



# **Older People in Rural Tamilnadu**

**T.K. Nair**



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## **Dedication**

I have not seen God. But I have seen my mother and father. I was born in a village where there was no electricity. All civic services were missing. Only mud roads to travel. Yet my parents were keen to give good education to me. For that they suffered a lot as those were hard days. I carry on the wishes of my parents.

And I dedicate this book to :

My mother **Lakshmi Amma** and

My father **Thankappan Pilla**.

## **Preface**

This study on the elderly in the villages of Tamilnadu was analogous to the cross-national studies on ageing in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Poland, Yugoslavia and Israel. It was preceded by a similar study on "Old People in Madras City". Data for this study was collected from June 4, 1974 to March 20, 1975.

The two studies were made possible by a research grant from the Social and Rehabilitation Service of the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The report based on the study was first published in 1980. The title was "Older People in Rural Tamilnadu". All the copies of the book were distributed some years ago. Yet, enquiries on the book continue to be made by the researchers on ageing. Hence the present abridged version has been considered.

Niruta Publications came forward to publish the book in its abridged version and the Centre for the Welfare of the Aged (CEWA) at Chennai agreed to meet all expenses towards condensing the original book into its present form. I am grateful to both the organizations.

**T.K.Nair**

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## Contents

<b>S.No</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
	Preface	- iv
1	Introduction	- 1
2	Health Status of the Aged	- 23
3	The Aged and the Family	- 42
4	Employment and Retirement	- 80
5	Income Security in Old Age	- 90
6	Isolation and Alienation	- 99
7	Conclusion	- 117
	References	- 125



## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Ageing is a process. Old age is referred to as the penultimate stage in the biological process of conception, growth, maturity, decline and death. The period of decline due to ageing is known as senescence. But the rate of decline varies from individual to individual. The exact age at which old age starts is controversial. Similarly there is little agreement on the physiological characteristics of old age. Their appearance, frequency and severity vary from person to person.

Old age is perhaps easily understood than defined. Chronologically it is after a certain age. But no specific age in the life span of an individual can be fixed as the starting point of old age. Benson (1971) says that the erroneous idea that old age begins at sixty five is slowly being moved out. Instead, seventy five is the dividing line because a person's sensory abilities of taste, smell, sight, hearing and probably touch decline most noticeably at this stage. This period is also the beginning of many chronic health problems.

Ageing is a natural process; whereas old age is arbitrary. Determination of old age differs from society to society depending on the social organization, level of economy, standard of living and health services on the one hand and the socio-cultural beliefs on the other. Again, socially popular concept of old age need not coincide with the personal experience or acceptance of it. Yet, determination of who are the old is necessary for the formulation of social policies



and programmes. Age of retirement from organised employment is often taken as the starting point of old age. Where age of retirement is determined from the point of providing jobs to the growing number of unemployed youth, the determination of old age from that point in time in human life becomes untenable. For instance, the age of retirement of most categories of employees in India is either 55 or 58 and there is demand in some quarters to further decrease the age to meet the massive challenge of unemployment.

Old age, according to the working definition of this study, starts from the sixtieth year. Traditionally, the sixtieth year has been considered to be the beginning of old age in India. Completion of 60 years, "Shastiabdipoorthi", is an important milestone in the life of an individual, which not many are lucky to reach. Depending on the caste affiliation, family status and income, it is celebrated. This is mainly because most people seldom survive into the sixtieth year. The expectation of life at birth in India is much less than 60 and the age of retirement of most categories of employees is either 55 or 58. Psychologically too most Indians appear to consider themselves old earlier than the chronological age of sixty. And the Indian woman perceives herself to be old much earlier than the man. The moment one becomes a grandparent, one is automatically viewed as old.

Whatever be the difficulties in defining old age, the older people are, by and large, distinguishable from the young because of certain physical characteristics. The wrinkling skin, the greying hair and the shrinking in the stature are some. Bergmann, (1972) adds that the pattern of illness may also change; in old age as people grow older there is a greater

likelihood of several illnesses to be present together. Medical opinion associates old age with sensory impairments, particularly vision and hearing, glandular and metabolic changes, slow responses, chronic ailments, diminished energy, increased fatigue and decreased capacity to do different physical tasks independently. On the other hand, Lang (1961) categorically states that there are probably no diseases caused by growing old. It is Lang's contention that there is no scientific evidence in support of the popular view that old age is a period of poor health, mental deterioration and loneliness.

Despite the controversies on the physiological features of old age, it is a period of change in employment status, income level and family composition. It is also characterised by unpleasant and even traumatic emotional experiences like death of peers, loss of spouse and separation from children.

It is true that in rural areas, cessation of work is not abrupt and retirement not sudden as most of the workers are outside the organised sector and people can work as long as they can or as long as they want to, provided there are adequate opportunities for work. Among those who have land to cultivate or who are self-employed in other occupations, there is a gradual change over from heavy to light tasks and transfer of responsibility to younger members of the household. Yet, at some point of time, people give up work, some earlier and some later. Those who do not retire at all are a very small minority. Transition from employment to retirement is a critical phase in one's life. Retirement from work normally brings about deprivation and hardships. Employment means income (however, meagre it may be),

## **Chapter 2**

### **Health Status of the Aged**

Old age is often considered the synonym for disease. It is more so in the villages where “old age” is commonly referred to as the cause of death among the elderly. Diseases occur at all stages of human life and are not peculiar to old age. But the incidence of morbidity may be higher and the severity of illnesses may be more marked among the elderly than among people in the younger age groups. The medical explanation for this is the low resistance to fight diseases and the declining changes that normally occur in the systems of the body which contribute to easy susceptibility to diseases. The diseases of the circulatory system are cited as examples of this decline which, according to them, is an inevitable consequence of the ageing process. The diversity of the health-functioning of the elderly is seen from the following instances.

Chinnappa is 85 and he lives alone. He has difficulty in seeing as well as in hearing. But he can do all the personal tasks without difficulty including going outside and climbing steps.

Eighty-year old Kulandai is a symbol of robust health. He has a good vision and hearing capacity. He has absolutely no incapacity to do any personal task.

Muthu karuppa Nadar is another example. He is 82. His eyesight is good with glasses. His hearing capacity is also good. Except his dependence on the barber for cutting toe nails, he is quite independent in doing various tasks.

But 66-year old Murugesu Reddy has more health problems. His eyesight is not good, though he can hear without any difficulty. He has no difficulty in dressing, going to lavatory and getting about the house. But he needs help for bathing, going up and down steps, and going outdoors.

Perumalakka is now 82. She is deaf and has difficulty to see. She is not suffering from any disease. But, for the past five years, she has been staying indoors most of the time, though not in bed always.

She says it is due to old age. She goes to the toilet with difficulty. She has also difficulty in dressing herself.

Muthamma is living with her mother. She is 60. Her eyesight and hearing capacity are good. But she cannot do any personal task by herself. Her 80-year old mother helps her. Her mother is doing all the light and heavy household tasks.

The health status of the elderly was measured by (a) mobility status, (b) sensory impairments, (c) an incapacity index based on the ability to manage certain personal tasks by themselves, (d) self-perception of health, (e) illness during a reference period of twelve months preceding the date of interview, and (f) physician utilisation.

### **Mobility Status**

Seven in hundred old persons in rural Tamil Nadu are housebound or bedridden. At the same time, three-fourths are ambulatory without any difficulty. A fifth of the aged are mobile with minor or major difficulty. The housebound constitute one in twenty and the bedridden one in fifty. Thus a quarter of the older people have difficulty in movement ranging from mild to complete restriction. Old women are

more restricted than old men. For every old man, who is housebound or bedridden, there are two old women. And the elderly women who can move about without any difficulty are slightly fewer than the elderly men.

**Table 2.1**  
**Mobility Status of Old People**  
(Percentage Distribution)

Mobility Status	Men	Women	All
Ambulatory	95.38	90.97	93.18
Without difficulty	75.91	72.27	74.09
With difficulty	19.48	18.70	19.09
Housebound	3.50	6.78	5.13
Bedridden	1.12	2.26	1.69
Total	100	100	100
N	801	797	1598

### **Eyesight**

Nearly a third of the old people report good eyesight without glasses: 35 per cent men and 30 per cent women. The blind or almost blind aged are around six per cent (5 per cent men and 7 per cent women). Sixty per cent of the elderly men and women have difficulty in seeing; but only about five per cent use spectacles. A very small percentage (1.7) reports good eye sight with glasses. Eyesight dims as age advances. The elderly claiming good eyesight decrease from 42 per cent among those aged 60-64 years to 20 per cent among those aged eighty and over. And the percentage with total or near blindness increases from 3 in the 60-64 age group to 14 in the last two advanced age cohorts.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Aged and The Family**

The central themes of the discussion on the situation of the elderly in India are the structural changes that have been taking place in Indian society, the concomitant disintegration of the joint family system and the consequent rejection or neglect of the aged (Planning commission, 1963). These views are widely shared among planners, social scientists and social workers. Two issues emerge from this thesis. One, the joint family has been the popular family system prevalent in India till recently. Two, the aged were well taken care of in the joint family system. Empirical evidences are lacking to support these statements conclusively.

Gupta, in his introduction to a volume consisting of many family studies, comments that “too much attention has been given to the concept of joint family”, which in effect did not represent the structural norm of the Indian social system (Gupta, 1976). Joint family is different from joint residence. As Desai (1964) observes “——— even in those times when the joint family system was said to be prevalent, it did not and need not have meant a preponderingly large majority of the joint households”. However, the process of nucleation does not mean disruption of family ties. “Even those units which are scattered at several locations continue to fulfil kinship obligations———. The expansion of such ties is continually augmented among the units which are branched off enlarging the structural unit at a different levels” (Gupta,

1976). He calls this “structural expansion”. He goes still further and asserts that “industrialisation, considered to be a major agent of family disintegration in the west, has, in fact reinforced family ties in India in several ways”.

There is no dispute regarding the pre-eminent position of the elderly in the early Indian society. But to say that there was no neglect of the aged then and such a condition is only a recent phenomenon is an exaggeration. For instance, older widows have always been a disadvantaged group. Whatever be the controversies on the joint family and the care the elderly received in the earlier family system, the institution of family is the principal agent of integration of the elderly in society. This chapter, therefore, examines the family structure of the older people in rural Tamilnadu, the number of generations of the families of the aged, the living arrangement of the older men and women, and between the children and their aged parents and other aspects of family relations.

### **Marital Status**

Most of the aged women have lost their spouses. Divorce has almost been a social taboo and consequently the separated and the divorced are few: less than two per cent (one per cent older men and 2 per cent older women). Widowhood is a characteristic feature of ageing particularly because of the difference in age, which is often high, between husbands and wives. But the majority of the men are married. While three-quarters of the elderly men have surviving wives more than four in five elderly women have lost their husbands. Those who remain single are negligible.

Thirty per cent of the elderly women were married young

before they reached fourteen. They were married immediately after puberty or even before that. But only a negligible number of men got married at that young age. Further, more than a half (53 per cent of the women) were married between 15 and 19 and only an eighth of the men were married in that age group. On the whole, most of the women were married before they reached twenty. Women marry early in life to men much older to them and they become widows in their middle ages. Widow remarriage is rare in Indian society and thus the population and proportion of widows swell. But the majority of the men do not become widowers having married to younger women. Many of them who lose wives at an early age remarry. Eighteen per cent of the men in this study are remarried as against less than two per cent women. Marital status is inversely associated with age. The proportion of married elderly decreases with age while there is a corresponding increase in the proportion of widows and widowers. Men and women lose their husbands and wives with the passage of time. Marital status of the older men and women exhibits significant variations at different ages. Widows aged 60–64 years are four times as large as widowers in that age group. Almost all the women in the eighties are widows whereas widowers in the eighties are slightly more than a half. Four in five of the older women in the sixties are widows whereas the same proportions of older men have their wives living. The proportion of married men remains same during the sixties and the first half of the seventies. It reduces significantly between the ages 65 and 69, and drastically between 70 and 74 years, increases considerably in the next age group of 75–79 years and falls steeply.





## **Chapter 4**

### **Employment and Retirement**

Work is significant to people from many angles. It is the source of livelihood for most. It confers status in the family and enhances prestige in the community. It places the individual in a network of social relations with people at the work spot. It occupies most of the time in a day and most part of one's active period in life. It has purpose and expectation, tangible and intangible returns. Without undermining the pecuniary significance of work and its economic functions, different people have different meanings of work. To one, it is a source of sustenance, for another it is a pastime, and for yet another it is an opportunity to serve the society. Some work because of the association of people which it offers and some others work for the sake of work; their satisfaction is intrinsic in the fact of their working. Work brings to some the sense of accomplishment and to some others the feeling of usefulness. Thus employment has significant psychological connotations beyond the money it brings in. As work is significant to individuals for more than one reason, retirement from work is poignant for many reasons.

Between men and women, work and retirement have different social and personal implications. The working women in the villages are usually poor and belong to lower castes. It is quite common for women to work as family labour in agriculture and in household enterprises. Otherwise, it is not common for women from middle class

families to work after puberty. Men, on the other hand, are the heads of families. They must work as long as they can. Work, therefore, has more significance for men, particularly in a man-oriented society. So retirement may be followed by more adjustmental and emotional problems for men than for women. The profundity of the effect of retirement is not felt by women in employment because of the continuity of home-making responsibilities.

### **Work Status**

Labour force participation was determined by the work status of the elderly during the week prior to the interview. A person was considered to be working if he or she got a remuneration for his or her work in the form of wage, salary, profit, allowance or honorarium, however small, whether in cash or in kind, and whether regularly or not. However, a person who worked as an unpaid family worker for a trade, a business, a household enterprise or agriculture carried on by the members of his or her household was also considered to be working whether or not he or she had a direct remuneration from such work. Those persons who had been working, but were temporarily absent from work for reasons such as illness, injury, bad weather, and for other similar causes including social and religious necessitating absence from work were also considered to be in the labour force. The temporarily absent persons included those who worked during certain seasons of the year and casual workers who worked just now and then. The employed also covered those who were unemployed and looking for work. Among those who gave up working completely, women who did so before they were fifty were also included as housewives.

### Labour Force Participation

The proportion of elderly in the labour force is high, they are nine out of every twenty older persons. Agriculture, traditional occupations, household enterprises and unskilled manual jobs do enable the elderly in the villages to be in employment and age per se does not make them obsolete in the labour market. The structured jobs are fewer in the villages where age is a determinant of continuity in employment.

The proportion of men in employment is double that of women. This is quite natural because men are the principal breadwinners of the families. Women work either to supplement the family income or for sheer survival, if they have no other source of livelihood.

**Table 4.1**  
**Work Status of the Aged**  
(Percentage Distribution)

Work Status	Men	Women	All
Worked last week	54.56	24.22	39.42
Temporarily absent from work	3.87	4.27	4.07
Unemployed and looking for work	0.87	0.38	0.63
Completely stopped working	40.45	43.66	42.05
Housewife	—	27.48	13.70
Never worked at all	0.25	—	0.13
Total	100	100	100
N	801	797	1598

Labour force participation declines with age. Between older men and women, though the trends are same, there are revealing variations. Among older women, labour force

## **Chapter 5**

### **Income Security in Old Age**

Retirement and reduced income are inevitable features as people grow old. Among the poor, the aged are one of the most vulnerable sections. Destitution and dependence are the lot of many older persons. For analysis, the older people are divided into three income units: married couple; widowers, separated, divorced and single men; and widows and other women. Thus the 1598 sampled older men and women were distributed among the three income units as follows: 41 per cent couples, 15 per cent unmarried men and 44 per cent unmarried women. The reference period to assess the economic situation of the aged was 1974.

#### **Income of the Aged**

A third of the elderly couples, men and women are in destitution with no income of their own. More than a half of the widows and other women are without any income. The couples are the fewest among those who have no income; one in eight couples is in destitution. The poorest, thus, are the widows. For the couples, as against the widowed or separated men and women, there is the likelihood of at least one of the partners earning or having some income.

**Table 5.1**  
**Elderly Income Units by Income Group**  
 (Percentage Distribution)

Income Group (Rs.)	Couple	Men	Women	All
Nil	13.04	35.27	52.41	33.87
1- 24	8.42	12.95	19.88	14.19
25- 49	19.47	16.07	15.36	17.14
50- 99	25.90	18.74	7.38	16.60
100-149	14.69	8.04	1.81	7.97
150-199	6.77	2.68	1.36	3.75
200-249	3.30	1.34	0.75	1.87
250-399	5.28	2.68	0.90	2.95
400 and above	3.14	2.23	0.15	1.67
Total	100	100	100	100
N	606	224	664	1494

Arbitrarily, we have taken Rs.50 a month for an individual and Rs.100 for a couple as the minimum amount required for subsistence. If an older person does not have at least this amount, he or she will have to depend on others or will have to undergo hardships including starvation. Six in seven women and two in three couples and men are below the subsistence level. The elderly who have monthly income exceeding Rs.150 are three in hundred women and one in eleven men. The couples with comparable income are more or less similar in proportion to that of men. The increase in income need not bring about better levels of living for all. The vast majority of the elderly have many family responsibilities. They are either the sole or the chief bread winners of the family, or active earning members. The aged

with unmarried children have the worry of getting the girls married and making the sons stand on their own.

Employment is the source of income of more than two-thirds of the elderly income units: three in four couples, two in three men and three in five women. For the couples, there are two to earn in many instances. In nearly a half of the couple households, the wife is either the supplementary or sole earner. More than a fifth have some property income which excludes the income from the land which people cultivate as self-employment. This also includes passive income like rent from land and house. Nearly a third of the men and a quarter of the women have some income from property. Fewer married couples have property income compared with the men and women. One in ten of the elderly income units gets money regularly from children outside the household. More women than men and couples get money from the children who are living away from them. Only one in hundred is a pensioner from former employment. Only men held pensionable jobs. In contrast, all the recipients of the old age pension from the government are widows and other women. Recipients of the social assistance benefit are only one in twenty five women. A few, mostly widows and other women, are helped regularly with money by their relatives.

Eighty eight per cent of the 1,060 income units who live with others have the earnings of other members of the household. Thus there are a substantial minority of 12 per cent who are the only earners of their households with the other members depending on the elderly man, woman or couple. They are nearly a fifth (19 per cent) of the elderly couples. The fewest are the widows and other women.

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