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## UNIT 7 KINSHIP

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### 7.0 OBJECTIVES

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After you have read this unit you should be able to describe:

- the significance of kinship;
- the basic concepts of kinship;
- the principles of descent;
- the types of descent; and
- kinship system in India.

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### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit we will be giving you the basic aspects of kinship. We explain the significance of kinship in social life. We then define the basic concepts of kinship. These include the concepts of descent, inheritance, residence rules and so on. Next we take up descent systems, including the patrilineal and the matrilineal systems. Finally, we deal with kinship modes in India. This unit provides a broad idea about the concept of kinship.

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### 7.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF KINSHIP

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The kinship system refers to a set of persons recognised as relatives, either by virtue of a blood relationship technically called consanguinity, or by virtue of a marriage relationship, that is through what is called affinity.

Most of us tend to regard the kinship system into which we are born and in which we are reared as natural. It will seem natural and right to us that certain close relatives should be tabooed as marriage and sexual partners, and we feel quite certain that disastrous consequences would follow any infringement of the taboos. We may similarly think it natural that certain classes of persons be preferred as marriage partners, or we may on the contrary think it very unnatural that any persons be so designated.

We all have very strong ideas, too, about what is the correct and proper behaviour of different kin towards each other—deference, respect, familiarity, avoidance, kindliness, protectiveness, and so on, as the case may be. All such aspects of kinship relations tend to be taken for granted unless, or until, one is confronted with the kinship practices of other peoples. Initially, different practices may appear as disgusting or inhuman, exotic or fantastic, strange or primitive, etc. Earlier anthropologists spent a great deal of labour on trying to work out the various stages through which they believed kinship systems had progressed in the course of human history. However strange other peoples' kinship practices may at first appear to be, a closer look will usually show them to be functional. They are useful for the maintenance of the society as a whole, contributing to its continuity over time and containing the conflicts that might potentially disrupt it.

This is not to say that all practices are for the best for all members of the society and for all time. One certainly need not justify customs like sati, female infanticide, child marriage, amniocentesis or killing of the female foetus etc. One would here try to understand how these practices are (or were) consistent with the principles and values at work in the wider society.

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## 7.3 BASIC CONCEPTS OF KINSHIP

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We have already made the general point that kinship relations are the outcome of the cultural interpretation of relations given in nature, and discussed some of the different ways in which sociologists have looked at the kinship system. In doing so, we have indirectly introduced some of the basic terms and concepts in kinship studies, which we will now set out more systematically. You certainly do not need to memorise this rather overwhelming set of technical terms, but you should try to understand the basic principles and distinctions that these key terms seek to convey.

### 7.3.1 The Principles of Descent

Descent is the principle whereby a child is socially affiliated with the group of his or her parents. In some societies the child is regarded as a descendant equally of both the father and the mother, except that titles and surnames are usually passed down along the male line. Such a system is termed Bilateral or Cognatic. The individual belongs simultaneously to several descent groups - those of the two parents, the four grandparents, the eight great-grandparents, and so on. This link is limited only by memory or by some conventionally determined cut-off point at, say, four or five degrees removal. In small intermarrying communities, membership will probably overlap, and in case of dispute or feud, the individual might find his or her loyalties divided. There are some cognatic systems where the individual has the right by descent to membership of several cognatically recruited groups, but this right is actualised only if the person is able to reside in a particular group's territory. Modern nationality laws often make this type of requirement.

### 7.3.2 Types of Descent

In other societies, by contrast and your own is most probably one of them—descent is reckoned UNILINEALLY, that is, in one line only. The child is affiliated **either** with the group of the father, that is, PATRILINEAL DESCENT, or with the group of the mother, that is, MATRILINEAL DESCENT. Theories of the physiology of procreation

and conception often correlate with these different modes of reckoning descent. In the former, the father is often given the primary role in procreation while the mother is regarded as merely the carrier of the child; in systems of the latter type the father's role may not be acknowledged at all.

Additionally, in some societies one finds that the child is affiliated to the group of either parent, depending on choice, or to one parent for some purposes (for instance, inheritance of property) and to the other parent for other purposes (for instance, the inheritance of ritual or ceremonial roles). This is called **DOUBLE UNILINEAL DESCENT**.

The principle of unilineal descent provides the individual an unambiguous identification with a bounded social group that exists before he or she is born and that has continuity after he or she dies. Members of a descent group have a sense of shared identity, often referring to each other as 'brother' and 'sister' even when no genealogical relationship can be traced. Descent groups are also very often, (though not inevitably), characterised by exogamy. That is, marriage must be with persons outside this group. For instance, traditional Chinese society was divided among approximately a hundred 'surname' groups—you could perhaps call them **CLANS**-within which marriage was disallowed, and these groups further divided into **LINEAGES**, whose members claimed to be able to trace their descent, perhaps for several hundred year, from a founding ancestor, and then into further localised **SUBLINEAGES** and so on down to the individual co-resident families. Sometimes a whole village might be settled by members of a single lineage. The gotras of Indian caste society are also exogamous descent groups, segmented in rather the same way.

#### Activity 1

Interview or discuss with some members of your family and prepare a chart indicating five generations of your family on your fathers' side or mothers' side whichever is relevant to you. Write a note of one page on "The kinship structure of My Family". Discuss your note with other students and Academic Counsellor at your study centre.

### 7.3.3 Functions of Descent Groups

Apart from the function of exogamy, unilineal descent groups tend to be 'corporate' in several other senses. Their members may often come together for ritual and ceremonial functions, for instance, for collective worship of lineage gods, totems or ancestors. The descent group will have a built-in authority structure, with power normally exercised by senior males, and it may well own corporate property. An individual's economic rights and responsibilities will be defined by his or her position in the descent group. In many societies unilineal descent groups are also jural units, internally deciding their own disputes, and externally acting as a unified group in the conduct of feud, etc. For this reason, lineage structure is often coterminous with the political structure in societies lacking a centralised state structure.

Lineages cannot expand indefinitely in a single locality and often segment into smaller, more manageable and economically viable lineage segments. You can see the lines of segmentation of the ground, as it were. Consider the pattern of land ownership in an Indian village; or at the pattern of village or urban settlement; a particular quarter of the village or town may be inhabited by the descendants of a single founding ancestor. Often, the large **havelis** divide among brothers or step-brothers, and these quarters are further divided among their descendants. In case a line dies out, the property would be reconsolidated.

Given the range of social functions that descent groups may potentially perform, it is little wonder that concern with the principles of unilineal descent has dominated the work of many students of comparative kinship. However, even these scholars realise that unilineal descent is not the whole story. In ancient Rome, women after marriage severed all contact with their natal group. In certain slave societies, the slave has no 'family' of his or her own. In patrilineal systems, the mother's father, mother's sister, and especially the mother's brother, are important relationships which need further discussion. To take note of the importance of relationships, the scholars have identified another principle. This has been termed the principle of **COMPLEMENTARY FILIATION** which explains the significant ritual and social roles of the mother's brother(s) in the lives of their sister's children. It reminds us that, in most societies, an individual is a child of both parents, however descent is formally reckoned.

### 7.3.4 Inheritance Rules

Rules of inheritance tend to co-ordinate with the reckoning of descent in most societies, but not necessarily in a one-to-one manner. In fact, it is quite often the case that certain types of property pass from father to son, and other types from mother to daughter. In most parts of India, in the past, immovable property such as land and housing, was inherited only by sons. In the absence of sons, except under rare circumstances, by the nearest male relatives on the father's side. On the other hand, movable property in the form of cash and jewellery was given to the daughter at the time of her marriage, with a certain amount of jewellery also passing from the mother-in-law to the daughter-in-law.

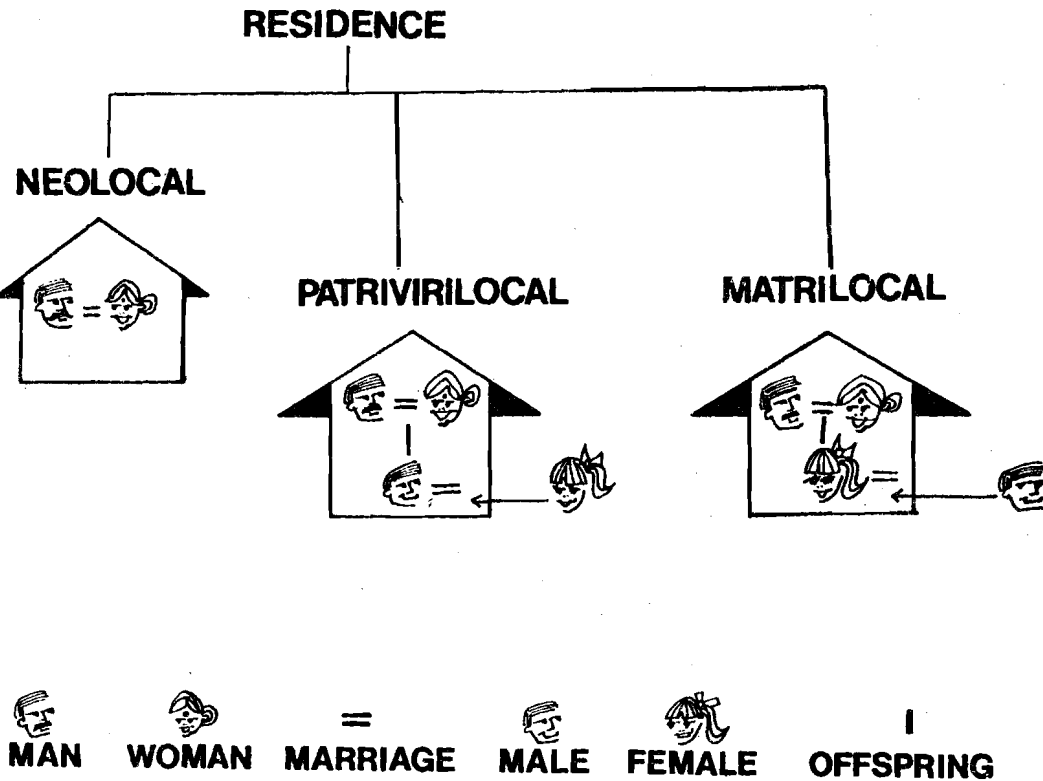
In addition to property of various kinds, rights and obligations, esoteric knowledge, crafts and skills, etc., might be passed on in accordance with kinship roles, succession to office to chieftainship, kingship, etc.-and to other social roles and statuses, is also very often determined by kinship criteria. In such cases, the individual's status is said to be 'ascribed', not 'achieved'. It is commonly asserted that ascriptive status of modern, industrial societies. There is a great deal of truth in this statement, but one should not underestimate the importance of kinship connections in modern societies too. Often one finds that in a family if father is a doctor or lawyer the son or daughter is also likely to choose the same occupation. Most of the Indian women who have been successful in the political domain are either daughters, sisters or wives of people who have been active in politics. One such example is the Nehru family of India.

### 7.3.5 Rules of Residence

Rules of residence, meaning residence after marriage, are an important variable in a kinship system, and substantially affect the quality of personal relations within the kin network. If husband and wife set up their own independent home after marriage, as is usually the case in modern western society, residence is said to be **NEOLocal**. Where the wife goes to live with the husband in his parents' home, residence is described as **VIRILocal**, **PATRILOCAL**, or **PATRIVIRILocal**, and where the husband moves to live with the wife, it is termed **MATRILOCAL** or Rules of residence may or may not 'harmonise' with the rules of descent. On the whole, patrilineal descent systems correlate with either neolocal or patrivirilocal residence patterns. However, matrilineal descent systems may be combined with all three types of residence. It is also combined with what is called **AVUNCULocal** residence, that is, residence with the mother's brother.

**ILLUSTRATION :** 1 different types of Residence

(i) Neolocal (ii) Patrivirilocal (iii) Matrilocal



Legend:

### 7.3.6 Patriarchy and Matriarchy

A society is said to have a patriarchal structure when a number of factors coincide, i.e. when descent is reckoned patrilineally, when inheritance of major property is from father to son, when residence is patrilocal, and when authority is concentrated in the hands of senior males. There is, however, no society on earth, nor any society actually known to have existed, whose features are the exact reverse of these. For even in matrilineal, matrilocal systems, which are fairly rare, major property is usually controlled by males. And authority is normally exercised by males, though women may well have a higher status in the family and greater powers of decision-making than in the patriarchal set up. Some anthropologists assert that in societies with very simple technology and minimal property, relations between the sexes are relatively egalitarian, whether descent is formally matrilineal, patrilineal or bilateral, but others insist that women, and children, have played subordinate roles in all human societies.

For this reason, the term 'matriarchy', though often found in the literature, is probably a misnomer, best avoided, and there is certainly no conclusive evidence to support the view that matriarchy was a universal early stage in the development of kinship systems.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- Note:**
- i) Use space below for your answers.
  - ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1) What is the principle of descent? Explain in one line.

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- 2) Explain the types of descent. Use about three lines for your answer.

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## 7.4 DESCENT SYSTEMS-FURTHER DETAILS

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The patrilineal descent systems of India have many of the features noted in similar groups elsewhere. A boy at birth becomes a member of his descent group, and a coparcener (partner) in a joint estate. A girl, by contrast, is only a residual member of her natal group: at marriage she is incorporated into her husband's descent group and ultimately (i.e. after her death) offered worship by their male descendants. Residence, as we have already noted, is usually partilocal.

The descent group may participate in joint rituals such as the worship of certain deities and ancestor worship, and will observe mourning restrictions, in various degrees, following a death in the family. It may also own a certain amount of common property. Immovable property such as land and housing is inherited in the male line only (of course, we are speaking here of the traditional system, before the several changes sought to be brought about by post-independence legislation). Whereas daughters are given goods, cash and jewellery as 'dowry' at the time of marriage. The descent group has an in built authority structure based on generation and age. Senior members have the authority to settle disputes within the kin group, and to represent the group in its dealing with outsiders.

### 7.4.1 Patrilineal Descent

Taken together, the above mentioned features approach the 'patriarchal' model of society. This has patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, inheritance from father to son, and authority in the hands of seniors as against juniors, and males as against females. A number of social practices testify to the fact that a woman's only legitimate roles are those of wife and mother. Spinsterhood and widowhood are inauspicious and unenviable conditions. A girl is regarded as merely a guest in her natal home and, initially at least, as a rather threatening outsider in her marital home. The poignancy of the transition between these two locales and these two statuses is captured in folklore and folksongs with which you are probably familiar.

The patrilineal systems of the south are not so markedly patriarchal as those of the north. Also a woman after marriage continues to have materially and psychologically important relations with members of her natal group. This is more so with her parents and her brothers, and the residual right to maintenance in their estate in adverse circumstances. And in many other partilineal systems, the mother's brothers have significant ritual and social roles in the lives of their sister's children, and an especially tender and affectionate relationship with them.

Further modifying the starkly 'patriarchal' picture a number of social anthropologists, speaking comparatively, have also drawn attention to the fairly substantial property that devolves on a daughter at her marriage. Others, however, insist that this property cannot be considered as a daughter's 'inheritance', comparable to that of the son, since the greater portion of it is neither owned nor controlled by the girl in her own right. It is really a form of 'bridegroom price', that is, an enticement to the groom's family as part of the settlement of the marriage contract. However, equal rights of inheritance by both son and daughter in one's father's or mother's self made property is recognised and some states have even introduced it in their legislation,

### 7.4.2 Matrilineal Descent

Matrilineal descent systems, of which there are several well-known examples in south-western and north-eastern India, have their own distinctive characteristics. Empirically you never find matrilineal systems that are an exact inverse of the patrilineal-patriarchal model which we have already described and which is fairly well approximated by the patrilineal descent systems of north and south (but especially north) India. The reason is quite simple: whatever the descent system, that is, matrilineal, patrilineal or indeed bilateral, authority is usually exercised by males, only in extremely simple societies one comes across a fair degree of mutual inter-dependence between males and females. Also, though rights in property might be determined by the principles of matrilineal descent (for instance, passing from mother to daughter or from mother's brother to sister's son rather than from father to son as in patrilineal societies), major property is usually controlled (if not actually owned) by males.

For obvious reasons, residence arrangements are problematic in matrilineal societies. A man may not have authority over his own children, who belong to his wife's descent group and who may also reside after maturity with their mother's brother. Conversely, in cases where the husband customarily resides with his wife and children, he may have difficulty managing the property in which he has an interest by virtue of descent, and in exercising authority over his sister's children. In other words, there seems to be some sort of contradiction in matrilineal kinship systems, brought out in the dilemma over residence, between a man's role as father and his role as mother's brother. His natural love for his own children might easily come into conflict with his special jural responsibilities towards his sister's children.

### 7.4.3 Nayars of Kerala: An Illustration

Among the matrilineal Nayars of Kerala, formerly, men resided in large and matrilineally recruited joint families, called **taravad**, along with their sisters, sister's children and sister's daughter's children. They visited their wives in other **taravads** at night (this is why the system has been popularly called the 'visiting husband' system). Their own children resided with their mother in their mother's **taravad**. In this system the bond between brother and sister was strongly emphasised, and the bond between husband and wife correspondingly de-emphasised, this is more so because Nayar women could legitimately have a number of visiting husbands (polyandry), provided they were of the correct status (i.e. higher status Nayars or Namboodiri Brahmans). Also, Nayar men could have a number of wives (polygyny). In fact, the marital bond was so minimised among the Nayars that anthropologists have debated endlessly whether Nayar society had the institution of marriage at all! Anthropologists have also cited that the Nayar system disproves the proposition that the elementary or nuclear family is a "universal" human institution. The details of these debates need not detain us here. Indeed, the unique institutions and customs described by the anthropologists no longer exist and have not existed for generations, but the Nayar case is a useful one for illustrating the types of tensions that seem to be coming into matrilineal systems. They had a rather unique way of coping with what anthropologists have called 'the matrilineal puzzle'. Effectively they ensured the unity of the matrilineal at the expense of the solidarity of the marital bond between husband and wife.

### 7.4.4 Other Matrilineal Communities

There are many other matrilineal communities in India whose kinship organisation is rather different to that of the Nayars. For instance, the Khasis of Assam are matrilineal in descent, inheritance and succession, and practise matrilocal residence. The youngest daughter is the heiress, and lives in her mother's house alone with her husband and her children. The older daughter however may move out of the matrilineal household on marriage and make new nuclear families; their husbands have greater independent

authority than does the husband of the youngest daughter still residing matrilocally. The Garo, also of Assam, have yet another arrangement. Marriage is matrilineal for the husband of the daughter who becomes the head of the household and its manager. A rule of preferential cross-cousin marriage ensures that a man is succeeded in this position by his sister's son in an ongoing alliance relationship between the two linked lineages.

Earlier anthropologists, working within an evolutionary framework, had maintained that the matrilineal descent systems are the surviving traces of an earlier matriarchal or 'mother-right' stage in the development of human kinship organisation, and that these would automatically give way to patriarchal and then bilateral models. There is no conclusive evidence that this has happened or is currently happening. At least in the Nayar case it appears that the decline of the Nayar **taravad** over the last century has given rise to a wide variety of residential patterns in the area, and it has become exactly like the patrilineal groups in their neighbourhood.

Sociologists and anthropologists continue to find matrilineal descent groups of special interest, not only because of the ramifications of the 'matrilineal puzzle', referred to above, but also because issues concerning the status of women or gender relations have come very much to the fore in recent years. It may be, as we have stated, that males have authority and exercise control over property in both patrilineal and matrilineal societies, but most scholars working on matrilineal societies, and the members of these societies themselves, feel that there is nonetheless a qualitative difference in the status of women in matrilineal, as against patrilineal, societies.

**Activity 2**

Think about emergency situation in your own family, such as, economic crises, death, birth etc. Try to recall the people from whom your sought help and how these people were linked with you. Write a report on "kinship in my Family/Community" and discuss it with other students at your study centre.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- Note:** i) Use space below for your answers.  
 ii) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.
- 1) Write a brief note on the patriarchal model of society. Use about three lines for your answer.  
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- 2) Explain matrilineal descent. Use about two lines for your answer.  
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**7.5 KINSHIP IN INDIA**

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From your general knowledge, what would you say are the distinctive features of kinship in the north and south of India? Almost everyone, spontaneously, thinks of the different rules of marriage, and of the kinship practices that derive from these. We will now briefly enumerate here the sort of contrasts that Iravati Karve, the famous sociologist, had described.



In the Southern Zone, you usually find a preference for marriage with certain categories of close kin, in particular with one or the other or both of the cross-cousins (but never parallel cousins), or even with the elder sister's daughter. On the whole, the inter-marrying groups are of comparable status. Though the actual marriage relationship might give rise to a temporary inferiority of wife-givers in relations to wife-takers. The marriage will probably involve groups which are geographically quite proximate—even from the same village—and the bride will already be familiar with her in-laws. You don't really expect a young bride to be badly treated by her mother-in-laws if that woman is also her aunt or her maternal grandmother!

In north India, by contrast, marriages are never between persons who are already closely related. A rule of village exogamy also ensures that brides are given to and taken from other villages or towns, often at a considerable distance. The bride therefore comes to her husband's family as a 'stranger'. She will always be suspected of trying to alienate her husband's affections, and will usually be blamed for the break up of the joint family, should a partition subsequently take place. The distinction between 'daughters' and 'brides' is very sharply emphasised in this system (think of the practice of veiling), and the new bride's position is relatively vulnerable, unless and until she becomes the mother of a son. In this region it is also often the case that marriages unite groups whose social status is already unequal, the wife-givers being of inferior status to the wife-takers (hypergamy), while the marriage transaction commonly (though again not invariably) takes the form of a 'dowry' payment. However legally taking dowry or giving it, both have become illegal offences punishable by the state. But, in reality it continues to affect a large category of people in India. Even other religions, such as, Muslims, Christians and SC/STs are getting influenced by it. All in all, we have in this combination of features the social-structural locale of also such practices as levirate marriage, sati, female infanticide and, lately, 'bride-burning' or dowry deaths.

#### Box 7.1

In 1980 the government of India began to take notice of the issue of dowry as oppression against women and took legal action against it. In December 1983 the Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act was passed. Section 498-A was added to the Indian Penal Code. Under this Act cruelty to a wife was made a cognisable non-bailable offence, punishable up to three years imprisonment, and a fine. Section 113-A of the Evidence Act was amended so that court could draw an inference of abetment to suicide (which most dowry deaths are claimed to be) under section 174 of the Criminal Procedure Code. (IGNOU: 2000, WED Programme, WED-01, pp. 34)

Other differences between the northern and southern systems noted by Iravati Karve (and others) relate to the rules of descent, inheritance and marriage. In brief, the northern zone is universally patrilineal, though patrilineal systems are also found among different communities in the southern or dravidian zone, along with a variety of residence patterns. We should add here that there are a number of important matrilineal groups (for instance the Khasis and the Garos) in north-eastern India (eastern zone) as well.

Of course, the division of the kinship may develop into major culture areas zones can give only a very crude idea of the salient variations in kinship practices throughout the subcontinent. A more precise picture emerges when one considers the sub-regional varieties corresponding to the different regional languages and dialects. In analysing these regional kinship systems, scholars pay attention not only to kinship terminologies and to the way the people concerned speak about kinship relations and about the moral obligations that stem from them, but also to the data of ritual practices, gift exchanges folklore and other forms of cultural communication.

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## 7.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we have provided information about kinship. We have shown quite clearly that kinship is significant to society. Moreover we have clearly indicated that the basic kinship concepts like descent, inheritance and residence are important in all societies. We also showed how patrilineal and matrilineal system are aspects of descent systems. Finally kinship in India was examined in this unit. This unit therefore provides adequate information about various aspects of kinship.

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## 7.7 FURTHER READINGS

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- 1) Faber, Bernard (ed.), 1966. *Kinship and Family Organisation*, Johan Wiley and Sons: New York.
- 2) Fox, Robin 1967, *Kinship and Marriage*. Penguin Books : New York.

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## 7.8 KEY WORDS

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<b>Consanguinity</b>	: The principle of recognising kinship by virtue of blood relationships.
<b>Affinity</b>	: The principle of recognising relationship through marriages.
<b>Descent</b>	: The system of deriving relationships from an ancestor.
<b>Bilateral or Cognatic</b>	: The system of descent in which a child is recognised as a descendant equally of both the father and the mother.
<b>Unilineal</b>	: The system of descent in which relationship with the ancestor is recognised in one line only, i.e. either of father or of mother.
<b>Double unilineal</b>	: The system of descent in which the child is affiliated to the group of either parent.
<b>Patrilineal</b>	: Implies that descent is traced from the father's side.
<b>Matrilineal</b>	: Where descent is traced from the mother's side.
<b>Patriarchal</b>	: Where the father is the main authority in the family.
<b>Complementary filiation</b>	: The principle which explains the significant ritual and social role of mother's brother in a patrilineal society.

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## 7.9 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Descent is the principle by which a person traces his/her ancestors.
- 2) The following is the list of the types of descent:
  - i) unilineal descent including (a) patrilineal descent (b) matrilineal descent.
  - ii) double-unilineal descent
  - iii) bilateral or cognatic descent.

## Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The patriarchal model of society combines (i) patrilineal descent; (ii) patrilocal residence; (iii) inheritance from father to son; (iv) authority in the hands of senior males.
- 2) In matrilineal descent, though, inheritance goes through the mother to daughter, major property is controlled by males and authority is also exercised by males.

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**REFERENCES**

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*References*, cited in Block II. (These and other works are given here for those students who wish to follow certain points in detail.)

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**Majumdar, D.N. and Madan, T.N., (ed.) 1986 edition.** *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*. National Publishing House: New Delhi. Chapters 4, 5 and 6, pp. 48-111.

**Murdoch, P.G., 1949.** *Social Structure*. Macmillan: New York. Chapters 6 and 7, pp. 91-183.