

AGED FEMALES: THE MOST DEPRIVED AMONG THE DEPRIVED

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Demographic trends have made population aging inevitable in almost every country today. While the emotional problems associated with aging are a preoccupation of developed countries, in developing countries aging is related to premature physical aging caused by inadequate nutrition and rest. However, the present study shows that society is also selective in caring for the aged, leaving widowed females to fend for themselves. The survey was carried out in North Arcot District of Tamil Nadu.

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Introduction

Aging is a phenomenon encountered in every country and by each individual with a long life expectancy. The declining birth and death rates, together with increasing life expectancy, have made this process inevitable. This trend foretells the future problems and solutions associated with an increasing proportion of the elderly among the total population, such as the possible changes in the overall health needs, dependency status and welfare expenditures. In the face of scarcity of resources, and since 50 per cent of the total of 258 million aged persons above 65 years of age are found in developing countries, the problem of aging is as important for the developing countries, as it is for the developed countries of the world (Binstock, 1982).

It is to be noted, however, that the nature of the problem is not the same across space and groups. While bringing aged persons into the mainstream of socio-political life is a common problem faced in developed nations, the problems and aspects of aging in a developing country would portray mainly the vivid picture of poverty and morbidity-ridden aged persons, eking out a living either through hard work or involuntary dependency. In other words, in a developing country like India, aging means physical aging due mainly to poor nutrition, health and economic conditions, and that, in developed nations it centres around the marginalisation of the aged with their sudden withdrawal from the workforce (Souza, *et al* 1982).

Contrary to the disheartening experiences of the aged in the developed nations, those in a developing country enjoy a relatively high level of warmth and affection among their kith and kin. In India, the social fabric is closely knit, and her unique culture and values have attached a sustained respect for the elders, in spite of the increasing pace of economic development and modernisation.

The problems of the aged differ not only between nations but also within nations and between groups. Also, with ongoing economic development, and the consequent changes in family structure and relationships, the elderly lose their relevance and significance in their households, and the more affected among them would be the aged females.

Present Study

The present study attempts to look into such gender bias across socio-economic groups in two panchayats of Tamil Nadu, with special reference to their relative numbers (sex ratio), economic participation, living arrangements and social status. The data for such analysis were based on a twenty per cent sample survey (stratified random) conducted by RUHSA¹ in two panchayats, Arumbakkam and Thondanthulasi, covering 214 households with a total of 1002 persons. An aged person, for our analysis, has been defined as one who has completed 55 years of age at the time of the survey. The lower age limit ascribed to them in the present study, unlike a higher age limit of 65 followed by studies done in developed countries, is because of the observed existence of prematured physical aging, especially in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu.

The following hypotheses have been formulated in understanding the interrelationships between different variables in determining the demographic, economic and social status of the aged population in the study area.

Hypotheses

- (1) Higher death rates have been observed for adult males above 35 years of age in India (Dyson, 1984). This generally observed phenomenon might have favoured the aged females in the study area in having a numerical superiority over aged males in terms of their sex ratio.
- (2) Rural labour market being unorganised, and the income during their (labourers') active working life insufficient, the aged can hardly afford to have the luxury of leisure during their rainy days. Rather, they would continue to be economically active at higher ages. However, such income earning activities might be relatively less for the elderly females than males, because of the former's physical conditions and the societal norm of males working as the bread winners.
- (3) Young females generally leave their village and parents for their husbands' places after their marriage. Hence, we may expect a greater number of aged males living with their sons, while aged females live with their spouses and/or sons.
- (4) Since aged females live with their husbands or sons who own the land, the head of the household status may be a distant reality for them even in their old age. This may be true in the case of the type of house wherein they live. The better the house, in terms of the type of roof and the number of rooms, the higher is the likelihood of males being the heads of households. On the contrary, old females, living in better houses, may have only dependency status².

Analysis and Interpretation

The study area covers 828 sq. km. and is 15 km. away from Vellore, the capital town of North Arcot District. The panchayats are each 2.5 km. away from the state highway.

They comprised a population of 4435 as per the 1981 Government census, out of which, 2227 were males and 2208 were females. The sample survey of RUHSA in 1983 covered 214 households with a population of 1002, out of which, 510 were males and 492 were females. Aged/old persons, above 54 years of age, constituted 12.3 per cent of the total population and there were 69 old males and only 55 old females. The heads of households among them by sex were 41 males and 11 females, while 28 old males and 44 old females were dependants.²

Sex Ratio

Table 1 shows the age distribution of the population in the sample households. It depicts a low sex ratio of 492 females per 510 males (965/1000). In the age group of 55 to 64, there were 38 males and 30 females and among old persons above 64 years of age also the number of males exceeded the number of females. There were 31 males as against 23 females. This low sex ratio among the aged population is quite the opposite of what we hypothesised earlier in the paper. Some insights into factors like sex ratio at birth, age and sex specific death rates and population mobility may throw more light on this phenomenon.

Some curiosity to dig a little deeper into this aspect has forced the authors to present Table 2 in the present analysis. It shows the average age specific death rates for North Arcot District between 1970 and 1972. Averages for the whole district may not fit well with the reality of a region even in the same district. Yet, it may help us in raising some relevant questions in the direction of a possible explanation for the observed low sex ratio among the aged. The table gives death rates for persons above 40 years because they could only have attained 55 years in 1982. Moreover, death

Table 1

AGE DISTRIBUTION OF PERSONS AMONG THE SAMPLE POPULATION BY SEX-1982

Age	Males	Females	Persons
0-14	182 (35.7)	182 (37.0)	364 (36.3)
15-34	154 (30.2)	136 (27.6)	290 (28.9)
35-54	104 (20.4)	121 (24.6)	225 (22.5)
55-64	38 (7.5)	30 (6.1)	68 (6.8)
65+	31 (6.1)	23 (4.7)	55 (5.5)
Total	510 (100)	492 (100)	1002 (100)

() shows percentage to total.

Table 2
AGE SPECIFIC DEATH RATES IN RURAL N.A. DISTRICT,
TAMIL NADU (1970-72)

<i>Age</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Persons</i>
40-49	8.2	5.3	6.8
50-59	22.7	14.5	18.5
60-69	37.7	41.2	39.5
70+	103.5	113.4	108.2
<i>All age groups</i>			
0 to 70+	15.1	14.9	15.0

Source: "Mortality in N.A. District, T.N.", *Longitudinal Studies in Human Reproduction*, Monograph No. 4, CMC, Vellore, 1973.

rates for the age group 40 to 59 is more important for the present analysis because many persons above 60 years of age in 1972 could not have seen the light of day in 1982.

The table shows higher death rates for adult males than females. It was 8.2 for males and 5.3 for females in the age group 40 to 49. For persons in the next cohort (age group 50 to 59), the death rates were 22.7 for males and only 14.5 for females. The low sex ratio (females/males) found in Table 1, and the high death rates for males in 1972 in the age group of 40 to 59, are contradictory. The data show that, in spite of high death rates among adult males, the sex ratio is biased positively towards aged males, possibly due to low sex ratio at birth and/or high net in-migration of adult males during the previous decades.

Labour force participation

For aged persons in the study area, physical aging seems to be more important than social aging. All of them did not stop working. Their participation in economically productive activities is shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 shows that only 48.4 per cent of the aged remained without doing any work. The percentage of unemployed females to total females was 67.3, as against 33.3 for males. There were a greater number of cultivators among aged males, 43.5 per cent, while it was only one person among older females. Thus, it could be seen that there are a greater number of male workers than females. However, this total percentage is misleading because, excluding cultivation which depends on sex-based land ownership pattern in any rural area, the actual workers who sell their labour for wages amount to 30.9 per cent for females and 23.2 for males. Thus, among actual aged wage labourers, a greater number were females.

The differences in the drudgery of labour by sex and age is shown in Table 4, which shows that aged males work for more days than aged females. Also, the labour days

Table 3
OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF AGED BY SEX

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Persons</i>
Cultivators	43.5	1.8	25.0
Agricultural Labourers and other coolies	11.6	16.4	13.7
Others	11.6	14.5	12.9
Non-workers	33.3	67.3	48.4
Total	100 (69)	100 (55)	100 (124)

expended by old persons show a decline with age, manifesting active aging among them. The labour days per worker declined from 191 for persons within the age group 55 to 64 to 176 for persons above 65 years. Thus, we find more aged females still in the labour force, but without being able to do as many days of work as the males of their age. Their inability to do more days of work may either be due to a lack of demand for them in the labour market, or their physical condition, which requires further enquiries.

Table 4
**NUMBER OF DAYS OF EMPLOYMENT PER WORKER BY
AGE AND SEX**

Sex Age	0-14	15-34	35-54	55-64	65†	Total
Males	200	213	222	212	165	206
Females	155	209	183	159	300*	187
Persons	172	211	203	191	176	198

*Only one woman guarding a coconut grove.

Living Arrangements

Indian culture and values give high respect to the elderly, and familial ties are quite strong. Consequently, we may find many of them living with their sons and daughters without undergoing the pangs of loneliness.

Table 5 shows the living arrangement of old dependents differentiated by sex and marital status. Eighty-five per cent of the married males lived with their sons, while 37.5 percentage of the older married females lived with them. Half of them, however, lived with their spouses. The living arrangements among the old dependents, not in their currently married marital status, shows the following trend. Among males, 62.5 per cent lived with their sons, 25 per cent with their daughters and 12.5 per cent lived with persons other than their spouse, 5 per cent lived with their sons, 25 per cent with their daughters and 12.5 per cent lived with persons other than their spouses and children. Among females, 57 per cent lived with their sons, 21.4 per cent with their daughters and another 21.4 per cent lived with other persons. We could find a striking difference in the living arrangements

Table 5

SEX, MARITAL STATUS AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS OF THE DEPENDENTS

Living with	Married			Others ^a			Total		
	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person	Male	Female	Person
1. Spouse	—	50.0	22.2	—	—	—	—	18.2	11.1
2. Son	85.0	37.5	63.9	62.5	57.1	58.3	78.6	50.0	61.1
3. Daughter	5.0	6.2	5.6	25.0	21.4	22.2	10.7	15.9	13.9
4. Others	10.0	6.2	8.3	12.5	21.4	19.4	10.7	15.9	13.9
Total	100 (20)	100 (16)	100 (36)	100 (8)	100 (28)	100 (36)	100 (28)	100 (44)	100 (72)

^aOthers here include widowed persons only, except one unmarried male.

between the sexes, that a greater proportion of male dependents without their spouses lived with their sons and daughters, while a smaller proportion of female (widowed) dependents lived with their children.

Social Status

The following discussion attempts to analyse the status of these aged persons in terms of their accessibility to being the head of the household (HHH). Attention is given to differences in their HHHs status across sex and socio-economic status groups, viz., groups with varying areas of land, types of houses and number of family members. Table 6 shows the percentage distribution of aged HHHs by land

Table 6

LAND SIZE, MARITAL STATUS AND THE PERCENTAGE OF HHH AMONG THE AGED PERSONS

Land Size (acre)	Married			Others			Total		
	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons	Male	Female	Persons
Landless	17 (70.6)	5 (—)	22 (54.5)	5 (40.0)	15 (46.7)	20 (45)	22 (63.6)	20 (35)	42 (50)
Less than 1 acre	12 (50)	4 (—)	16 (37.5)	— (—)	5 (40)	5 (40)	12 (50)	9 (22.2)	21 (38.1)
1 to Less than 2.5	10 (90)	2 (—)	12 (75)	4 (50)	9 (22.2)	13 (30.8)	14 (78.6)	11 (18.2)	25 (52)
2.5 to less than 5	8 (75)	2 (—)	10 (60)	2 (—)	4 (—)	6 (—)	10 (60)	6 (—)	16 (37.5)
5+	9 (33.3)	3 (—)	12 (25)	2 (50)	6 (—)	8 (12.5)	11 (36.4)	9 (—)	20 (41.9)

() Per cent of aged persons as head of the households.

size groups and marital status. The table shows that for males, their status is not related to their land holding position. For married males the percentage of HHHs to total persons was 70.6 in the case of landless households, 50 for households with less than one acre of land, 90 for households with 1 to 2.5 acres of land, which again declined to 33.5 for households having more than five acres of operational holdings. No married female among the aged had HHH status, in spite of the land holding position of the households. Like married males, for other (widowed) males also, the percentage of HHHs among them registered no correlation with the land holding size. HHH status for the widowed females, however, is inversely correlated with land size. Nearly 47 per cent of the widowed females in landless households had HHH status, which declined steadily to 40 and 22.2 per cents for households having less than one acre, and one to less than 2.5 acres of land, respectively.

Table 7 shows a direct correlation between the type of house (in terms of the type of roof and the number of rooms per house) and the HHH status of aged persons. Out of the hundred households with old persons, which were studied, 52 houses had the aged as HHHs. More than 49 per cent of the thatched houses had aged persons as the HHHs, which increased consistently to 50 and 68.4 per cents for houses with tiled and terraced roofs. Strikingly, the table shows that while the status of old females is related inversely with the type of roof, the status of old males is related directly to the type of roof. Among thatched houses, 34.5 per cent of the aged HHHs were females, the percentage of which declined to 10 and nil for tiled and terraced houses, respectively. On the other hand, for old males the respective percentages were 65.5, 90 and 100 for houses with thatched, tiled and terraced roofs.

Table 7

TYPE OF ROOF, NO. OF ROOMS AND AGED AS HHH

<i>Type of House</i>	<i>Wo. of HH with aged persons</i>	<i>Per cent of households with aged as HHH</i>	<i>Per cent of Male</i>	<i>Male and Female</i>	<i>Female HHH Persons</i>
<i>Type of Roof</i>					
Thatched	59	49.2	65.5	34.5	100
Tiled	21	50.0	90.0	10.0	100
Terraced	19	68.4	100.0		100
Total	100	52.0	78.8	21.2	100
<i>No. of Rooms</i>					
1	51	52.9	52.9	40.7	100
2	26	57.7	100.0		100
3+	23	43.5	100.0		100
Total	100	52.0	78.8	21.2	100

The number of rooms and the status of old persons do not show any relation in the table. However, the relatively higher status of old persons in bigger houses, on the one hand, and the low status for females in bigger houses, on the other hand, are quite obvious when we look at the sex-wise distribution of the aged heads of households. In single room houses only 59.2 per cent of the aged HHHs were males, whereas, all the aged HHHs in two roomed houses, and houses with either three or more than three rooms, were males.

Table 8 shows the distribution of persons by household size and by HHH status. Eighty per cent of aged persons in single member households were females. They constitute 72 per cent of the total female HHHs. The table also shows an inverse relation between family size and the proportion of households run by old persons as HHHs. Obviously, all single member households were run only by old persons. The percentage of households run by aged persons declined consistently to 84.6 for two member families, 46.2 for three to five member families, 36.7 for six to nine member families and 25 per cent for families with ten and more than ten members per household.

Table 8
FAMILY SIZE, AGED AND THEIR HHH STATUS

Household Size	No. of households with aged persons	No. of old persons			Percent of households with old as HHH	Percent of Male & Female HHH Person		
		Male	Female	Person		Male	Female	Person
1	10	2	8	10	100	20	80	100
2	13	10	6	16	84.6	90.9	9.1	100
3-5	39	28	17	45	46.2	94.4	5.6	100
6-9	30	22	20	42	36.7	90.9	9.1	100
10 +	8	7	4	11	25.0	100	-	100
Total	100	69	55	124	52.0	78.8	21.2	100

Summary and Findings

In spite of a higher level of death rates among male adults in the previous decade, the relative number of aged males happened to be more than the females.

Secondly, the relatively higher figure of employment among the aged males is misleading, because many of them were working on their own, or operating holdings as cultivators, mainly due to the sex-based ownership of land. Many of them might have even worked as supervisors. But, avoiding the category of cultivators, we find relatively more females working for meagre wages in their old age. Considering their larger numbers, we may say that active aging is more among females in these panchayats than among males. The fact that they work for a lesser number of days

than males for wages, requires further insights. As yet, we do not know what factors lead to lesser days of work among aged females. This may be due to the labour market being unfavourable towards them, their physical condition and/or the other household chores demanding their attention.

Thirdly, among the aged, the widowed males were living mainly with their sons, while the widowed females were prepared to expand their living arrangements well beyond their own children, possibly, due to the landownership status of the aged males or due to the differential respect the children have towards their fathers and mothers. The relatively greater number of single member households among the aged females is the indication of such differential respect exercised by the adult children towards their aged parents.

Finally, among the aged females, only the widowed could become the HHHs which is not generally possible when/if they belong to landowning households living under tiled/terraced roof with a greater number of rooms. Rath⁷ for six to nine member families and 25 per cent for families with ten and more than ten members per household.

No doubt, this does not denote a status elevation in their old age but a reflection of gross neglect and deprivation even in their old age. Is the social firmament partial in accommodating the aged males as the guiding stars, while allowing the aged females to become the superficially venerated meteors who have a long way to go, only to become emaciated outcastes in the glittering social network?

Notes

1. Rural Health and Social Affairs (RUHSA) is a Department of Christian Medical College and Hospital, Vellore, T.N., involved in voluntary work for the people of Kilvazhithunayan Kuppam (K.V. Kuppam) block in the area of health and development.
2. Dependents here means persons other than HHHs.

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