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Family is one of the most important social institutions. Most of the world’s population lives in family units; it is an important primary group in the society. Family is the most pervasive and universal social institution. It plays a vital role in the socialisation of individuals. It is known as the first school of citizenship. One is born in family, grows in it, works for it and dies in it. One develops emotional attachment to it. The parental care imparts to the child the first lesson in social responsibility and acceptance of self-discipline. Family is the backbone of social structure. It occupies a nuclear position in society.

Meaning of Family:

Broadly speaking, family refers to the group comprising parents and children. It may also refer, in some cases, to a group of relatives and their dependants forming one household. All these refer to the compositional aspect of this institution. Another aspect is that of residence of its members.

They usually share common residence, at least for some part of their lives. Thirdly, there is the relational aspect of the family. Members have reciprocal rights and duties towards each other. Finally, the family is also an agent of socialisation. All these aspects make this institution different from all other units of social structure.

As Mack and Young say, “The family is the basic primary group and the natural matrix of personality”. According to the Bureau of Census (U.S.A.). “Family is a group of two or more persons related by blood, marriage or adoption and residing together”. Some of other important definitions of family are as follows.

Family is regarded as the first society of human beings According to Maclver and Page, “Family is a group defined by a sex relationship, sufficiently precise and enduring to provide for the procreation and upbringing of children”.

According to Burgess and Locke, “Family is a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood or adoption; consisting a single household, interacting and intercommunicating with each other in their social roles of husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter, brother and sister creating a common culture”.

As a K. Davis defines, “Family is a group of persons whose relations to one another are based upon consanguinity and who are, therefore, kin to one another”.

According to Elliot and Meril, “Family is the biological social unit composed of husband, wife and children.

Biesanz writes “The family may be described as a woman with a child and a man to look after them”.

Strictly defined, family consists of parents and children. Its members are more closely related to one another through the process of reproduction. It is a universal institution found in every age and in every society.

Characteristics of family:

1. A Mating Relationship:

A family comes into existence when a man and woman establish mating relation between them.

2. A Form of Marriage:

Mating relationship is established through the institution of marriage. The society regulates sexual behaviour between opposite sexes through the institution of marriage. Through the institution of marriage, mating relationship is established. Without marriage family is not possible. Hence, family is a form of marriage.3. A Common Habitation:

A family requires a home or household for its living. Without a dwelling place the task of child-bearing and child rearing cannot be adequately performed. The members of a family have a common habitation or household.

4. A System of Nomenclature:

Every family is known by a particular name. It has own system of reckoning descent. Descent may be recognized through male line or through the mother’s line. In patrilineal families descent is recognized through male line. Similarly, in matrilineal families descent is recogned through mother’s line.

5. An EconomiEvery family needs an economic provision to satisfy the economic needs. The head of the family carries on certain profession and earns to maintain the family.

6. System of Interaction and Communication:

The family is composed of persons who interact and communicate with each other in their social roles such as husband and wife, mother and father, son and daughter etc.

It is important to mention that the family is composed of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption. The family maintains a common but a distinctive culture.

Distinctive Features of the Family:

Family is the smallest and the most intimate group of society. It is a universal institution found in every society. Family as the most important social institution possesses certain distinctive features which may be discussed below.

1. Universality:

The Family is a universal institutions. It was found in many simpler societies. In advance societies, the whole social structure is built of family units. According to Maclver, “It is found in all societies, at all stages of social development and exists far below the human level among myriad species of animals”. Every human being is a member of some family.

2. Emotional Basis:

Every family is based on human impulses of mating, procreation, motherly devotion and parental love and care. The members of a family have emotional attachment with each other. Love between husband and wife, parents and children makes the family an institution of self-sacrifice. Hence, emotion is the foundation on which every family is built.

3. Limited Size:

The family is very small in size. It is known as the smallest primary group. It is a small social institution. It includes husband and wife and the persons who are born in it or are adopted. The relations among the members of family are direct, intimate, close, personal and permanent. This is possible only due to small size of the family. Further, smallness of the family brings stability in the family.

4. Nuclear Position:

With regard to all the different types of groupings, the family plays an important role in so far as it prepares the individual for participation in all these secondary groups, for their demands and situations. It serves as the nucleus for the growth of other types of groupings which never deal with the cultureless creatures that a newly born child is.

5. Formative Influence:

Family exerts most profound influence on its members. The personality of the individual is moulded in the family. The family customs, traditions, mores and norms have great influence in shaping the personality of its members during childhood. Family is the most effective agency of the process of socialisation and social control.

6. Responsibility of the Members:

The members of the family have a deep sense of -d. responsibility and obligation for the family. Due to this sense of responsibility, all the member discharge their duties. All the members of the family have joint responsibility. In family, the children learn about responsibility and cooperation.

7. Social Regulation:

Society, that is the collectivity, keep the collective and wider view in mind, has to ensure, by evolving mores and folkways, that the individual member in a family do perform all those functions towards each other on the basis of which the wider network of social relationships in dependent for its success. Thus, for example, there are social restrictions on divorce, in almost every society.

8. Persistance and Change:

The family may be permanent and temporary by nature. As an institution it is permanent. When a couple after marriage settle in an independent residence, the family continues to exist with other member. Hence, family is permanent as an institution. Family on the other hand is temporary and transitional. Because structure of the family changes over a time in terms of size, composition and status of persons.

HE FAMILY AS AN ECONOMIC UNIT

FRIEDRICH BAERWALD\* A LENGTHY discussion of the proposition that a family requires a solid economic basis in order to carry out the natural functions assigned to it would amount to belaboring the obvious. It is also evident that whenever the drift of social and economic forces is leading even to a partial breakup of this economic basis, the institution of the family is in great peril. Consequently, an economic system which ceases to produce conditions permitting families to continue living together as a unit, economic and otherwise, would fail to measure up to the requirements of the natural law. The social scientist cannot disregard the natural law because it is rooted in the very dynamics of human nature. It is therefore at the core of the social reality with which he has to deal. A proper understanding of natural law rejects the widespread but nevertheless false idea, that its concepts are extrinsic to the real structure of society. On the contrary,

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no understanding of this structure is possible without the realization of the requirements of natural law. However, the social scientist in accepting the reality and the validity of the natural law is fully aware of the complexities, inconsistencies, and the precariousness of any actual situation with which he has to deal. The formulation of the postulates of natural law does not of itself provide a blueprint for meeting the ever changing problems of social situations; it establishes a framework within which solutions must be sought. This applies also to the modern problems arising from the change of the economic function of the family in contemporary urban and industrial society. The task of the social scientist is to analyze what these changes are and then to investigate how the lasting requirements of the natural law can be translated into workable arrangements in our present day economic setting. A first glance at marriage in modern society reveals a strange paradox. While it is true that the proportion of broken homes and of divorce cases has seldom been higher than at present, it is also true that at mid-century the proportion of married people relative to the total population fourteen years and over in the United States, is substantially higher than it was before World War I. In 1910, 37.2% of males and females fourteen years and over were married, widowed or divorced. In 1950, the corresponding figure was 43.2%. Furthermore, if we compare the number of single males and females over fourteen years of age in the years 1940 and 1950, we find that despite the increase in the total population of the United States of about nineteen million people, the number of unmarried men declined by about three million and that of unmarried women by somewhat more than two million in the same period. This seems to indicate that while the breakup of families continues to occur with alarming frequency, the formation of families on the other side seems to have become easier with the result that there are fewer bachelors and spinsters in the United States now than in that period when the family bond was much stronger and divorce was not socially accepted by the majority of the population. In order to explore the implications of these seemingly inconsistent trends, we will discuss the change in the structure of the economic basis of a majority of families; certain transformations in the sphere of private property; and lastly, recent experiences with attempts of remediaal action designed to strengthen the weakening bond of the family.