

# The Changing Household Structures in Bihar, Kerala and West Bengal: A Comparative Overview

NUMEROUS changes in economic and demographic situations have taken place in India during the last three to four decades, but not much attempt has been made to assess the impact of these changes on household structures in India. This paper seeks to analyse changes which have occurred in household structures in three Indian states—two from the north, Bihar and West Bengal, and another from the southern region of the country, Kerala. In this connection the paper proposes to examine the following propositions: Firstly, the average household size has started to increase as a result of a rise in population growth, following excess of births over deaths. Secondly, the average size of urban households is likely to be smaller than rural ones. Thirdly, males preponderate as the formal heads of households but among older household heads (50 and above years of age) the percentage of female household heads becomes larger than that of male household heads. An effort will be made to examine these questions in a macro-sociological perspective.

## Sources of Data

The Indian censuses are the main source of data for this study. Although the tabulations on households in the census are not very detailed, the amount of information available in censuses can throw significant light on the patterns of household structure at the regional level. This discussion will be confined to the censuses of 1951, 1961 and 1971. No systematic collection of data on household structure was made in the earlier censuses. Prior to 1951, census reports provided only the number of households rather than details on the household.

We cannot go beyond the 1971 census, since the social and cultural tables of the 1981 census, which contain information relating to the household, are yet to be published.

Since this paper is based on census data, we employ the census definition of the household. A household, according to the 1951 census, refers to all persons who live together in the same house and take their food from a common kitchen unless the exigencies of work prevent them from doing so. If in a census house or dwelling unit there was more than one group of persons and each group had its own separate kitchen, every such group was treated as a separate household. The same criteria of household were observed in the two subsequent censuses—1961 and 1971. In all three of these censuses, household population did not cover people living in boarding houses, hostels, hospitals, jails and other such institutions, nor did it include people living in camps, members of wandering tribes or other homeless person-. Residential un'ts or institutions comprising such people were classified as institutional households, and this paper excludes such households from the discussion.

The concepts of 'household' and 'family' are usually confused because of their close relationship to each other. In many studies relating to family in India these two concepts have been used interchangeably. In as much as they have two different connotations, it is inappropriate to use them in the same sense. A family does comprise a household, but a household may not always constitute a family. A census household sometimes contains only one person or it may represent a group of individuals who are living together but are not related by blood or matrimony. A household, therefore, conveys a much broader meaning than a family. A family in a strict sense is taken to mean 'one or more men living with one or more women in a socially-sanctioned and more or less enduring sex relationship,with. Socially-recognized rights and obligations, together with their offspring' (Fairchild, 1977 : 114). Rather than defining family in a purely Indian fashion, we have followed the sociological definition of family because our main objective here is to distinguish a household from a family. This definition does not exclude a family consisting of more than one nuclear family such as the joint or extended family commonly found in India. It simply lays down the basic minimum conditions to constitute a family. The conceptual distinction between the two terms, however, is kept in mind throughout this paper.

## **Household Size**

Detailed household statistics were given for the first time in the 1951 census and ever since then the census reports have continued to provide them. Data on households given in the earlier censuses cannot be used to study household size for the following reasons : First, the criteria for defining household was not uniform throughout the country, nor was it the same for every census.

Second, there was some conceptual problem with regard to the definition of household in the sense that a household was often taken to mean a structural unit. The number of families dwelling in a residential building or the number of separate kitchens therein was not taken into account for one reason or the other. For the two reasons the average size of household in India during 1951-71 census-s should not be compared with the one based on the earlier censuses. Despite these limitations, Orenstien (1961 : 341-50) has attempted to calculate the average household size for different regions of India from 1911 to 1951 where he found no significant variation in household size from one census to another. This suggests that the average household size in India remained more or less stable across regions during the first half of this century. This was mainly due to the fact that the rate of population growth during that period experienced very little change.

The average household size in India both in rural and urban areas—clearly began to rise in the post-1951 census period. According to the 1951 census, the average household size in India was 4.9 persons and by 1971 it had reached 5.5 persons. In Bihar, the average household size climbed from 5.2 in 1951 to 5.6 persons in 1971. Similarly in 1951 the average household sizes in the States of West Bengal and Kerala were 4.9 and 5.3 persons per household respectively, and in 1971 they rose to 5.6 and 6.0 persons per household in these two states in a similar order (Table 1). This increase in the average size of house

**TABLE 1 AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE IN BIHAR, KERALA, WEST BENGAL AND INDIA BY RURAL-URBAN RESIDENCE. 1951-1971**

|             | 1951  |       |       | 1961  |       |       | 1971  |       |       |
|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|             | Total | Rural | Urban | Total | Rural | Urban | Total | Rural | Urban |
| Bihar       | 5.2   | 5.2   | 4.7   | 5.5   | 5.5   | 5.3   | 5.6   | 5.7   | 5.4   |
| Kerala      | 5.3   | N.A.  | N.A.  | 5.8   | 5.7   | 6.2   | 6.0   | 6.0   | 6.3   |
| West Bengal | 4.9   | 4.8   | 5.2   | 5.3   | 5.4   | 4.9   | 5.6   | 5.7   | 5.4   |
| India       | 4.9   | 4.9   | 4.9   | 5.2   | 5.2   | 5.0   | 5.5   | 5.5   | 5.3   |

SOURCES: Census of India, 1951, *Demographic Tables, India*, Vol. 1, Part ii-A, pp. 149-57; Census of India, 1961, *Social and Cultural Tables, India, Part ii-r (i)*, Vol. 1, pp. 4-5 and Census of India, 1971, *Social and Cultural Tables, India*, Series-1, Part (iii), Vol. 1, pp. xii-xvii.

hold goes against the widely held notion that household size has been diminishing in the country as an aftermath of the break-up of the joint family system and the onset of fertility decline in India. Although the joint family is said to be steadily atomizing, the average size of households is gradually increasing.

An average of 5-6 persons per *household* does *not mean that the joint family* system has ceased to exist in India; rather, it simply indicates that small and medium-sized households are beginning to constitute a higher proportion of all households than large-sized households. It can be seen in Table 2 that

**TABLE 2—TYPES OF HOUSEHOLD BY SIZE AND PLACE OF RESIDENCE IN INDIA, 1951**

| Types of Household | No. of Persons | Percentage Distribution of Different Types of Household in a* |      |
|--------------------|----------------|---|------|
|                    |                | Village   | Town |
| Small              | 1-3            | 33  | 38   |
| Medium             | 4-6            | 44  | 41   |
| Large              | 7-9            | 17  | 16   |
| Very large         | 10 +           | 6   | 5    |
| Total              | —              | 100   | 100  |

\*This refers to the average situation in the country.

SOURCES : Census of India, 1951, *India*, Vol. 1. *Report*, Part 1-A, p. 50.

according to the 1951 census, of all households, households having one to six persons accounted for 77 per cent in rural areas and 79 per cent in urban areas in India. The large-sized households comprising seven or more persons per household accounted for 23 per cent in rural and 21 Part in urban areas.

It is important to note here that household size cannot be taken as an indicator of family size. As a matter of fact, the census household in India underestimates family size, since a family can occupy more than one household at a time. It is a well known fact that a good portion of families in urban areas are the offshoots of joint families living in villages Physical distance does not necessarily mean a lack of social proximity. In fact, the-physical distance between members of a joint family, resulting from migration, has been found to have strengthened the bond of jointness of a joint family in India (Eames, 1954: 13-26; Basu, 1962:90). Migrants always remain in touch 'with their native kinsfolk by attending family rituals and ceremonies and rush to their place of origin in times of crisis and share the expenses too' (Ishwaran, 1965 : 93). The censuses rightly react them as two households, but for all social purposes they are one joint family. There is not much need to dwell on this point, as it has been well discussed by Desai (1955 : 97-117).

The rise in average household size in India has occurred mainly through a faster rate of decline in mortality and increase in the age at marriage. When

we look at the birth and death rates in these states and the country as a whole, it is noticed that death rates have declined at a faster rate than birth rates. The crude birth rate in India was nearly stable during 1941-70, while the crude death rate has declined from about 27 to 19 per thousand population during that period (Table 3). The birth rate has gone down from 42.6 to 37.5 in Kerala,

**TABLE 3—ESTIMATED CRUDE BIRTH AND DEATH RATES FOR INDIA, BIHAR, KERALA AND WEST BENGAL, 1961-70**

|         | <i>India</i> |              | <i>Bihar</i> |              | <i>Kerala</i> |              | <i>West</i>  | <i>Bengal</i> |
|---------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
|         | <i>Birth</i> | <i>Death</i> | <i>Birth</i> | <i>Death</i> | <i>Birth</i>  | <i>Death</i> | <i>Birth</i> | <i>Death</i>  |
| 1941-50 | 39.9         | 27.4         | 39.0         | 26.6         | 42.6          | 18.0         | 35.4         | 28.6          |
| 1951-60 | 41.7         | 22.8         | 43.4         | 26.1         | 38.9          | 16.1         | 42.9         | 20.9          |
| 1961-70 | 41.2         | 19.0         | 41.9         | 23.3         | 37.5          | 13.7         | 44.3         | 18.5          |

SOURCES : Bhattacharjee and Shastri (1976 : 14, 31) and Miira (1978 : 112).

but it has gone up from 35.4 to 44.3 in West Bengal and from 39.0 to 41.9 in Bihar during 1941-50 and 1961-70. Those states have recorded a substantial decline in death rate during that period. A rise in the child-woman ratio from 624 to 715 in Bihar, 559 to 603 in Kerala and 480 to 787 in West Bengal during 1951-71 is important evidence of increase in population at the familial level due to substantial decline in mortality (Table 4). This continuing rise in the average household size is one of the consequences of the onset of a new phase of the demographic transition in India typified by high fertility and low mortality.

**TABLE 4-CHILD-WOMAN RATIO (CHILDREN 0-4/WOMEN 15-49, 1,000) : INDIA, BIHAR, KERALA AND WEST BENGAL**

|      | <i>India</i> | <i>Bihar</i> | <i>Kerala</i> | <i>West Bengal</i> |
|------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 1951 | 564          | 624          | 559           | 480                |
| 1961 | 659          | 667          | 638           | 697                |
| 1971 | 716          | 715          | 603           | 787                |

SOURCES : Based on age data from Mukherjee (1976 : 65-88 and Census of India, 1971, Age Tables (1977 : 142-97).

An increase in the age at marriage is yet another important factor accountable for the rise in the average size of households. Agarwala (1977: 95) has calculated the mean age at marriage for males and females separately for different

states of India showing that the mean age at marriage has been gradually rising. With the increase in age at marriage, the proportion of dependent children living with their parents or the family of origin has increased, ensuing from the prolongation of stay.

The census data indicate that a small household is associated with urbanization. It is easily discernible in Table 1 that on an average urban households are smaller than rural ones in West Bengal as well as in India generally. Kerala, surprisingly enough, presents a different picture. We will discuss Kerala's case later. India's urban household is relatively smaller because a considerable number of males migrate from village leaving their families behind in their rural homes. It is true that some of them later bring their families to cities; still the significant groups in cities are those who never bring their families to cities. Males, especially those of the working age group, represent a disproportionately large part of India's urban population. The preponderance of males in rural to urban streams of migration is well reflected in the highly masculine sex ratio of urban areas (Table 5).

TABLE 5—SEX RATIO (MALES PER 1,000 FEMALES) BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE, 1951-71 : INDIA., BIHAR, KERALA AND WEST BENGAL

|      | <i>India</i> |              | <i>Bihar</i> |              | <i>Kerala</i> |              | <i>West Bengal</i> |              |
|------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
|      | <i>Rural</i> | <i>Urban</i> | <i>Rural</i> | <i>Urban</i> | <i>Rural</i>  | <i>Urban</i> | <i>Rural</i>       | <i>Urban</i> |
| 1951 | 1046         | 1163         | 999          | 1188         | 968           | 1008         | 1065               | 1515         |
| 1961 | 1038         | 1184         | 988          | 1233         | 974           | 1009         | 1060               | 1426         |
| 1971 | 1054         | 1166         | 1030         | 1239         | 980           | 1002         | 1061               | 1331         |

Sources : Census of India, 1971, *General Population Tables, India, Series-1 Part ii-A (i)*, pp. 126-27.

It is really surprising that in Kerala the average size of the urban household is larger than the rural one (see Table 1). One could attribute this to errors involved in the census counts, but there is no specific reason why the chances of errors in counting households and their population should have been greater in the case of urban areas of Kerala only in the 1961 and 1971 censuses. Data in these censuses suggest that there is a greater proportion of dependants in urban households than in rural ones in Kerala. In 1971, for instance, there were 6.0 persons in rural and 6.3 persons in urban areas per household in Kerala. This has possibly arisen out of the increasing pressure of the migrant population on the slow-developing urban housing facilities. On the basis of census statistics only, it is difficult to assess why the pressure on urban households is greater in

Kerala than in West Bengal. Yet another possible reason is that friends and Kinsmen play a comparatively greater role in rural to urban migration in Kerala. Because of this contact some migrants tend to stay with their friends and Kinsmen, which ultimately increases the average size of households in urban areas in Kerala. The fact that urban households have been slightly bigger than the rural ones in Kerala calls for an in-depth study at the micro-level.

## Household Composition

Having discussed the phenomena of increasing size of households and rural-urban differentials in household size, we come to the discussion of household composition and reasons for variation in household size among these states. Household heads and their spouses constituted 31 per cent in Bihar, 29 per cent in Kerala and 33 per cent in West Bengal of all household members at the 1961 census (Table 6). In 1971, this proportion remained the same in Bihar

TABLE 6-HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION IN BIHAR, KERALA AND WEST BENGAL, 1961 AND 1971

|          |      | <i>Household<br/>Population<br/>(in per cent)</i> | <i>Household<br/>Heads and<br/>Their<br/>Spouses</i> | <i>Married<br/>Relations</i> | <i>Never Married<br/>Widowed,<br/>Divorced and<br/>Separated<br/>Persons</i> | <i>Unrelated<br/>Persons</i> |
|----------|------|---|--|------------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| Bihar    | 1961 | 100   | 31.3   | 19.5                         | 48.2   | 1.0                          |
|          | 1971 | 100   | 31.2   | 19.4                         | 48.9   | 0.5                          |
| Kerala   | 1961 | 100   | 29.1   | 12.3                         | 57.1   | 1.5                          |
|          | 1971 | 100   | 29.0   | 10.2                         | 60.1   | 0.7                          |
| W.Bengal | 1961 | 100   | 33.0   | 11.7                         | 50.4   | 4.9                          |
|          | 1971 | 100   | 31.6   | 10.8                         | 56.5   | 1.1                          |

SOURCES : Same as for Table 1

and Kerala, and it came down by two percentage points in West Bengal. On the other hand, the percentage of dependents in a household such as single, widowed, divorced and separated persons increased from about 57 to 60 in Kerala and from about 50 to 57 in West Bengal during 1961-71. However, Bihar did not experience any change in the distribution of dependents during that period. Unrelated persons remained an insignificant minority in both the censuses. Of the total household population, married relations, who in most cases are married sons, brothers and parents, constituted about 19 per

cent in Bihar and 12 per cent each in Kerala and West Bengal at the 1961 census. The 1971 census recorded a decline in their share in the household size by one to two percentage points in West Bengal and Kerala, but not in Bihar. The decline in the proportion of married relations in the states of West Bengal and Kerala presumably shows an increasing tendency for newly married couples to form a separate household.

In a household, within the category of single, divorced, widowed and separated persons, unmarried sons and daughters constitute the largest proportion. When we compare the proportion of sons and daughters to the total household population in these states in 1951 with that of the 1971 census data, it becomes obvious that their share has increased considerably, implying that the continuing increase in the number of sons and daughters in a family accounted for the increase of household size (Table 7).

TABLE 7-HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION IN BIHAR, KERALA AND WEST BENGAL, 1951 AND 1971

|          |      | <i>Household Population (in per cent)</i> | <i>Heads of Household and Their Spouses</i> | <i>Relations of Household Heads</i> |                        |                          |
|----------|------|---|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
|          |      |   |   | <i>Sons and Daughters</i>           | <i>Household Heads</i> | <i>Unrelated Persons</i> |
| Bihar    | 1951 | 100                                       | 32.0  | 34.6                                | 33.3                   | 0.1                      |
|          | 1971 | 100                                       | 31.2  | 37.8                                | 30.5                   | 0.5                      |
| Kerala   | 1951 | 100                                       | 31.4  | 45.6                                | 21.4                   | 1.6                      |
|          | 1971 | 100                                       | 29.0  | 48.0                                | 22.3                   | 0.7                      |
| W.Bengal | 1951 | 100                                       | 33.7  | 38.0                                | 26.7                   | 1.6                      |
|          | 1971 | 100                                       | 31.6  | 45.3                                | 22.0                   | 1.1                      |

*Note:* Relations of household heads include (heir parents, brothers and their wives and children, single sisters, uncles, aunts, and their children and any other persons related by blood or marriage to household heads. Unrelated persons refer to any persons in a household who are related by neither blood nor marriage such as domestic servants and household caretakers.

As the 1961 census does not provide any information about the number of sons and daughters in a household separately, the 1961 census data have not been Included in this table.

SOURCES: Same as for Table 1.

A comparison of proportions of sons and daughters per household between these states suggests that it is the greater proportion of sons and daughters per household which is responsible for a larger size of households in Kerala. In Table 7 it is obvious that on an average a household in Kerala has a greater proportion of sons and daughters than in Bihar and West Bengal. Their increas-

ing proportion in a household is a consequence of a faster rate of decline in mortality and increase in the age at marriage. Since we do not have similar information about the number of sons and daughters per household for the 1961 census, we can only speculate on the basis of the 1951 and 1971 censuses data that the same reason was responsible for a larger size of households in Kerala at the 1961 census as well.

Social and cultural factors, besides demographic ones, are also partly accountable for a larger size of households in Kerala. There are several castes in Kerala which are matrilineal. It has been found in a study of Malabar that castes characterized by a matrilineal family system have usually a larger size of household than those which have a patrilineal family system (Mayer, 1952 : 98-99). The matrilineal Tiyas, for instance, have larger communal dwellings than the patrilineal Tiyas. Similarly the Chermas and the Pulayas of Kerala who have always been patrilineal rarely live together as a joint family. On the basis of studies done by Hitchcock (1956), Mencher (1962) and Kolenda (1967), Kolenda (1968) makes a comparative analysis of family types where she finds that the Nayars of Kerala have a much higher proportion of joint families than do the Rajputs and the Chuhras of Khalapur in Uttar Pradesh. This indicates that the matrilineal family system is also partly responsible for a larger household size in Kerala.

### **Household Heads : Age and Sex Characteristics**

The discussion of age and sex characteristics of household heads is quite important, because they have been the main ordering principles in family hierarchy. To quote Gore (1965 : 216), "The men have the more decisive authority in the traditional Indian family as compared with women, and elders have a greater authority, as compared with young persons/ He adds that the difference of a year or two in age is sufficient to establish firmly who is the formal superior. As between the authority of an older woman and a younger man, sex is the more dominant factor than age. With regard to the sex characteristics of household heads, our data suggest that males continue to be the formal heads of households. Although their traditional authority has been greatly eroded with the increasing participation of women in the decision making process in the family and the rise in their level of literacy, the formal headship of males does not seem to have been adversely affected.

Census reports from 1951 to 1971 have revealed consistently that in India over 90 per cent of the total household heads were males, and there is not much difference between the rural and the urban areas in this regard. The percentage of male household heads varied from 90 to 92 per cent in Bihar and around 92 percent in West Bengal during 1961-71. In Kerala, male household heads constituted about 84 per cent in 1961 and about 83 per cent in 1971 (Table 8). Except for a few castes in Kerala and Scheduled Tribes in Assam, the Indian

**TABLE 8-HOUSEHOLD HEADS BY SEX IN BIHAR KERALA AND WEST BENGAL, 1961-71**

|             | <i>Household Heads</i><br>(in per cent) | <i>1961</i> |          | <i>1971</i> |          |
|-------------|---|-------------|----------|-------------|----------|
|             |   | <i>M</i>    | <i>F</i> | <i>M</i>    | <i>F</i> |
| Bihar       | 100                                     | 89.9        | 10.1     | 92.0        | 8.0      |
| Kerala      | 100                                     | 83.5        | 16.4     | 82.7        | 17.3     |
| West Bengal | 100                                     | 91.7        | 8.3      | 92.3        | 7.7      |

SOURCES: Same as for Table 1.

family is basically of patriarchal type. In India, a female as household head is found principally because of marital dissolution, general taboo on widow re-marriage and individual male out-migration. In most cases female heads of households are separated, divorced or widowed. Since very often men migrate without their families, the women are left behind in their homes as heads of households.

The percentage of female heads of household is higher in Kerala than in Bihar and West Bengal. It varied from 8 to 10 per cent in Bihar, 7.7 to 8.3 per cent in West Bengal and 16.4 to 17.3 per cent in Kerala during 1961-71 (Table 8). In addition to a higher expectation of life of females than males, the practice of spinsterhood and the matrilineal family system are the main reasons for a higher proportion of female household heads in Kerala. However, the proportion of female-led households in Kerala is less than what one may normally expect. This is not surprising because not all matrilineal families are matriarchal nor is the proportion of spinsters large. We cannot offer any details on the distribution of matriarchal matrilineal families in Kerala, but we can give some rough estimation with regard to spinsterhood from the census. For instance, according to 1971 census, of the total never-married females percentages of single women at ages 35 and above were less than one in Bihar and West Bengal and two in Kerala.

As regards the age structure of household heads, we have limited information in census reports. Only the 1971 census provides tabulations on age of household heads. Since there is a lack of benchmark data, it is not possible to ascertain trends of change in the age structure of household heads. Even if the 1951 and 1961 censuses had provided age data on household heads, they would not have been sufficient to show changes therein. As the transition in headship of households from older to younger generation people is a quite slow process, what we need is fairly long-term time series data which are not available. Given these limitations, we still can have some idea of changes in the age structure of household heads. Some authors have sought to understand the traditional Indian

family system on the basis of oral and written traditions which seem to suggest that in the good old days families were usually large and governed by the old patriarchs (Prabhu, 1954; Karve, 1968). Since in the past the family often consisted of people of more than two generations, it was, therefore, possible that the household heads were old. The obvious reason for this is that the larger the size of a family, the older will be the head of the household. Several village studies done in the recent past have clearly shown that the larger households were headed usually by older males compared to the smaller households. Against this background, we can have some idea of changes in the age characteristics of household heads based on the 1971 census data.

As may be seen in Table 9, persons below 30 constitute about 6.4 per cent in Kerala, about 12 per cent in West Bengal and 14 per cent in Bihar of the

**TABLE 9-PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSEHOLD HEADS BY AGE AND SEX IN BIHAR, KERALA AND WEST BENGAL, 1971**

|             | Sex   | Household Heads |         | Age Groups |       |      |
|-------------|-------|-----------------|---------|------------|-------|------|
|             |       | Pop. in 000s    | Percent | < 30       | 30-49 | 50 + |
| Bihar       | M     | 9,020           | 100     | 14.3       | 51.8  | 33.9 |
|             | F     | 782             | 100     | 10.9       | 49.7  | 39.4 |
|             | Total | 9,802           | 100     | 14.0       | 51.6  | 34.4 |
| Kerala      | M     | 2,884           | 100     | 8.1        | 53.3  | 38.6 |
|             | F     | 604             | 100     | 4.6        | 42.2  | 53.2 |
|             | Total | 3,488           | 300     | 6.4        | 47.7  | 45.9 |
| West Bengal | M     | 7,168           | 100     | 14.3       | 54.8  | 30.9 |
|             | F     | 596             | 100     | 9.1        | 45.6  | 45.3 |
|             | Total | 7,764           | 100     | 11.7       | 50.2  | 38.1 |

Note: Figures for 'age not started' have not been excluded from the computation.

SOURCE: Census of India, 1971, *Social and Cultural Tables, India*, Series 1, Pan II-(iii), Vol. I, pp. 3-15.

total household heads. The percentages of household heads up to age 49 in these states in a similar order are about 54, 62 and 65. This suggests that a greater proportion of household heads is below age 50. Since, of total household heads, 48 per cent in Kerala, 50 per cent in West Bengal and 52 per cent in Bihar are between age 30 and 49, it can be inferred, although the evidence is not so strong, that households are dissolved in many cases during the life time of old household heads; or at the same time, it can also be said that the

headship of households is transferred to young sons even when fathers are residing with their sons. Marriage of a son does not appear to play an important part in the formation of a household. Had marriage been the main reason for the formation of a household, the percentage of household heads at ages below 30 would have been quite significant, for the mean age at marriage of males is much *less than 30 years in these states*.

It is a matter of general expectation that West Bengal would show a much smaller proportion of household heads below ages 30, because West Bengal follows the *Dayabhaga* system of laws, as opposed to the *Mitakshara* system practised in other parts of the country (Karve, 1968: 342-75). Under the *Dayabhaga* system a son does not have a right to property by birth; rather, it is inherited upon the death of the father. The *Dayabhaga* system works as a unifying force in the family. In view of this fact, it is surprising that about 12 per cent of household heads are young adults of ages below 30 in West Bengal (Table 9). It is believed that in the face of changes in socio-economic structures of the country the traditional institution of the *Dayabhaga* system of inheritance has *lost its unifying force in the family*. Increase in *population mobility, ensuing* from the opportunity to work away from the family of origin because of industrialization, has played an important role in disrupting the joint or complex nature of household in West Bengal.

There are some interesting facts noticeable in Table 9 : First, the percentage of household heads increases for women and decreases for men at age 50 and above. This implies that on the demise of their husbands, women take over the responsibility of running the household, because very few widows remarry. Widows become heads of households usually when they do not have grown-up sons who can take care of family affairs. Second, the percentage of women as household heads at age 50 and above is higher in Kerala than in West Bengal. Of the total female household heads, (they *comprise 45 percent in West Bengal* and 53 per cent in Kerala at ages 50 . Kerala has a higher percentage of female household heads at age 50 and above mainly because the life expectancy of women is higher in Kerala than in West Bengal. In fact, their life expectancy at birth is higher than that of both males and females in any other part of the country (Nag, 1981 : 4).

It has been observed that 'there is considerable evidence . . . that in North India, the general pattern of nuclear family establishment is the result of the break-up of existing joint families. In contrast to this, in the southern part of India, the tradition appears to be establishment of a separate home shortly after marriage' (Kumar, 1974:70). However, our evidence does not lend support to this generalization. Had the formation of family taken place immediately after marriage in south India, Kerala would have recorded a greater percentage of household heads at ages below 30 than Bihar and West Bengal. However, only on the basis of the 1971 census data for one state from the southern part and two states from the northern part of the country it is hard to refute the

above argument outright, but our findings do put a question mark against this *generalization*.

## Conclusions

It appears from the above that average household size has increased in India over the last three to four decades. Since the fertility level in the country has remained at its maximum, the change in household size has materialized mainly through the decline in mortality. A faster rate of decline in mortality has positively influenced household size through the increase in expectation of life at birth. Increase in the age at marriage is yet another important factor which has significantly pushed up the average size of households in India by pushing up the duration of unmarried persons in the family of origin.

The average household size in urban areas is somewhat smaller than in rural ones in Bihar, West Bengal and the country as a whole, but not in Kerala. The size of urban households is relatively smaller for two main reasons: First, the urban areas have a greater proportion of single-member households than the rural ones. A good number of rural folk come to cities leaving their families behind in their rural homes. Second, the proportion of dependants to household heads is slightly smaller in urban than in rural areas; this may be because the urban way of life usually induces individualism, resulting in a smaller household size.

Though the automatic character of patriarchs has been undermined to a great extent, males continue to be formal heads of households in India. Female household heads are mostly those who are widows or separated women as well as those who have been left behind by their out-migrating husbands. The prevalence of the matriarchal-matrilineal type of family, a relatively higher expectancy of life for women and spinsterhood largely accounts for a higher proportion of *female* household heads in Kerala than in Bihar and West Bengal.

Viewed against the background of old situations, it appears that in a large number of cases headship of households has shifted to persons of comparatively younger ages. This has ensued from the fact that elementary families comprising persons from one to two generations are gradually becoming more and more prominent. The smaller the size of household, the younger will be the heads of households. Since the household heads are mostly young, it can be inferred that a household is subdivided into two or more households in the lifetime of a father, or say the old patriarch of the family, which further implies that the traditional role of age in matters of controlling the household affairs has diminished over time.

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