



A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF ELDERLY IN COIMBATORE DISTRICT

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Abstract:

In India, since time immemorial family and elder members are at the core of its social and economic fabric but due to disintegration of the joint family system have led to the rapid erosion of the basic respect and value for the elderly. As social support from family members of the current generation are lacking among old people majority of the Indian senior citizens are leading a life with full of misery and distress. In India though there are laws and policies for the protecting and promoting the life of the elderly to live a life with dignity. But the changing scenario does not promote the welfare of the aged persons and are left at distress. Therefore, this paper highlights the socio economic background of the elderly residing in rural and urban areas and analyse the changing trends towards the elderly.

Key Words: Ageing, Social Support, Health, Social Status

Introduction:

Ageing, is a worldwide inevitable biological process and a leading demographic issue in the new millennium in most countries of the world, especially the developed nations. Longevity, has increased significantly in the last few decades due to socio-economic and health care developments leading to higher dependency among the elderly.(1) Although, ageing is not a new phenomenon, but the problems associated with aging leads to social isolation and marginalization of the elderly. The United Nations estimates those aged 60 + plus at 600 million, i.e., 10 percent of the world population and this number is expected to go up to 2 billion by 2050 in which 75 percent of the global elderly will be in developing countries.

Ageing of its population will be one of the major challenges of the near future for developing countries like India. According, to Census of India 2001 which projects that Indian elderly are increasing at a fast pace from 6.9 percent in 2001 to 8.3 percent in 2011 and 10.7 percent in 2021. The special features of the elderly population in India is that majority 74.97 percent of older persons live in rural areas and 25.02 percent in urban areas. Gender based elderly population reveal that for the period 2006 - 2010, the life expectancy of female was 68.1 in comparison to 65.8 of males which is expected to rise to 72.3 for females as compared to 69.02 for males during the period 2011 - 2016. This accounts for a larger female population in the overall 60+ age group compared to the male population in the years to the come. (2)

Advancing age seems to bring meaningless misery mainly because the elderly have been neglected and by passed by modern society. Indian family which has been predominantly joint or extended remained stable despite marked and drastic social, political, economic and religious changes over the last decades. Older members enjoyed a sense of honour and authority and had the responsibility in decision making. However, in recent times as a result of changing circumstances and due to demographic transition, industrialization, urbanization, disintegration of joint family structure, increasing participation of families in non-agricultural labour force, the older people have become more vulnerable and socially isolated. In this changing social scenario it can no longer be assumed the older persons can live comfortably at home receiving care from family members.

In a competitive society where usefulness is measured by the economic yardstick, the aged are considered useless due to technological advancement and its accompanying social change. This trend clearly reveals that ageing poses a major challenge, as vast resources are required towards the support, care and treatment of older persons. As care for the elderly is a growing concern of every individual and society this paper aims to analyze the socio-economic status of the marginalized elderly in order to safeguard from social isolation and enhance their fundamental human rights.

Sampling and Data Collection:

In India caste being a major social stratification and among the various caste groups Kongu Vellala Gounder being one of the dominant cultural groups in Coimbatore engaged in agricultural and non-agricultural activities was purposively selected as the sample. Coimbatore city, headquarters of the Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu comprises the urban population and Sulur block of Coimbatore district comprising of six hamlets was purposively selected for rural population. As there was no systematic records of the aged 60+ the respondents were identified with the help of community heads, community voluntary organization and voters list. With the available list a census survey was adopted which was supplemented by snow ball technique in order to identify the elderly. Both elderly male and elderly female comprises the respondents and data's were

collected through interview schedule. Of the elderly identified 157 respondents in urban areas and 160 respondents in rural areas fulfilled the criteria and co-operated.

Socio-Economic Background of the Elderly:

Table 1 depicts the age of the respondents is fairly wide spread with nearly half of the respondents in the age group 60-69 years and one-third in the age groups of 70-79 years in both rural and urban areas. And the old-old 80+ comprises of 15.6 percent in rural and 17.8 percent in urban areas. Mean age is 70 years in case of both rural and urban respondents. The dependency ratio of the elderly in rural areas will be comparatively high as the national data's too projects that 62.5 million of the elderly live in rural areas.(3) Due to the changing life styles of modern society the younger generations are migrating not only from rural to urban areas rather from one country to another which makes the situation worsen.

Table 1: Age of the Respondents

Age of the respondent (in years)	Rural		Urban	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
60 – 69	78	48.8	78	49.2
70 – 79	57	35.6	51	32.5
80 +	25	15.6	28	17.8
Total	160	100.0	157	100.0
Mean	70.76		70.43	

Marital status among male respondents indicates that more than a three- fourth of rural and urban elderly are currently living with their spouses. Among the female respondents three-fourth of the urban and two-thirds of rural respondents are widows (Table 2). The incidence of widowhood is much greater among females than males owing to the increase in life expectancy and partly to taboos against remarriage among women.

Table 2: Gender and Marital Status of the Respondents

Gender and Marital Status	Rural		Urban	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Male				
Married	68	84.0	59	75.6
Widowed	13	16.0	19	24.4
Total	81	100.0	78	100.0
Female				
Married	20	25.3	29	36.7
Widow	59	74.7	50	63.3
Total	79	100.0	79	100.0

Literacy levels of both rural and urban elderly highlight that half of the respondents are illiterate and the remaining proportion has attained up to high school level (Table 3).As regards the employment status only half of the elderly are engaged in income generating works like agriculture and cattle rearing which did not have specific age for retirement and the remaining unemployed elderly are total dependents on their family (Table 4).

Table 3: Literacy Level of the Respondents

Level of Education	Rural		Urban	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Illiterate	82	51.3	75	47.8
Primary	53	33.1	44	28.0
Middle and High School	23	14.4	23	14.6
Higher Secondary and above	2	1.3	15	9.6
Total	160	100.0	157	100.0

Table 4: Present Employment Status

Sources	Rural		Urban	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Non-earning	76	47.5	131	83.4
Owner cultivators and Cattle rearers	77	47.5	16	10.2
Non-agricultural activities	7	4.4	10	6.4
Total	160	100.0	157	100.0

Health status highlights that most of the elderly are vulnerable to various diseases. Nearly half of both rural and urban elderly have reported to minor health problems and complications related to health issues were high among males than female respondents. Remaining half have reported that they were temporary ill and suffering from chronic diseases associated with old age (Table 5). The prevailing socio-economic conditions and deteriorating health status of the elderly is emerging as a major problem not only to family members but also to society that requires serious consideration before it becomes critical.

Table 5: Nature of health problems of the respondents

Health Conditions	Rural		Urban	
	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Nature of diseases				
No health problems	88	55.0	81	51.6
Old age related problems	37	23.1	18	11.5
Chronic diseases	35	21.9	58	36.9
Total	160	100.0	157	100.0

Legal Rights of the Elderly:

The Constitution of India recognizes the duty of the state through its Directive Principles to make effective provision for maintenance of senior citizens which is stated in Article 41 'the state shall, within the limits of economic capacity and development to make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in case of unemployment, old-age, sickness and disablement and in other cases of undeserved want.(4)

In Constitution of India, entry 24 in list III of schedule 7 deals with the welfare of labour including conditions of work, provident funds, employer's liability of workmen's compensation, invalidity and old-age pension and maternity benefits and in item no.9 of the state list and item no. 20, 23, 24 of the concurrent list relates to old-age pension, social security and social insurance and economic and social planning. (5)

The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, Sec. 20(3) gives a statutory recognition to the well established normal obligation of a Hindu child (male or female) to maintain his aged infirm parents, as long as they are not able to maintain themselves.

(6) and Section 2 (d) of Human Right's Act 1993 defines "human rights" as the rights relating to liberty, equality and dignity of the individual guaranteed by the Constitution or embodied in the International Covenants and enforceable by courts in India.(7). However, there is no specific laws in India to deal with this problem the government of India in 2007 introduced the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Bill, 2007 that seeks to make it a legal obligation for children and heirs to provide sufficient maintenance to senior citizens, and proposes to make provisions for state government to establish old-age homes in every district.(8)

Although, problems related to elder is manifested in various forms but varies from person to person depending on their socio-economic background and health condition irrespective of the existing legal provisions. Therefore, it becomes the need of the hour to safeguard the life's of such vulnerable elderly in order to protect and promote their rights.

Conclusion:

In Indian society family members still play an important role in providing economic and social security for elderly but advancing age brings meaningless misery for dependent elderly. The traditional family system is undergoing change along with the changing family structure and due to the growing individualism the family's capacity to provide quality care and support is decreasing. This trend is significantly evident among rural elderly who are chronically ill and financially dependent. As widowhood status and life expectancy is high among elderly women providing support to such marginalized elderly becomes a burden not only to family members but also to the society. Though, it is evident that the elderly complain about the difficulties they face for receiving support from family members but still insist to live with children in old age.

Old-age homes too play a significant role to cater the needs of the isolated elderly. But support from family members in old-age gains more prestige so families which are not capable of taking care of their elderly should be supported economically through governmental welfare measures and schemes. Therefore, marginalization of the elderly from their family networks can be avoided if the government ensures with all amenities to lead a healthy and a fruitful life in society. And the government should also take steps to revive cultural values and reinforce the traditional practice of inter dependence among generations in which the rich human resources can be maximum utilized for national development. As ageing poses a major challenge and burden to the family and enormous recourses are required to meet the needs of the elderly which has made a paradigm shift of support from the individual to the state to bear solemn responsibility.

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