The joint family: 
a terminological clarification

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One of the difficulties that the reader of the literature of anthropology has to face is the fact that the same word is used in different meanings by different writers, and many anthropological terms are sometimes used ambiguously or without precise definition. RADCLIFFE-BROWN

"THE joint family" is a term widely used by social anthropologists. Students of the Hindu kinship system are particularly familiar with it for such a family has long been regarded as the core of this system. It is, therefore, rather surprising that there should be divergence concerning the connotation of the term.

An over-zealous concern with definitions, particularly at the beginning of an inquiry, may hinder rather than further research. But a persistent lack of interest in such a fundamental problem as the exact meaning of what one is inquiring about will also defeat the ends of research. It is well to remind ourselves, in the words of Kantor, that "Scientific definitions are constructs developed for the purpose of isolating and locating a domain of work. They serve to clarify the character of scientific enterprises..."

2 Irawati Karvé writes: "Three things are absolutely necessary for the understanding of any cultural phenomenon in India. These are the configuration of the linguistic regions, the institution of caste and the family organization. Each of these three together give meaning and supply basis to all other aspects of Indian culture" (Kinship Organization in India, Poona, 1953, p. 1).
K. M. Panikkar observes: "The unit of Hindu society is not the individual but the joint family" (Hindu Society at Cross Roads, Bombay, 1961, p. 43).

The purpose of this essay is to make suggestions toward the clarification of the terminological muddle which at present obscures the notion of "the joint family". We will first examine some of the current usages and then proceed to suggest the limits of meaning that may be imposed upon the term. It may be mentioned here that I first became conscious of this problem in the course of analysis of my data on the family system of the Hindus of rural Kashmir.¹

I

Lowie² and Piddington³ use the joint family and the extended family synonymously to denote a property-owning corporation constituted of two or more nuclear families. Lowie regards it as a single household. Piddington mentions locality as its basis but does not stipulate a single "house community" as does Lowie.

Beals and Hoijer distinguish between, what they call, the simple or the extended primary family on the one hand and the joint family on the other. The latter is defined as consisting of "two or more primary families linked either through the paternal or maternal lines, that is, through parent-child or sibling (brother-sister) relationships. Common residence almost always occurs, accompanied usually by various shared economic and social obligations."⁴ The broad agreement between the views of Lowie, Piddington, and Beals and Hoijer is obvious.

Murdock defines the extended family as consisting "of two or more nuclear families affiliated through an extension of the parent-child relationship..., i.e., by joining the nuclear family of a married adult to that of his parents".⁵ He distinguishes the joint family from the extended family by employing the former for only such "households" as are constituted of "two or more brothers and their wives" and include "only two generations" and lack "temporal continuity". To emphasize this limitation he adds the qualifying prefix "fraternal" to the term.⁶ Although Murdock calls the joint family a household, i.e. a residential-

¹ This analysis was originally carried out at the Australian National University, in 1958, when I was engaged in writing my doctoral dissertation (Family and Kinship: A Study of the Pandits of Rural Kashmir, 1959, typed copy in the ANU Library). I am deeply grateful to Dr. J. D. Freeman, who was my supervisor, for many stimulating discussions and much helpful advice on this problem. Acknowledgment is also made of a three-year scholarship awarded me by the ANU which enabled me to undertake fieldwork in Kashmir and subsequent analysis of the data collected.
⁴ Ralph L. Beals and Harry Hoijer, An Introduction to Anthropology, New York, 1959, pp. 441-442.
⁶ Ibid., p. 33. John J. Honigmann follows Murdock to the letter: "The term 'joint family' is often used when an extended family is indicated. The label is applied more specifically to a relatively rare, composite family consisting of two or more brothers with their wives and offspring. This group dissolves with the death of the males,..." (The World of Man, New York, 1959, p. 385).