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Q4(c)

What is kinship? Briefly explain G. P. Murdock's contribution to the study of the kinship system

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 2 · 10 marks · Perspectives on the study of Indian society

Perspectives on the study of Indian society: Indology (G.S. Ghurye); Structural functionalism (M.N. Srinivas); Marxist sociology (A.R. Desai).

Core demand of the question

- Define kinship as a social institution
- **Summarise Murdock's comparative contribution:** sample, nuclear family claim, residence and descent
- Note Indian qualifications (Karve, Dumont, Uberoi, joint family)

Revision summary

Kinship organises descent, marriage, residence, inheritance and care beyond raw biology.

Murdock's Social Structure compared hundreds of societies on those axes.

He argued the nuclear family is a universal functional unit, often inside larger kin groups.

Indian joint family, **gotra** exogamy and Dravidian cross-cousin marriage qualify a simple nuclear picture.

Caste endogamy makes Indian kinship a political as well as a domestic institution.

Introduction

Kinship is the organised set of relations that come from descent, marriage and socially recognised parenting. It allocates **who may marry whom, who inherits, who lives together, and who must care**. It is not only biology. **G. P. Murdock** made this a comparative science with a world sample, which Indian sociology still uses-and argues with.

Body

Murdock's contribution

In Social Structure (1949) Murdock coded hundreds of societies (the number often cited is about 250 in that book, later expanded in the Ethnographic Atlas). He classified **residence** (patrilocal, matrilocal, neolocal, avunculocal), **descent** (patrilineal, matrilineal, bilateral), and **cousin marriage**. His famous claim was that the **nuclear family is universal**: a man and woman and their children as a functional unit of sex, economy and socialisation, even when embedded in larger kin groups.

The method was **cross-cultural statistical comparison**, a break from purely speculative evolutionism. It gave later demographers and family sociologists a grid.

Indian caveats

India's **joint family**, vansh, **gotra**, North Indian village exogamy, and Dravidian **cross-cousin** marriage (Karve, Dumont, Trautmann) do not fit a simple nuclear-universal story. Murdock allowed that nuclear units sit inside extended structures; Indian ethnography shows the **property and ritual corporation** of the joint household as more than a cluster of nuclear cells. **Patricia Uberoi** and **A. M. Shah** document **change: residential nuclearisation with continuing joint obligations**. **Kinship here is also caste**: endogamy is the hinge of the jati.

Murdock remains the pioneer of systematic comparison. Indian kinship studies supply the necessary resistance: region, caste and jointness.

Flow diagram

Kinship -> Descent
Kinship -> Marriage rules
Kinship -> Residence
Murdock sample -> Kinship
Karve Dumont Shah -> Kinship

Conclusion

Kinship is the rule-bound organisation of descent and marriage. Murdock gave a comparative map and a nuclear-family thesis. Indian systems of joint family, **gotra** and Dravidian alliance show why that map needs local theory, not why comparison should be abandoned.

Facts & figures

G. P. Murdock

Social Structure (1949); comparative coding of residence, descent and family forms.

Irawati Karve

Mapped North-South Indian kinship differences, including Dravidian alliance patterns.

Gotra

Exogamous clan category among many Hindu groups; a kinship rule that is also a caste rule.