

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

G.N. RAMU, *Brothers and Sisters in India: A Study of Urban Adult Siblings*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006, ix + 259 p., index.

The study of sibling relations has a long and distinguished tradition among scholars spanning the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. However, much of this research is focused on sibling ties in the West and has been conducted by scholars interested in the social and psychological impacts of these ties. In contrast, researchers who have examined sibling relations in less developed and urbanized countries, such as India, have done so through an anthropological lens. This has rendered a static view of sibling relations making them seem more like an unalterable artifact of kinship rules rather than ties sustained through interactions and prone to change. The studies of the past have failed to capture the interactional processes that constitute these relations and the dynamics of change that transform these relations over time and context. Ramu's book addresses these crucial, yet much neglected, aspects.

In his book *Brothers and Sisters in India* Ramu examines adult sibling relations in the city of Mysore, which is in the state of Karnataka, in the southern part of India. This research suffers from the shortcomings of a study based on a single site. Yet, if one were to choose only one site, few cities in India would be more appropriate for a study like this than Mysore. To North American readers the geographic and sociological significance of Mysore is perhaps best explained by reference to its proximity to Bangalore, the silicon valley of India. Although Mysore is not the hub of the computer and business process outsourcing industries (popularly called "call centers") as is Bangalore, it has not escaped the throes of change. Ramu is correct in pointing out that this city presents an ideal site for investigating the continuity from rural to urban experiences and is nearly perfect for examining how adult sibling relations are being transformed. To a large extent Mysore represents all the urbanizing and modernizing cities in India and to that extent the findings are fairly generalizable across the urbanized segments of the country. Ramu could have done a bit more to emphasize the parallel between Mysore and other cities in India. Doing this would allow readers to have a better sense of the degree to which this city represents other urban centers of India. But he only mentions this in the passing and, instead, devotes more than necessary space to the history of the city, which is rather superfluous for understanding the later substantive discussions. Also it is not clear why he cites 1991 Census figures instead of more recent ones.

The book is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected from 363 purposively sampled individuals, which included 168 men and 195 women. The main question addressed is the following: how are sibling relationships organized and maintained in an urban setting? Based on this overarching question the book explores the following important themes: attitudinal dimensions of sibling solidarity; the nature of solidarity and conflict; the values and norms surrounding sibling relationships that promote solidarity and reduce conflict; the frequency of interactions; the critical events (e.g., illness, ritual and feasts) which draw siblings close or drive them apart; forms of aid exchanged between siblings and the frequency of these exchanges; the differences and similarities between fraternal, sororal, and cross-sibling relationships; and how sibling relations are shaped by socioeconomic factors and caste identity.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter provides a concise review of research on sibling relations in the West, which has been conducted mostly by sociologists, and research in India on the same topic, which has been conducted mostly by anthropologists. The second chapter discusses the research setting and methodology. The third, fourth, and fifth chapters respectively discuss fraternal, sororal, and cross-sibling relationships. The final chapter synthesizes the findings.

The three substantive chapters of the book present well-researched evidence on the three types of sibling relations. Ramu does a fine job of pointing out the differences between sibling relations in traditional joint and extended families in rural settings in comparison to sibling relations in nuclear families residing in urban settings. He explains how the reduced importance of age-based hierarchy among siblings, fewer conflicts surrounding the division of parental assets, and personal values attached to maintaining sibling relations have changed the nature of these relations over time and context. He also evaluates the roles played by various factors such as residential proximity, availability of personal means of transportation and communication, reciprocity, predisposition of spouses, and care for aging parents in drawing siblings close or driving them apart.

Among the most important observations made about sibling relations in the urban context are the decline of the importance of birth order in determining the authority of one sibling, particularly the older brother, over others. Personal choice and the availability of resources are identified as the two most important factors determining fraternal relationships. A vast majority of his respondents seemed to agree about the need to resolve conflicts in order to maintain solidarity. At the same time a fair number believed that reciprocity was crucial in maintaining solidarity and that their own interests should precede the interests of their brothers. Few referred to the ideals of fraternal bonds idealized in the mythological traditions. Another finding that deserves attention is the number of respondents (36% of the men) who see their closest brothers as their friends. Higher education, occupation and income, residential proximity, and common interest in recreational activities were found to be factors that made it more likely for men to designate their brothers as friends. This characterization

of brothers is new in the Indian context where, traditionally, kinship ties have been more valued than friendship ties. Here one observes almost a reversal of tradition; close friends were given the honor of being made into fictive brothers since fraternal ties were seen as more sacred and long lasting. In contrast, in the modern urban context we see just the opposite. Kin are characterized as friends, thus indicating a degree of intimacy and camaraderie. These relational qualities typical of friendships were often lacking in traditional fraternal relations. The latter were guided by the ascriptive hierarchy of birth-order and marked by relational qualities such as authority and subordination or respect and deference. This, for example, is one of a series of astute and insightful observations that are scattered across the substantive chapters of Ramu's book.

Another interesting discovery is the emerging importance of sororal relationships. Ramu found that reciprocity between sisters mattered less because few women have independent resources over which they have complete command. Their ties were supported by strong values of caring and sacrifice, and their husbands' attitudes towards this aspect of their lives mattered less. All of these, Ramu points out, indicate the increased autonomy of women in the urban context. As for cross-sibling relationships, Ramu concludes that many of the values underlying brother-sister relations – brothers ought to make sacrifices for their sisters' well-being, maintain solidarity, seek and give advice, and render assistance with no expectation of reciprocity – represent a continuity of values from the past. However, even in these relationships there have been changes. In the urban context brothers and sisters maintain their relationships more as a result of their mutual affection rather than because of traditional norms.

Overall, Ramu has made a valuable contribution to the field of family and kinship studies. His work is only marred by some of the shortcomings that he himself identifies in the introduction where he lays the groundwork of the study. One he mentions is this: "Absent from the existing literature is an understanding of how non-Hindu family practices such as those of Muslims, Parsis, and Christians have influenced adult sibling relations in India" (19). In my opinion, the main methodological shortcoming of this work is the exclusion of Muslims and Christians from the sample. The religious composition of the state's population is not specified. According to the 2001 Census report, 12.2% of Karnataka's population is Muslim, which is close to the national average of 13.4%. His reason for excluding other religious populations from the sample is not convincing given the substantial amount of time and resources that were dedicated to the project. He argues that he "wanted a culturally homogenous population so that we could assess the modern-day relevance of the values propounded in the epics and mythologies of one [Hindu] religious community." However, this was not one of the guiding concerns of the research project as he clarified it in an earlier section of the volume.

The second flaw in existing research according to Ramu is this: "Also absent is an analysis of conflicts between siblings..."(20). By choosing to sample siblings based on social and psychological closeness he fails to

address an important gap in the literature. It is true that even his sample based on closeness yields some evidence of conflict and disagreement between siblings. The qualitative evidence of conflict and the causes of increasing distance are indeed very interesting and leave one wanting more. So a more explicit focus on conflicts, even if on a partial sample, would be very instructive for illuminating many of the guiding questions of this project.

Finally, in my opinion, Ramu could have further enriched his book by presenting more of the qualitative evidence found in his study. The quotations included in the substantive chapters do a fine job of capturing the interactional and behavioral dynamics that sustain sibling relationships or lead to their disintegration. More in-depth evidence of this nature would have contributed to a richer account.

Ramu is right to point out that few studies, so far, have examined adult sibling relations in urban India. His work makes a major contribution in filling that gap. Most importantly, it captures the changes occurring in an important kinship tie at a time when the country is experiencing enormous social and economic changes. His book has great value to all scholars and students interested in exploring family and kinship patterns in general and particularly in transitional societies which have experienced recent waves of industrialization, urbanization, and migration.

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