

Chapter 6

Summary Conclusions and Policy Implications

There have been many debates and deliberations about the vulnerable groups in the society like scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, landless etc. Elderly women constitute one of the very important susceptible groups that need urgent attention. More vulnerable are the subjects of our study namely the elderly women of the Tamil Brahmin community who seem to be characteristically marginalized due to social and physical distancing from the social economic and political nucleus. There are reasons to believe that the relative bargaining power in the local, social and political circle has been low among the women of this community. These came in the form of inhibitions both inherited and institutional imposed upon them by their religion and customs and by the socio-economic transformation of Kerala's society. There has been no scientific or systematic large scale study to report on the extent and depth of problems among the elderly women in India especially those of the Brahmin community of Kerala though there are few studies here and there about elderly males.

The present study has attempted to trace the social and economic transformation in Kerala and in its course examined the socio-economic status of the Tamil Brahmin community. The transition has resulted in a growing number of elderly women, mostly widows deprived of income and support and who are forced to fend for themselves, working as wage labour and as cooks in their sunset years to make both ends meet.

The flood gates of Brahmin in migration into Kerala seemed to have opened in the 18th century, when Brahmins from the neighbouring states were attracted by the charities of the Travancore rulers. For decades they enjoyed this royal patronage of food and employment security. But with the social and economic transformation of Kerala's society, there started a slow eclipse of this community.

The study examined the socio-economic impact of the social security measures adopted by the Travancore rulers on the Brahmin community with special focus on the elderly Brahmin women. The pivotal role of the temple in the social and economic development of the Brahmins and later how its decline adversely affected them have been dealt with in the study at length.

The historic transformation of the socio-economic and demographic profile of this community has been analysed. At the primary level the current status of contemporary elderly Brahmin women in Trivandrum district has also been examined.

Since the study is inter-disciplinary Walter Martens population policy research approach came useful. Random sampling and population survey methods are used for data collection. Data analysis was undertaken with the help of statistical tools like frequency distributions, cross tabulation, chi-square and scoring pattern for framing well-being index.

The study hypothesized that widows especially those without children are more deprived than those with children. Further that there is a high work participation rate among the poor elderly Brahmin women due to lack of economic and familial support.

A brief rewinding of the chapters is made here for a quick recollection of the presentation of the study. The first chapter introduced the topic and the significance of the problem. After the statement of the problem the specific objectives were spelt out and hypothesis drawn, and the data source and methodology to solve

the research questions drawn out, pointing out the limitations of the study.

The second chapter has given an exhaustive review of selected literatures that have relevant roles in the concept of socio-economic transformation of Kerala and on the developments in the area on population ageing with special reference to the problems of elderly Tamil Brahmin women. Hence an elaborate interdisciplinary review of literature is undertaken.

The third chapter has outlined the theoretical framework around which the study revolves. The multi-disciplinary nature of the thesis has necessitated a review of theories from various disciplines ranging from those of Malthus, Caldwell, Mill, Leibenstein, Becker's theories of institutional economics, social security concepts of Lord Beveridge and Sen's idea of well-being. The various concepts used in the study are also explained in the third chapter.

The most solid chapter of the thesis is the fourth chapter which provides a macro analysis of the social, economic and demographic profile of the Brahmin community right from 1891 using census reports and other authentic secondary sources of data. The significance of the socio-economic transformation in Kerala, the

origin of the Brahmins, their migration into Kerala, the safety net provided by the temple in the form of massive feeding programme and employment security, have all been given elaborate treatment. The initial role of temple as a significant entity and later its decline had a great impact on the socio-economic transformation, which ultimately led to the slow eclipse and degradation of the Brahmins.

This glaring problem of the elderly that is one of deprivation, degradation and acute poverty at the macro level from the end of the last century led the researcher to look objectively at the various problems of the elderly women at the micro level.

In the fifth chapter the problems of the target group of elderly women are examined at the grass root level using primary data. In the framework of experience gathered from the field study as well as cases investigated the contextual issues are outlined. This is supplemented by a detailed assessment of case level data. Based on all these data an attempt was made to frame a well-being index.

The comprehensive study carried out in the representative localities in the rural and urban areas of Trivandrum district brought out various insights into the different aspects of the social and economic life of the elderly some of which were quite positive while some were very disheartening.

Empirical Results

At the very outset it may be pointed out though the data were collected separately from rural and urban areas, when it was reviewed, results were such that no significant outcome emerged from the rural survey. There were only marginal differences. Hence the results are analysed in totality.

The survey found a weighty concentration of the Tamil Brahmin community in the urban areas. The mean age of the elderly women was 69 years and those aged 70 years and above needed more care. Exactly 50% of the subjects were either widowed, divorced or separated. Around 45% were currently married and 5% of the elderly women belonged to the 'never married' category.

Some of the positive results that emerged from the study regarding the elderly women are:

- None of them were found to be illiterate which goes very well with Kerala's move to 100% literacy
- Majority of our elderly subjects were getting some kind of support because of their co-residence.

- Child marriage no longer prevailed among them because the average age at marriage of the women surveyed was 20.2 years.
- Again their nuptiality status showed that majority of them had given birth only to 2 children and only a minority had more than 4 children. This had several implications. The small family norm had been accepted by them. Though family planning measures were not known to them, their religious customs of practising celibacy on certain days of the month must have led to the smaller number of children.
- Yet another conspicuous positive result of the survey worth mentioning was that a good majority of the women to the extent of 58% reported that they never felt lonely in their old age which however is the most glaring problem among the elderly in developed countries and also among the richer sections in our country. This is because the elderly Tamil Brahmin women live in joint or extended families though out of economic compulsion. Hence there was no feeling of loneliness. This 'joint family' or 'extended family' is a big 'shock absorber' because the informal sharing

arrangements within the household were a unique source of strength which lacked in nuclear families. It led to reciprocal obligations and strong bonds of kinship and provided physical and emotional security to the elderly and to the grand children when their parents were away.

- Another encouraging observation was that the elderly in such families contributed to productive work and enjoyed a sense of belonging.
- The survey revealed that most of the elderly subjects *i.e.*, nearly 80% are engaged in cooking or related activities which is the only skill on which the Brahmin women excel. Right from the days of the kings the Tamil Brahmins established a virtual monopoly over the cuisine in all the temples. They established an unshakeable expertise over the art and craft of cuisine such that even now the best cooks for marriages for traditional meals are reputed to be the Tamil Brahmins. This is apparent in the study because many of the elderly worked as cooks in affluent families out of economic compulsions.

- The survey data on household indebtedness showed that this community did not thrive on borrowings and only 14% reported indebtedness. Therefore incidence of debt trap, borrowing related harassment etc., was uncommon among them.

Taken together the positive results which we found are less impressive because the negative results outweighed the positive which are reviewed in the subsequent paragraphs.

- Most of the subjects of the study were widowed and the mean age of the elderly women was 69 years. Their age and marital status demanded more care. This in turn increased financial stress in the family.
- The study strengthened the patriarchal nature of the Tamil Brahmin society with only 18% of the subjects enjoying the status of household.
- The past status of employment of the husbands of the elderly surveyed, showed that more than half of them had employment in unorganized sector and therefore were not entitled to receive any pension. This had severe repercussions on the widows and their families,

who were bereft of income and struggled for their existence, which reflected in a high current participation of the elderly in the labour market.

- The most striking and shocking result that transpired from the current labour force status was that more than 18% of the subjects are working even after the age of 70, necessarily out of economic compulsions, due to lack of family pensions, or any kind of social security. This result very well substantiated our hypothesis that there is a high work participation rate among the elderly.
- Further it is apparent that most of these aged women are engaged in cooking related activities for nearly 6 to 7 hours a day which is strenuous.
- The penetration of the social security schemes, is more on the 'young old' in the age group 60-69, rather than the 'old old' i.e., 70-79. The under coverage of elderly women in the higher age groups is a matter of serious concern.
- Enquiry into the economic concerns of the elderly women did not echo a promising picture. More than

65% of the elderly did not have any income of their own. Even those who had some source, had insufficient income which resulted in the elderly having no means of support. This led to loss of recognition in the family and social life, ultimately making them the most vulnerable class.

- A closer look at the household income and expenditure depicted that most of them belonged to lower middle class who strived very hard to eke out a living and adjust their expenditure level to the income earned leaving very little on savings or investments.
- Regarding help and family support while 63% received help from son, daughter or others, it is disheartening to note that remaining 37% did not get help and support from any source. Lack of availability of physical and emotional support at old age is a matter of concern. Women by nature are family bonded and visits of children provide the much needed emotional support. However the results showed that around 64% of women did not get the expressive emotional support sourced by such visits of children or grand children.

- Though at the macro level only 34% expressed an inclination to move to old age homes, the chi-square test confirmed the significant association between the 2 variables *i.e.*, ‘inclination to move to old age home’ and ‘feeling of burden to the family’.

One of the prime concerns of the study was to assess the level of well being of the subjects namely the elderly women. The well-being index that was framed threw some insights regarding their socio-economic status.

- Only 19.4% of the elderly women seemed to belong to WBI grouping of either ‘Good’ or ‘Very good’ while majority of the subjects were found to be in the lower order of ‘Bad’, “Very bad” and ‘Deplorable’ categorization.

The hypothesis that most of the elderly women belonged to the vulnerable class is thus vindicated. Though children are considered to provide the requisite support system for the aged in general and elderly women in particular the WBI categorization showed otherwise and did not validate the initial supposition. Household income had a direct bearing on the

economic well-being of its members and demonstrated the existence of a significant association between WBI categorization and household income.

Thus the survey evidence and results reviewed do not provide a rosy picture of the present status of the elderly Brahmin women in contemporary times, though their ancestors were at the peak of their glory living comfortably in the cosy blanket of food and social security of the royal patronage. Today a majority of them are totally dependent on others and feel neglected, ignored and felt that they are a burden to their own family. Their living conditions are mainly influenced by many factors like marital status, financial well being and cultural traditions. Some of them cope with these changes effectively while others experience extreme disappointment, frustration and mental agony and suffer silently in solitude and isolation. Inspite of all the problems the Tamil elderly Brahmin women, prefer to live under their own roofs with their grown up sons. Though even today they are a minority they still cling on to their social systems and cultural traditions and have carved out an identity of their own.

Policy Implications

The elderly women constitute one of the most deserving segments that need special consideration because of their economic vulnerability compounded by physical, psychological, and emotional vulnerabilities. Therefore they need focused and meaningful policy intervention.

The stringent rules and regulations in the security schemes and programmes have to be made more flexible and the bureaucratic delays in the disbursement of pensions must be prevented.

The relative vulnerability indicates that families or households with elderly members in general need additional socio-economic support mainly from the government to effectively take care of the aged. Special leave to those employees taking care of the elderly income tax benefits etc., must be provided to the care-givers. Since such households with elderly undergo a great financial stress.

The government may provide safety and near family environment through establishment of elderly care centres or institutions particularly to the widowed without children.

The 'Annapurna Scheme' (The Hindu, Feb.28, 1999) i.e. provision of 10 kg food grains free of cost per month to all indigent senior citizens by Government of India may be implemented by the state government also which would be a great source of food security to the elderly in this age of food inflation.

Survey findings have shown a high degree of participation of the elderly in the labour market. Therefore efforts should be taken to use the rich knowledge, experience and skill of the elderly for the benefit of society. Since most of them are specialized in the art of cooking and catering, efforts must be taken for the marketing of their food and food products and providing affordable credit arrangements.

There is also the challenging need for re-defining public policy in favour of economically backward classes by redistributing and providing economic opportunities such as more of formal sector employment to these classes.

The government should urge schools and colleges to introduce gerontology as a part of their courses and curriculum and encourage research in the area of age-related studies. This will create an awareness among the younger generation about the problem of vulnerability of the elderly and to treat them with

dignity. Thereby social atrocities and heinous acts of 'oil bath' to inflict death on the elderly as reported from certain regions of Tamil Nadu can be avoided in future. (The Hindu, December 6th 2010)

Another suggestion is to include vital questions regarding the elderly in the census so that more information and data base can be built up and policies can be framed accordingly.

Rapidly increasing land prices in the urban areas are reducing the stock of housing available to the urban elderly. In our study we have observed a weighty concentration of the elderly in urban areas. Hence efforts may be made by the government to provide subsidized housing facilities for the elderly. Many of the 'agraharams' are being converted to big commercial centres in the city.

Lastly the aged should not be treated as liabilities but as veritable store houses of knowledge and experience who can actively contribute to the welfare of society.

Conclusion

The increase in the number of elderly and in the average life span of the female is a symbol of social progress.

However it is our task to study and solve their problems and thereby help them to live a decent, dignified, healthy and happy life in their sunset years. This way we can make the ‘grey state’ of Kerala a rosy state where the aged are not sidelined but mainstreamed. As Singh rightly remarked “These flowers may be faded but they still smell sweet through empowerment”.

References

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