# UNIT 9   KINSHIP-II

## Structure

## 9.0   OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you should be able to

● discuss two main kinship groups in South India

● outline main features of South Indian Kinship terminology

● describe preferential rules of marriage in South India

● distinguish between gifts exchanged between various kin groups at the time of marriage in South India

● compare the North and South Indian kinship systems in terms of differences and  similarities between them

● give an account of matrilineal kinship system in North-east and South-west India.

## 9.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, you learnt about the broad patterns of patrilineal system in North Indian kinship. Now, this unit will deal with broad patterns of kinship in South India. Here too, the main system is that of patrilineal kinship, with the exception of matriliny in the state of Kerala. The patriliny in both North and South

India outlines the major component of kinship system in India and that is why we have devoted more space to its description. Only at the end of this unit, we have given an account of matrilineal kinship as found in South-west and North-east India.

In this unit, we will confine to the broad patterns of patrilineal kinship organisation that has been discussed by sociologists. We will also give a brief note on the variations found in Kerala. Because of the paucity of space, we will not go into other regional variations.

As with kinship system in North India in unit 8, here too we shall discuss in section 9.2 the South Indian Kinship system in terms of the following four features, (i) kinship groups, (ii) kinship terminology, (iii) marriage rules and (iv) ceremonial exchange of gifts among kin. In section 9.3, we compare the North and South Indian patrilineal kinship systems. We show the similarities as well as differences between the two regions. Then in section 9.4, we discuss kinship organisation in matrilineal communities of North-east and South-west India.

## 9.2    KINSHIP SYSTEM IN SOUTH INDIA

Let us first define the area that we will include in our discussion of South Indian Kinship System. The states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala arc generally considered as South India where the languages of the Dravidian family are spoken. In the region occupied by these four states, we find a fairly common pattern of kinship organisation. Like in the North, we find diversity in the kinship pattern in the South too. We must not forget that in this region, the state of Kerala is distinct because of its matrilineal system of descent and the practice of inter-caste hypergamy. Secondly despite common elements, each of these four linguistic regions may have its distinct socio-cultural patterns of kinship. Having defined the area, let us now begin with a discussion of kinship groups.

### 9.2.1  Kinship  Groups

Kin relatives in South India are mainly categorised in two groups namely, the patrilineage and the affines.

**Patrilineage:** In South India, just as in North India, relating to various categories of kin beyond one's immediate family implies a close interaction with members of one's patrilineage. The **patrilocal** residence amongst the lineage members provides the chances for frequent interaction and cooperation. Thus, the ties of descent and residence help in the formation of a kin group. Such a group is recognised in both South and North India. For example, K.Gough (1955) in her study of the Brahmins of Tanjore district describes patrilineal descent groups, which are distributed in small communities. Each caste within the village contains one to twelve exogamous patrilineal groups.

Dumont (1986) in his study of the Pramalai Kallar of Madurai in Tamil Nadu describes kin groups in terms of patrilineal, patrilocal and exogamous groups, called *kuttam*. All members of the kuttam may form the whole or a part of one or several villages. It may be subdivided into secondary *kuttam*. Each *kuttam* bears the name of its ancestor, which is also the name of the chief. The name is inherited by the eldest son who is also the holder of the position of chief in the group.

The ritual activities, in which the *kuttam* members participate, show its significance as a unit of kinship organisation. During harvest season, when food is plenty, all the members of the group are invited and they collectively worship in the temple of the *kuttam*.

In the economic sphere, as land is owned by the male members of the *kuttam,* we find that after the death of the father, there are frequent fights between brothers or coparceners, as opposed to the free and friendly relations among affinal relatives. Thus, it is said amongst the Kallar that brothers or coparceners do not joke. The coparceners are known as *pangali.* In the classificatory system of South Indian kinship terminology, they are opposed to the set of relatives, known as *mama-machchinan.* More of this will be given in sub-section 9.2.2 of this unit.

**Affinal Relatives:** Opposed to the members of a patrilineage, we have the kin group of affinal relatives (those related through marriage). Beyond the patrilineage are the relatives who belong to the group in which one's mother was born, as well as one's wife. They are a person's uterine (from mothers side) and affinal (from wife's side) kin, commonly known as *mama-machchinan.* In this set of relatives are also included the groups in which a person's sister and father's sister are married. The nature of interaction between a patrilineage and its affines, as described by Dumont (1986) is always cordial and friendly.

**Indirect Pangali:** If group A is one's patrilineage and group B has *one's mama-'machchinan* (uterine and affinal kin), then members of group C, which has *mama-machchinan* of group B, will become classificatory brothers to people in group A. Such classificatory brothers are called *mureikku pangali* (see Dumont 1950: 3-26). These relatives, though called a kind of *pangali,* are never confused with actual coparceners or sharers of joint patrilineal property. Beyond this circle of relatives, the rest are only neutral people.

From this discussion of kinship groups, we now move on to the description of kinship terminology. The South Indian kinship terminology places particular emphasis on affinal relationships, which are the main interest of those who follow the alliance approach.

**Check Your Progress 1**

i)     What are the two kinship groups in South India? Use one line for your answer.

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ii)    In terms of South Indian Kinship groups, what is an affine of your affine to you? Use one line for your answer.

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## 9.2.2  Kinship  Terminology

The linguistic expression of kin relationships in Dravidian languages follows a clear-cut structure with a great deal of precision. Main features of this system, according to Louis Dumont (1986: 301), are that (i) it distinguishes between parallel and cross-cousins and (ii) it is classificatory. Let us discuss these two features.

i)     **Parallel and Cross-cousins**

Parallel cousins are those who are the children of the siblings of same sex. This means that children of two brothers, or, of two sisters are parallel cousins to each

other. Cross-cousins are those, who are the children of the siblings of the opposite sex. This means that children of a brother and a sister are cross-cousins.

The kin terminology in South India clearly separates the two categories of cousins. There are very good reasons for doing so because in South India, parallel cousins cannot marry each other while cross-cousins can. If the system of terminology does not distinguish between the two categories, there would have been utter confusion in the minds of the people. But as any speaker of one of the four Dravidian languages will tell you, there is never any doubt as to who is one's parallel cousin, with whom you behave as a brother/sister and who is one's cross-cousin with whom one is to remain distant and formal. The parallel cousins are referred as brothers/sisters. For example, in Tamil, all parallel cousins are addressed as *annan* (elder brother) or *tambi* (younger brother) and *akka* (elder sister) or *tangachi* (younger sister). Cross-cousins are never brothers/sisters. They are referred, for example in Tamil, as *mama magal/magan* (mother's brother's daughter/son) or *attai magal/magan* (father's sister's daughter/son). Figure 9.1 will further clarify this simple formulation.



1. **Persons within the shaded rectangle in generation D are parallel cousins to each other.**
2. **Those outside the shaded rectangle in genration D are cross cousins to each other**
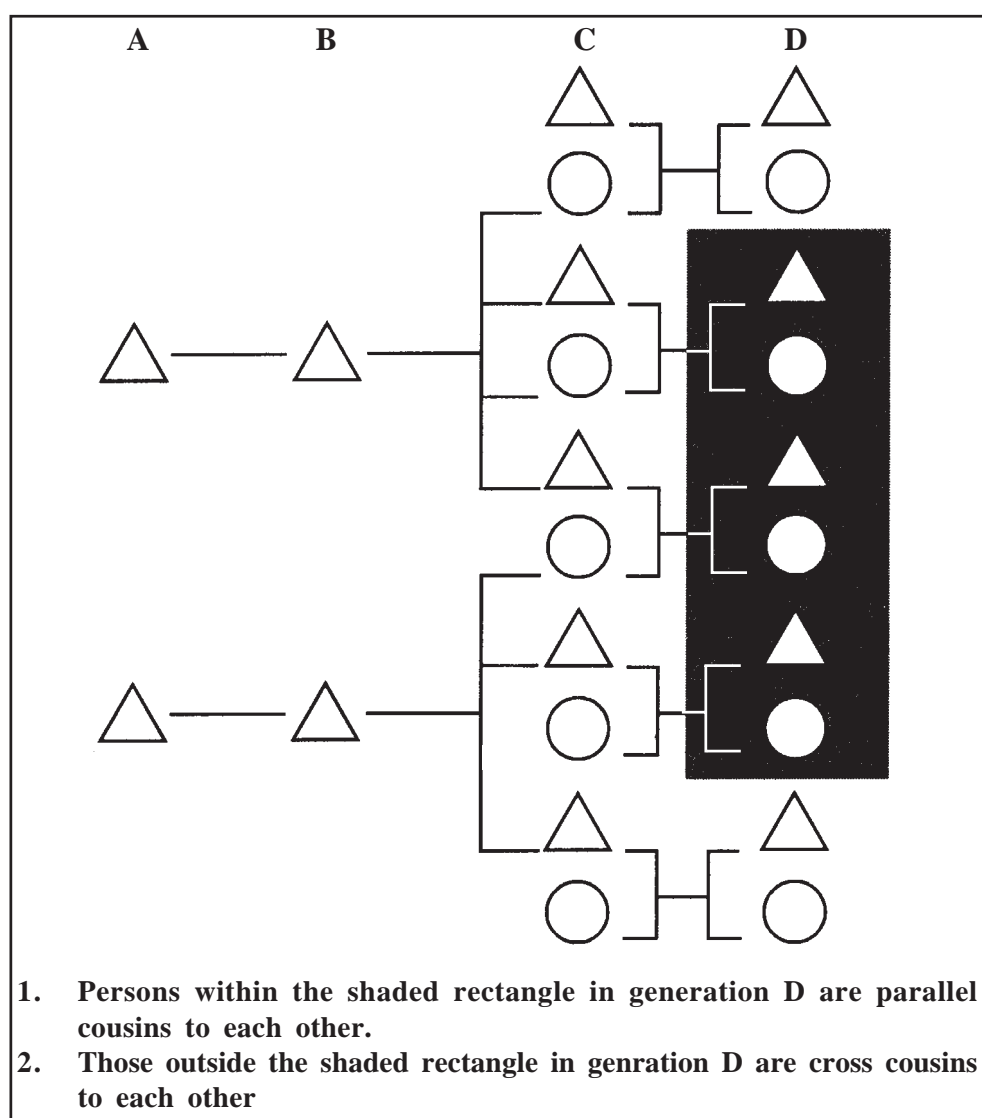
**Fig. 9.1: Two categories of cousins**

This system of kinship terms is in agreement with marriage among close relatives. It separates all descent lines into those with whom one can marry and those with whom one cannot marry. The terminology clearly tells that in a man's own

generation, males are either his brothers or brothers-in-law. Similarly females are either sisters or potential spouses. Perhaps in this very sense, Morgan (1981: 394) described the Dravidian kinship terminology as 'consistent and symmetrical'.

For the sake of comparison, let us clarify that in North India, all cousins (be they parallel or cross) are considered consanguine or brothers/sisters. They are not allowed to marry each other. Then in this respect, you can see how North Indian kinship system is different from the one in South India and how the kinship terminology reflects this distinction.

ii)   **Classificatory Nature of Kinship Terminology**

The distinction between parallel and cross-cousins combined with the classificatory nature of terminology makes the Dravidian kinship terms a mirror image of the kinship system in South India. The terminology becomes classificatory in the following manner.

The person's own generation is terminologically divided into two groups.

a)   One group (known as *Pangali* in Tamil) consists of all the brothers and sisters, including one's parallel cousins and the children of the father's parallel cousins.

b)   The other group comprises cross-cousins and affinal relatives such as wife/ husband of the category (a) relatives. In Tamil, this category is called by the term of *mama-machchinan.*

Let us see how the two classes of kin divide relatives in one's own generation and in both ascending and descending generations.

**One's Own Generation**

This bi-partition applies to the whole generation of a person. All one's relatives in one's own generation are systematically classified in this way. There is no third category of relatives. People falling into neither category are not considered to be relatives. The Tamil term for category (a) is *pangali,* which means 'those who share'. The word *pangali* has connotations of both the general and the specific kind. In its general sense, it refers to classificatory *(murei)* brothers, who do not share a joint property. They are all reckoned as *pangali* (brothers). In its specific sense, the word *'pangali'* refers to strictly those people who have a share in the joint family property. Here we are more concerned with the classificatory *(murei)* connotation of this term.

The two categories *(pangali and mama-machchinan)* are both opposed and exclusive to each other. This classification, which has been explained above in terms of relatives in one's own generation, is applied to groups, lineages, villages and so on. Let us now understand this bi-partition in terms of both the generation above one's own and the generation below one's own. In other words, we will see how the two categories of kin are observed in one's father's generation and in one's children's generation.

**Ascending Generation**

Two classes of male kin are distinguished in the father's generation. One class is the side of the father, and the other class is the side of the mother's brother. With one's father (in Tamil, *appa or aiya*) are classified in one group all his brothers

(*periyappa* or father's elder brother, *chittappa/sinappa* or father's younger brother) and also the husband of mother's sister (also termed *periyappa or chittappa/sinappa* in Tamil). With the mother's brother *(maman)* are classified father's sisters' husbands (also termed *maman* in Tamil). All immediate affines, for example, the father-in-law, are classed with the corresponding cross-relatives, i.e. the mother's brother or the *maman.*

### Descending Generation

In the generation below one's own we have again the same principle operating. With one's daughter and son are classified children of one's parallel cousins. In Tamil, one's daughter is called *magal* and one's son is *magan.* So are one's parallel cousin's children. On the other hand are placed one's daughter-in-law (*marumagal* in Tamil) and son-in-law (*marumagan,* in Tamil). The children of one's cross-cousins come in this category. This has to be so because they are potential spouses for one's children.

### Affines of Affines

The principle of classificatory relationship into the categories of *pangali* and *mama-machchinan* extends to even those who are the affines of one's affines. As we have already seen, the rule is that one has to assign a class to each relative. If A is the affine of B who is an affine of C, then the relationship between A and C has to be, according to the above formulation, that of a *murei pangali* or classificatory brother. This is so because anyone who is related to you, and is not your mama-machchinan then has to be your *murei pangali* or classificatory brother.

Thus, we have seen how at the level of three generations — that of one's own, of one's father and of one's children — all kin relationships are classified into two opposite and exclusive categories. Secondly, this principle is also extended to those who are the affines of one's affines.

Now we need to mention other features of kinship terminology in South India. One is the factor of age distinction which classifies all kin into those older and those younger to ego (i.e. the person who is the speaker). The other is related to the distinction in terminology on the basis of sex.

### Age and Sex Distinction

By separating the older and younger relatives, the ego's generation is divided into two parts. Similarly, the father's generation is also divided into two parts. In Tamil brothers and sisters and parallel cousins older to ego are called *annan/akka,* respectively, and those younger to ego are called *tambi/tangaichi,* respectively. In the same way all brothers/sisters and parallel cousins older to one's father are called *periyappa/periyamma* and younger one's are *chittappa/sinnappa/chithi sinnamma,* respectively.

The sex distinction is paired, says Dumont (1986: 302), with the alliance distinction. As soon as a distinction is not necessary for establishing an alliance relationship, it is merged. This is what we find in the case of kin terms applied in grand-parental and grand children's generation. For the generation of one's grandchild, one does not distinguish between one's son's and daughter's children. Both are referred in Tamil, as *peran* (grandson) or *peththi* (grand daughter). Similarly, maternal grandfather/mother and paternal grandfather/mother are designated by a common term *tata* for grandfather and *patti* for grandmother. Merging of the sex distinction

in generations of grandparents and grandchildren shows the boundaries where the relationship of alliance ceases to matter and the two sides can be assimilated into one category.

The above description of kinship terminology in South India should not give you the impression that there are no variations in this general picture. In fact, particular features of kinship terms in specific regions are of great interest to sociologists. For example, Louis Dumont (1986: 301-9) has discussed, in particular, the features of kinship among the Pramalai Kallar of Tamilnadu. But here we are concerned with only the general and broad scheme of kinship terminology.

**Check Your Progress 2**

i) Define, in three lines, parallel cousins and cross-cousins, as per south Indian kinship system.

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ii) Name, in three lines, the two categories of relatives in one's own generation, as per kinship system in South India.

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iii) Give, in three lines, one example of kinship term in South India to show the merging of sex distinction.

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## 9.2.3 Marriage Rules

Kinship system in South India is characterised by positive rules of marriage. This means that preference for a particular type of alliance in marriage is clearly stated and practised. Remember that in the context of North India we have said that negative rules of marriage tell us whom one should not marry. In South India the marriage rules are quite clear about who one should/can marry.

**Three Types of Preferential Marriage Rules**

The preferential marriage rules are of the following three types.

i) In several castes in South India, the first preference is given to the marriage between a man and his elder sister's daughter. Among the matrilineal societies like the Nayars, this is not allowed. A simple diagram in figure 9.2 will show this positive rule of marriage.
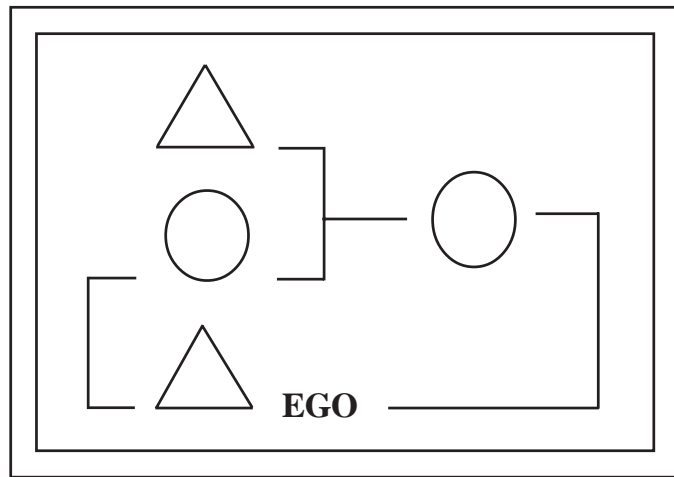
**Fig. 9.2: Marriage with the elder sister's daughter**

The figure 9.2 shows that ego is married to his sister's daughter. This is the most preferred form of marriage.

ii)     Next category of preferred marriage is the marriage of a man with his father's sister's daughter (fzd). In other words, we can also say that a woman marries her mother's brother's son (mbs). In this kind of marriage, the principle of return is quite evident. The family, which gives a daughter, expects to receive a daughter in return in marriage. In other words we can say that when an ego marries her mbs, she is given in marriage to the family from which her mother had come. Thus, principle of return is followed in this type of preference. Often, this process takes two generations to materialise. With the help of a kinship diagram in figure 9.3 we will see how this rule operates.
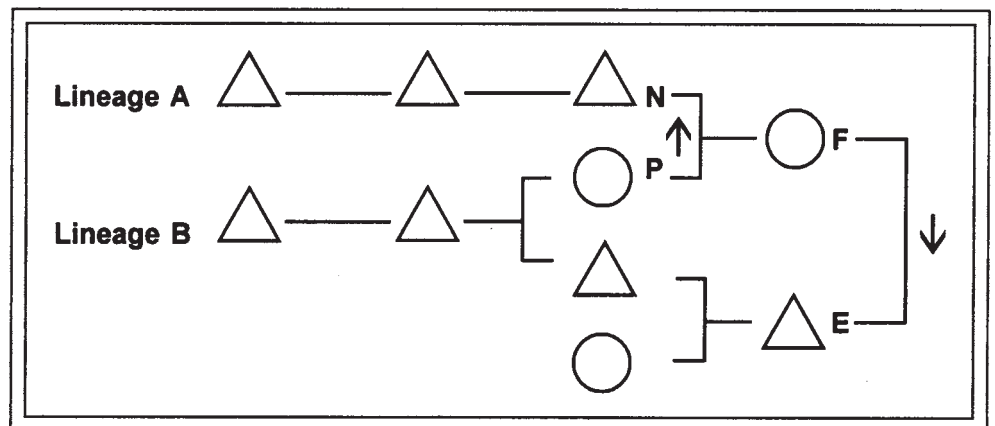


**Fig. 9.3: The rule of return in marriage**

Lineage B gave the woman (P) in marriage to the man (N) of lineage A. In the next generation, lineage A gave the woman (F) to the man (E) of lineage B. Thus, a man's marriage with patrilateral cross-cousin reflects the positive 'rule of return' in South India.

iii)    The third type of preferential marriage is between a man and his mother's brother's daughter (mbd). In a way, this is the reverse of (ii) above. Some castes, such as the Kallar of Tamil Nadu, Havik Brahmin of Karnataka, some Reddy castes of Andhra Pradesh, allow only this type of cross-cousin

marriage. In the castes which have type (iii) of preference, there is always an underlying notion of superiority or hypergamy. This is not present in South India to the extent that is found among the bride-takers in North India. But in this type of marriage, the principle of no-return or a 'vine must not be returned' is practised and therefore the bride is given only in one direction. The bride-takers are considered to be somewhat higher to bride-givers. That is why this rule of no return. Thus, where a man marries his mother's brother's daughter his family is again receiving a woman from the family, which gave his mother to his father's family. This process is only unidirectional, as is shown in the kinship diagram in figure 9.4.
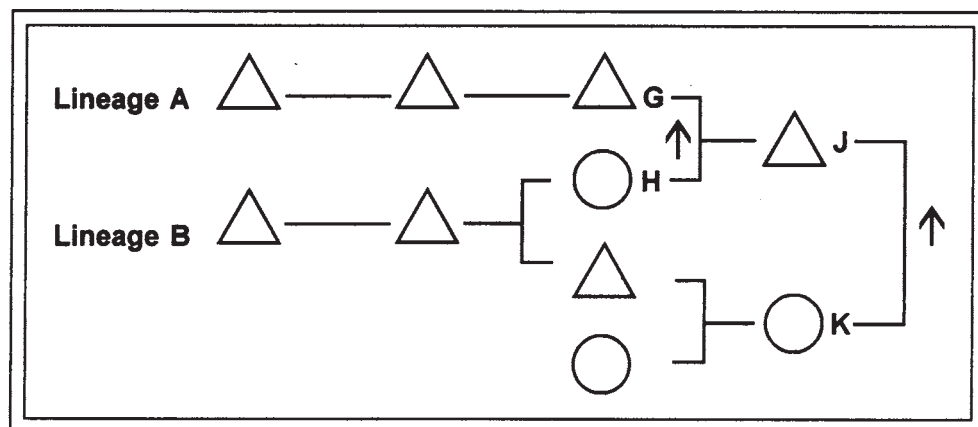


**Fig. 9.4: The rule of no return or the rule of repetition**

Figure 9.4 shown that lineage B gave the woman (H) to the man (G) of lineage A. In the next generation lineage B gave again a woman (K) to the man (J) of lineage A. Here a man's marriage to his matrilateral cross-cousin indicates the positive 'rule of repetition' among some castes in South India.

When one set of brother and sister marry another set of brother and sister, there is no distinction between patrilateral and matrilateral cousins in the cases of marriage of their children. Then the question of preference for (ii) or (iii) type does not arise, because the children of each set are cross-cousins to the other and they can and do marry. This is basically a form of the above three types only and does not constitute a separate type.

In the above three types of preferential marriage in South India we find a definite tendency towards marriages within a small kin group. This group is just outside one's immediate family. The family seeks to strengthen the already existing kin relationships through marriage. Thus, a woman may find that by marrying her mother's brother (mb) her mother's mother (mm) and mother-in-law are one and the same person. Or, if she marries her mother's brother's son then her mother's mother and her husband's father's mother are one and the same person. These examples go to show that marriages take place within the limited kin group. This also shows that village exogamy is not practised in South India. The agnates and affines can be found living in the same village. Affines in South India, living in the same village, are commonly involved in each other's social life. This kind of situation is rare in the context of kin groups in North India. But there are some other restrictions regarding marital alliances in South India. We shall now look at them.

**Restrictions regarding Marital Alliances**

In this context it is necessary to see what are the restrictions imposed with regard to marriage between certain relatives. For example, in certain castes a man can marry his elder sister's daughter but not younger sister's daughter. Also a widow cannot marry her deceased husband's elder or younger brother or even his classificatory brother. Here we find that for each individual, the prohibited persons for marriage differ. Then there is, of course, the rule that a person cannot marry in one's own immediate family and one's lineage. The lineage in the case of the Kallar subcaste is known as *Kuttam* (Dumont 1986: 184). All individuals in the lineage are forbidden to marry persons of the lineage.

**Check Your Progress 3**

i)      What are the three preferential marriage rules in South India? Use four lines for your answer.

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ii)     Is it possible to have village exogamy in South India? Use three lines for your answer.

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## 9.2.4  Ceremonial Exchange of Gifts among Kin

The process of gift-giving and taking reflects the principles governing the separation/ assimilation of various categories of kin relationships. This is the reason why we look at this aspect of kinship behaviour. Gifts and counter-gifts in South India from certain persons to other persons or from certain groups to other groups can be distinguished in two categories.

i)      Gifts passing from the bride's family to the groom's family or the reverse can be seen as a series of exchanges between affines. This is one category of gift-exchange.

ii)     The other category of gift-giving and taking occurs within each of the two groups. We can call it internal exchange of gifts. It is sometimes possible for a person to make/receive gifts from both sides. Because of the positive rules of marriage between relatives, often certain individuals are placed in the positions of receivers and givers at the same time. In other words, there is a process of merging of relationships.

**Examples**

Let us take some examples of both categories from ethnographic studies made in South India.

## Examples of Category One

Louis Dumont (1986: 256) in his study of the Pramalai Kallar subcaste of Tamil Nadu mentions a gift of money from the bridegroom's father to the bride's father. It is known as *'parisam'*. The bride's father uses this money to get jewels for his daughter. But he is expected to spend twice the amount he receives. Thus, we may say that the bride's jewels are paid for half-in-half by the two families. This particular ceremony marks the beginning of the giving and taking of gifts between affines. If continues for a period of at least three years.

Then, the birth of the first child gives rise to another cycle of gift-exchange. In fact, among the Pramalai Kallar after three years of marriage or after birth of a child, when the newly weds set up an individual household, the bride's parents provide the household articles. This gift is called *'vere pona sir'*, literally meaning 'the gift for going apart'. So from *'parisam'* to 'the gift for going apart', we witness the series in which a gift is made and it is returned after 'doubling' its content. The series begins with a gift from the groom's side and ends with a gift from the bride's side. Thus, though there is a reciprocity of gifts between affines on both sides, it is quite clear that the bride's side ends up paying more. In other words, gifts from the groom's side are mere excuses for getting more gifts from the bride's side. Having seen the nature of gifts passing from the bride's family to the groom's family, now we also discuss the gifts given and taken within each group of affines.

## Examples of Category Two

At weddings, both in the bride's house and in the groom's house, respectively, a collection (usually in the form of cash) is taken from the relatives present at the occasion. This is called the *'moy'* among the non-Brahmin castes in South India. The same is practised by the Brahmins under the name of 'writing the *moy'*. A person is given the charge of recording the amount of cash/kind given by a particular person. In this gift-giving also, there is the principle of reciprocity. One gives *'moy'* to those who have already given or will give on similar occasions. Louis Dumont (1986: 256) tells us that among the Pramalai Kallar, the mother's brother is the first person to contribute to the *moy*. After the mother's brother other relatives make their contribution. Usually the money thus collected goes towards the expenses incurred for the marriage feast.

In the cycle of internal gifts, the role of the mother's brother is quite prominent. After a child is born to a family, the mother's brother gives gifts on various occasions in the child's life. Among the Pramalai Kallar (see Dumont 1986: 256) the mother's brother gives to his sister's son at birth a gift of land or money. In a way, we can say that the gifts given by mother's brother are a continuation of the series, which started at the mother's wedding. Then we called it an exchange of gifts between affines. Now, the mother's brother, an affine of ego's father, is merged in relation to the affines in ego's generation, among the common relatives of one group, either of the bride/or the groom. Secondly, the special place of the gifts made by the mother's brother points to the obligation the female side has to the male side. This is seen in the continuity maintained by the relatives on the mother's side in terms of gift-giving even to the next generation.

## Element of Reciprocity in Gift-giving

In conclusion, we may say that in the context of kinship behaviour at ceremonial exchanges of gifts in South India, the element of reciprocity is present, though the

bride-givers have to pay more gifts than they receive. In comparative terms, we may say that in North India, the gifts travel from the bride-givers to bride-takers in a unidirectional manner. As a result, the bride-givers, in turn, receive the enhanced prestige and status in their own community. In South India, the positive rule of marriage means that gifts are exchanged among close relatives. There is always the difference in the amount of gifts both sides exchange but their flow has to remain both-sided. It cannot be as unidirectional as it is in North India.

**Check Your Progress 4**

i)      Describe, in four lines, the two categories of gifts, given at marriage in South India.

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ii)     Are gifts at marriage, in South India, unidirectional? Use three lines for your answer.

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## 9.3    A COMPARISON OF NORTH AND SOUTH INDIAN KINSHIP SYSTEMS

In this section we shall first look at differences in the kinship system in North and South India. Then we will also discuss the elements of similarity between them.

### 9.3.1  Differences

We have already seen how in North India the kinship system is characterised by negative rules of marriage. The South Indian kinship system, on the other hand, is characterised by positive rules of marriage. In North India, a marriage alliance links one family with an entirely new family and in fact one village with another village. In South India, most marriage alliances occur within a small kin group and the emphasis is laid on relationships on both the father's and mother's sides. Further, there is almost no territorial exogamy. This results in co-activity among the affines. In North India co-activity takes place among only the lineage members. One's affines generally live in other villages and do not participate in one's day-to-day affairs. Thus, following the negative and positive marriage rules we encounter different types of kinship bonds in North and South India.

Following the composition of kinship groups the kinship terminology in North India reflects the separation of kin related by blood from those related by marriage. While in South India, the kinship terminology emphasises the symmetry of relationships between the affines. The South Indian or Dravidian terminology is structured on the principle classificatory kin relationships and divides a generation

into parallel and cross relatives This distinction is crucial in South India which is irrelevant for the purpose of marriage alliances in North India.

Secondly, marriage alliances in North India follow the principle of hypergamy. This means that the bride-givers are distinctly inferior to the bride-takers. In South India, preferable marriage is with one's matrilateral and sometimes patrilateral cross-cousin and sometimes intergeneration (between mb and zd). This situation makes it difficult to brand the bride-takers as superior to the bride-givers. Already related kin cannot be treated as lower or higher after a marriage. It is easier to treat bride-givers as lower in North India because marital alliances are mostly made between unrelated and relatively unknown family groups. With reference to the Dravidian or South Indian system, Dumont (1986: 299) considers that the principal marriage (usually a person's first marriage) links the persons of equal status. He calls it isogamy. i.e., the marriage between two equals. What we need to remember here is that the notion of hypergamy or the status of bride givers being lower than the status of bride-takers, also exists in South India but it is much less common because of the already existing relationships.

Thirdly, we can also look at the differences between the two systems in terms of status of women. In North India, a girl enters the family of total strangers when she gets married and leaves her natal home. Her behaviour in her father's house is quite different from how she is expected to behave in her father-in-law's house. In South India, from the woman's point of view, there is little difference between her family of birth and the family of marriage. She is not a stranger in her husband's house.

## 9.3.2 Similarities

We have discussed the kinship systems without talking much about the link between caste and kinship. This does not mean that their relationship is either weak or irrelevant. The fact is that in both North and South India, caste and kinship are inextricably intertwined. The all India system of hierarchy and social stratification permeates the kinship system as well. The notions of purity and pollution are found influencing the kinship systems in terms of protecting the purity of one's blood.

Another basic similarity is unilineality of the two kinship systems. In both North and South India, we find the application of one principle of descent either matrilineal or patrilineal. Irrespective of a society being either patrilineal or matrilineal, the kinship systems in both regions emphasise the role of affinity in social relationships and networks. This means that relationships established through marriages are important in both systems. The distinction between bride-givers and bride-takers is recognised in both North and South India. Undoubtedly, the degree of emphasis on affinity does highlight the essential difference between the two systems. Yet, Dumont (1961, 1964 and 1966) has tried to discover the underlying similarities between the kinship systems in North and South India. According to him, the very recognition of the distinction between bride-givers and bride-takers across North and South India shows the basic similarity in the kinship system.

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**Activity 1**

Read section 9.3, subsection 9.3.1 and 9.3.2 and list the differences and similarities between kinship system in North and South India. Then, work out differences in the position of women in both the regions and write a short note on this theme.

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## 9.4 KINSHIP ORGANISATION IN MATRILINEAL COMMUNITIES IN NORTH-EAST AND SOUTH-WEST INDIA

In section 9.2 of this unit, we said that both North and South India have variations in kinship systems. Having outlined broad patterns of kinship organisation in patrilineal societies we now give a brief account of the less common types of matrilineal descent system in India. These are in contrast to patrilineal descent system and provide us with examples of quite different patterns of kinship.

Matrilineal communities in India are confined to south-western and north-eastern regions only. In North India, the matrilineal social organisation is found among the Garo and Khasi tribes of Meghalaya and Assam. In South India, matriliny is found in Kerala, in parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep. Among the matrilineal groups of both the Hindus and the Muslims in these regions property is inherited by daughters from their mothers. Let us in brief discuss what a matrilineal system is. Then we will look at the patterns of kinship organisation in the above mentioned societies.

### 9.4.1 Matrilineal Descent System

In a matrilineal descent system, the children trace relationship through mother. A matrilineal descent system should not be confused with matriarchal system. In matriarchy, women also hold power. In matriliny, though descent is traced through women, power does not normally lie in their hands. Social control and power of decision-making regarding land and other property is held by men. Thus, we can clearly say that in matrilineal system women perpetuate the line of descent and children follow the social status of their mother. Through the mother they acquire a right in property. Correspondingly, we also notice that here, the birth of a male child is not a special occasion.

Matrilineal descent is linked with those economic systems which recognise women's independence and their right to organise their living arrangements themselves. In these systems, men do help in some economic activities, like hunting, fighting and trading. In some cases, large-scale changes in the economic system do not reflect corresponding changes in the traditional social organisation. Often even the change in religion has not much affected the patterns of kinship and marriage. Yet, we cannot say that the factors such as market economy, access to education, legal changes, diversification of occupational structure, have brought no changes in matrilineal communities. These have definitely affected patterns of residence after marriage, rules of succession and structure of authority in the family. Now we first discuss the pattern of kinship organisation among the matrilineal communities of north-east India.

### 9.4.2 Matrilineal Groups in North-east India

The matriliny is represented, in the north-east, mainly by the Garo and the Khasi in the states of Meghalaya and Assam. We will now discuss in brief the broad features of the kinship organisation in each of these two groups.

i) **The Garo**

Among the Garo tribals who are found mainly in the state of Meghalaya, a matrilineage is represented by the households of daughters. These households come

out of the original household (consisting of a woman, her daughter and her son-in-law) which is continued by retaining one daughter within its fold. The husband *(nokma)* of this daughter inherits the rights and duties of the head and manager of the household *(nok)*, while the daughter inherits the property. Unmarried daughters and sons live with their mother, while married daughters, except the one living in the original household, set up households near their mother's house. The married sons leave their mother's house to join their wives.

A matrilineage is understood by the term *machong,* which refers to an extended group of kin, living in a locality. All members of a matrilineage or *machong* trace descent from a common mother. The children take the name of their mother's clan. In the matter of tracing descent and passing on property, mother is the pivot around which the Garo society revolves. But decision-making regarding land and other property and management of the affairs of the household (nok), lie with men. As authority is exercised within the framework of a lineage, some men of the lineage have to remain in the village within its fold, while others may go and live in the families of their spouses. Thus, a Garo village generally includes most women of the core lineage (or lineages) together with their husbands and off spring. In addition, it has also some men who belong to these core lineage (or lineages).

In this way we can clearly see that a cooperating group in a Garo village comprises a unilineally related core. So kinship relationships begin with those in the immediate family and extend to the cooperating group *(nok)* and lineage *(machong)*. Further they extend to the village and village cluster. The Garo are divided into two phratries *(katchi)*. A phratry is a kinship unit of the tribe. The two kinship units among the Garo are named the *Marak* and the *Sangma,* respectively. There are no inter-marriages between the two phratries. The dual social organisation of the Garo gives them the ever-widening circles of kin relatives within each phratry.

Kinship groups are involved in the process of settling disputes. Mostly members of a matrilineally defined kindred take action in these matters. The institutionalised role of the headman *(nokma)* is the basis of the organisation of local village groups.

After marriage the pattern of residence is matrilocal. This means that after marriage the son-in-law lives in his wife's parents' house. He becomes the *nokrom* of his father-in-law. After the death of the father-in-law, a *nokrom* marries his wife's mother and becomes the husband of both the mother and the daughter. According to Burling (1963) a man's marriage with his mother-in-law is only an economic arrangement to enable the son-in-law to succeed his father-in-law as the head of the *nok*. The Garo have the custom of avoidance between a mother-in-law and her son-in-law during her husband's life-time. That is why the marriage between the two after the father-in-law's death, is seen only as an economic arrangement by Burling (1963). If a woman becomes a widow before there comes a *nokrom* or a son-in-law in the family, she cannot remarry without the permission of the family of her deceased husband. However, children from such a union belong to the lineage of the mother.

Property owned by a matrilineage *(machong)* cannot pass out of it. It goes from mother to daughter. In a family of more than one daughter the mother selects her heiress (the *nokna*). At the present time, other daughters in the family also get a small portion of the parental property at their marriage. These daughters usually set up their own family units. In a matrilineage a son cannot inherit property. A man as a husband can however make full use of his wife's property during her life-time.

As mentioned before, some male members of the lineage remain in the village. These people manage the day-to-day affairs of their sisters' families. This is known as the *nokpan* system in which the mother's brother or the maternal uncle has a very important place. He has a strong hold over his sister's children and acts as their father.

Chie Nakane (1968) has shown that the Garo have two lines (i) the line of ownership of property and (ii) the line of authority and management of property. She says that the functions of both the lines are equally strong. The first line is taken care of through the wife while the second line is managed through the husband. Thus, the co-residential core among the Garo is that of husband and wife.

The rules of matrilateral cross-cousin marriage (a man's marriage with his mother's brother's daughter) and mother-in-law marriage (a man's marriage with his mother-in-law) are the two mechanisms to end the problems which arise out of the contradiction between the above mentioned two lines. Secondly, among the Garo, divorce is a rarity. However, incidence of adultery does lead to divorce. So also does the refusal of work.

ii) **The Khasi**

The Khasi are a matrilineal tribe, which lives in the hills of Meghalaya. These tribals are matrilineal in descent. This means they trace their descent through the mother. Inheritance and succession are also through the mother. Residence after marriage is matrilocal. This means that a man after his marriage lives with his wife's parents. The Khasi have exogamous clans, that is, two persons belonging to one clan cannot marry each other.

They have a classificatory kinship terminology. This means that they address their lineal relatives (father, son etc.) by terms, which are also applied to certain collateral relatives. For example, the same term is applied to the father and to the father's brother. In other words, the terms for siblings are also applied to parallel cousins.

The Khasi rules of marriage allow the matrilateral cross-cousin marriage. But levirate (marriage of a widow with her husband's brother) or sororate (marriage of a widower with his wife's sister) marriages are not allowed. They do not also practice hypergamy, i.e. woman's marriage into a group higher in status than her own group. Polygyny (a man's marriage to more than one spouse at a time) as well as polyandry (a woman's marriage to more than one spouse, at a time) are unknown among the Khasi. A man may have a mistress. Among some sections of the Khasi, children from his mistress equally share inheritance rights to the father's property, if any is acquired by him, with other children in the family.

The Khasi follow the rule of **ultimogeniture.** This refers to the system of inheritance by which the youngest daughter in the matrilineal societies (son in patrilineal societies) succeeds to the property. Thus, among the Khasi, the youngest daughter is the heiress. She, her husband and children live with her mother and father. She performs the family ceremonies and propitiates the family ancestors. The youngest daughter gets the main share of the property and other daughters are entitled to a share of their mother's property on her death only. The other daughters normally move out after their marriage and birth of first or second child. They live **neolocally** in nuclear family households with their husbands and children.

The status of the man who marries the youngest daughter is quite different from that of the men who marry other daughters. The husband of the youngest daughter is the head of the household in which his wife and her parents live. The men marrying other daughters are, on the other hand, the masters of the houses they build and manage. Among the Khasi, the ideal type of co-residence after marriage comprises a woman with either her husband or her brother.

The function of the line of ownership of property, i.e., the line of the mother is stronger than that of the line, which manages the property, i.e., the line of the father.

The Khasi say that all members of a clan descend from a woman ancestor. They are called 'one clan'. The 'one clan' is divided into sub-clans, which originate from those who descend from one great grandmother. The next division is the family, which comprises the grandmother, her daughters, and the daughters' children, living under one roof. The male child is generally lost to the family he marries into. As a husband, the man is looked upon as a begetter. All property acquired by a man before marriage belongs to his mother. After marriage the property acquired by a man goes to his wife. The wife and children inherit such property. The youngest daughter receives the major share upon the death of a man's wife. If there is no daughter, only then the acquired property of a man is equally divided among the sons.

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**Activity 2**

Read Section 9.4, subsections 9.4.1 and 9.4.2 and list main features of matrilineal system among the Garo and the Khasi tribals of Meghalaya.

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## 9.4.3 Matrilineal Groups in South-west India

The state of Kerala in the south-western region of India has been the main seat of matrilineal communities. Here we will discuss in brief the case of the Nayar community. We will also look at the features of the matrilineal Muslim community in the Union Territory of Lakshadweep.

The Nayar of Kerala present a unique type of matrilineal society and the Lakshadweep Muslims present a rare example of the absence of the social unit of husband, wife and children. Let us look at the two cases.

i) **The Nayar example**

The kinship institutions of the Nayar have been described and analysed by many anthropologists and sociologists, e.g., by F. Fawcett (1915), K.M. Panikkar (1918), L.K.A. lyer (1909-12, 1932), Aiyappan (1932, 1934), K. Gough (1952).

It was K. Gough (1952) who first pointed out that the Nayar are a named category of castes and they have three different systems of kinship. These systems operate in North Kerala, in Central Kerala and in Southern areas around Travancore. These are three cultural divisions of the state of Kerala. In a book (*Matrilineal kinship* (1962), edited by Schneider and Gough) Gough has looked at the kinship systems of the **retainer** Nayar castes (one of the three ranked groups among the Nayar of Central Kerala) and of the Nayar of North Kerala.

The Nayar of Central Kerala follow the practice of visiting husbands. Thus, they do not have the institution of the elementary family in which husband, wife and

children live together under one roof. Gough focused on the practice of matriliny among the Nayar before the arrival of the British in India. As far as its traditional practices of matriliny are concerned, the Nayar community has presently changed a great deal.

In the traditional system, the Nayar had three ranked groups, namely, (i) the Nayar royal lineages, (ii) the lineages of Nayar chieftains, lineages of village headmen and (iii) the retainer Nayar castes. In this system the Nayar women were allowed to marry the Nambudiri Brahmins of South-west Kerala. They could also marry in some other higher castes of the Nayar group/s and of course, in their own groups. This clearly shows that the Nayar practised hypergamy, i.e., married their women in the groups, which had social status higher than their own group. This provided an example of inter-caste hypergamy between the Nayar women and Nambudiri Brahmins of South-west Kerala.

Among the Nayar, the term *taravad* was applied for the clan, and the lineage. It also referred to the property group. Members of a *taravad* or a lineage were involved in activities of cooperation at the pre-puberty and marriage rites of girls and at the funeral of a member of the *taravad*. The lineages were linked through hereditary ties of mutual cooperation at these ceremonies. Gough (1962) shows that the linked lineages had special roles to play. These roles outline the kinship organisation of the matrilineal units of the retainer Nayar castes.

In terms of the management of land and other property, the matrilineage was not the important unit. Instead we find that property groups were the main legal units. These operated within the local caste group. The oldest male member, known as *karanavan*, was responsible for the economic activities of the property group *(taravad)*.

Gough has described the interpersonal kin relationships within the matrilineal group and has shown the closeness between mother and son. There was, on the other hand, the relationship of avoidance and constraint between a man and his sister's son. A man was to avoid his sister's daughter and behave formally towards his younger sister. These are some of the significant features of kinship among the Nayar. In a *taravad* a male observed the incest prohibitions between himself and the junior women. These prohibitions helped in maintaining the solidarity of the descent group. Within the matrilineage sex relations were not allowed. So also they were forbidden within a certain range of affines and with men of lower castes.

The emphasis being on the solidarity of the lineage group, marriage was the weakest institution among the Nayar. For example, Gough has shown that among the retainer Nayar castes, a woman had a number of husbands at a time. She was also visited by men of appropriate groups. The same was true for a Nayar man who visited a number of women of appropriate groups. In this situation, 'marriage', or better referred as *sambandham* (the term used by the Nayar communities) involved very few obligations. There was no ceremony at any point to mark the event. The procedure to legitimise the birth of children was quite simple. A legally obligatory payment to the midwife attending the delivery and gift of cloth to the mother were made by some man/men of appropriate rank, having *sambandham* ('marriage') relationship with her. This was all that legitimised children. As a mark of married status a woman wore *tali* or the marriage badge throughout her life. The woman and her children observed pollution at the death of her ritual husband. They did nothing when any particular visiting husband died. Here we have mentioned

the term 'ritual husband'. Let us see what it refers to in the context of the Nayar marriage.

J.P. Mencher and H. Goldberg (1967) have described the unusual kinship and marriage system found among the patrilineal Nambudiri Brahmin of the south-west Kerala. This group is shown to have a complementary system and to survive with the help of the Nayar group only. Let us see how it worked.

Land owned by a Nambudiri patrilineage was indivisible and it was managed by the eldest male in the patrilineage. Among the Nambudiri Brahmin, only the first son could marry within the caste and could have up to three wives at a time. In other words, he was allowed to practice polygyny. The remaining sons of the group had *sambandham* (marriage) relationships with Nayar women. Such a Nambudiri Brahmin, who forms *sambandham* with a Nayar woman, is called her 'ritual husband'. The children from these unions always belonged to the lineage of Nayar women only. In this way the Nambudiri men could check their children by Nayar women from claiming a share in their lineage property. Here we find that both the Nambudiri patrilineal group and the Nayar matrilineal group insist on maintaining their autonomy. Further, kinship relationships within respective lineages remain strong. The result is that affinal relationships arising out of *sambandham* alliances are quite weak. The strong descent ties and weak affinal links in this case are related to the kind of private ownership of land in Kerala. We shall not go into the details of this aspect. Rather we will now look at kinship terminology and changes brought in kinship system among the Nayar. Gough has shown the nature of father-child relationship among the Nayar. The Nayar kinship terminology has no term to specify father. A person in the Nayar *taravad* had no obligations towards the patrilineal kin. Thus, the terminology clearly emphasised the matriliny.

On the basis of recent changes in the practice of matrilineal kinship organisation among the Nayars, it is said that the Nayars of Central Kerala are increasingly accepting the idea of elementary family. K.R. Unni (1956) has studied the changes in the pattern of residence among the Nayar of Central Kerala. He has concluded that these Nayars were changing from a matrilineal to bilateral kinship system. This means that they have begun to emphasise the relationships on the sides of both the mother and the father.

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**Activity 3**

Draw a map of the state of Kerala. Show the three cultural divisions of the state, in terms of the operation of matriliny among the Nayar. State which of the three divisions had three ranked groups.

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ii)    **Matrilineal Muslims of Lakshadweep**

Now we shift to a discussion of the matrilineal Muslim community of Lakshadweep. These matrilineal Muslims are descendants of Hindu immigrants from Kerala. Later, they were converted to Islam. They follow duolocal residence. Duolocal residence implies that the husband and the wife reside separately. In this context it means that the husband visits his wife's home at night. The common unit of matriliny on the island is the *taravad*. A *taravad* here is a group of both the males and the females with common ancestress in the female line. Name of a *taravad* is used by its members as prefix to their own names. By the fact of taking birth in a *taravad* each person gets the right to share the *taravad* property. This right passes through

the female members. A male member has the same right of using the property of his *taravad.* The *taravad* is an exogamous unit, i.e., a member cannot marry another member of the same *taravad.* The *taravad* may comprise one domestic group or a number of domestic groups.

In this community, the father has a special role, which is associated with these people's conversion to Islam. He has to substantially spend money on ceremonies linked with his children's life cycle rituals. Leela Dube (1969) has shown how the influence of Islam has affected the patterns of kinship and marriage in this community. The Islamic practices of a patrilineal social structure have affected the form of kinship relationships, operating in a matrilineal framework. Regarding the inheritance of property on the island, Leela Dube (1969) has shown that marriage is quite fragile on the island. It incorporates few rights and responsibilities. People manipulate the inheritance of property on the basis of both the matrilineal and Islamic (patrilineal) principles. Islam provides procedure for easy divorce and islanders use it frequently. The institution of *taravad* as a unit of production and consumption, however, remains basically matrilineal.

These accounts of matrilineal communities give us a picture of contrast from the commonly found patterns of patriliny in India. In the limited scope of two units (Units 8 and 9) we have attempted to look at both the most common pattern of patrilineal kinship systems and the less-common systems of matrilineal kinship organisations in some parts of India.

**Cheek Your Progress 5**

i)   Fill in the blanks

   a)   Matrilineal Muslim community of Lakshadweep comprises descendants of ............................................................. from Kerala.

   b)   The common unit of matriliny in Lakshadweep is ..............................

ii)   Can a male and a female member of a *taravad,* in Lakshadweep marry each other? Use three lines for your answer.

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## 9.5   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed the main features of patrilineal kinship system in South India. This was done in terms of kinship groups, kinship terminology, marriage rules and ceremonial exchange of gifts among the kin. Then we noted how kinship systems in the two regions compare in terms of similarities and differences. Finally we also gave an account of matrilineal kinship system in North-east and South-west India.

## 9.6 KEY WORDS

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|---|---|
| **Neolocal** | This term refers to residence after marriage. In this type of residence, the husband and the wife set up an independent household. |
| **Patrilocal** | In this type of residence after marriage, the married couple lives with the husband's father's family. |
| **Retainer** | This term is used to refer to a person or a group of persons, attached or owing service to a household. In the context of the Nayar castes, it refers to those Nayar who were attached to Nayar chiefs. |
| **Ultimogeniture** | This term refers to a system of inheritance by which the youngest son/daughter succeeds to the estate in a patrilineal/matrilineal society, respectively. |

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## 9.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check Your Progress 1**

i)   In South India, we find two types of kinship groups, namely the patrilineages and the affinal relatives.

ii)  In terms of South Indian kinship terminology, an affine of my affine is my classificatory *pangali.*

**Check Your Progress 2**

i)   Parallel cousins are the children of the siblings of same sex. Cross-cousins are the children of the siblings of opposite sex.

ii) In South Indian patrilineal societies, all relatives in one's own generation are divided into two categories, namely, the *pangali* and *mama-machchinan*.

iii) To refer to one's grandfather on both the mother's side and father's side, in Tamil, there is only one term, *i.e., tata.* This is an example of merging of sex distinction existing between the parents of one's parents.

**Check Your Progress 3**

i) The three preferential rules of marriage in South India are

a) a man should marry his elder sister's daughter.

b) a man should marry his father's sister's daughter.

c) a man should marry his mother's brother's daughter.

ii) It is not usual to find village exogamy in South India. This is so because in South India, rules of marriage allow marital alliances within close kin groups.

**Cheek Your Progress 4**

i) The two categories of gifts given at weddings in South India comprise (a) those gifts which are given by the bride-givers to the bride-takers and vice-versa; and (b) those gifts which are given to the bride/bridegroom by the paternal and maternal and other relatives of the bride/bridegroom.

ii) By and large, gifts given at weddings in South India are not unidirectional. There is an element of reciprocity in them, that is both the bride's side as well as the bridegroom's side exchange gifts.

**Check Your Progress 5**

i) a) Hindu immigrants

b) *taravad*

ii) No, the *taravad* in Lakshadweep is an exogamous unit and therefore a member is not allowed to marry another member of the same *taravad.*

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