Women are expected many times to supplement the family income. Their education, in so far as it increases their earning power, is considered an investment. However, the facilities of work for women are limited and there is not enough return on the investment. As a result there is a reaction in the public against women's education. The married women who do work and try to keep house at the same time are under a strain. They find that at such a juncture a joint family life might offer certain benefits like release from the burden of housework and looking after children. They thus cannot decide definitely in favour of the nuclear family.²

The hypothesis that I would submit is that in spite of their emancipation, the women of today are emotionally less stable and more frustrated than the women under the joint family system, because their very emancipation has introduced into their lives many and varied problems which they cannot yet solve. From the women's literature reviewed earlier, it is apparent that the older women did have their problems.

¹ Appadorai, 1954, p. 63.

² Ibid., p. 67.

But their problems were within the confines of the family and, to a certain extent, anticipated. An anticipated problem is easier to meet. Through their literature the women learned about such problems and the behaviour expected of them in solving the problems. They were thus better able to solve their difficulties than modern women, and one of the influences which helped them do that was the women's literature.

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Other Sources

- Letter No. 1 by Mrs. A. She married into a joint family. Her in-laws were lower middle-class farmers who owned land. Later her husband separated from the joint family, as he belonged to a junior branch of the family.
- Letter No. 2 by Mrs. B. She married into a lower middle-class joint family. Later her husband obtained a government job which involved his being transferred from place to place. This resulted in their starting a nuclear family.
- Letter No. 3 by Mrs. C. He was born in and is at present living in a joint family. His father, who is the head of the family, is a higher middle-class business man.