

Socioeconomic Conditions Among the Urban Oldest-Old Females : A Gerontological Study in Medinipur Municipal Town, West Bengal

*Parikshit Chakraborty*¹

*Sutapa Chaudhury*²

*Arup Ratan Bandyopadhyay*³

Abstract

Gerontology has developed as a discipline to study aged people, and it is becoming a subject of immense significance all over the world. Thus, studies related to this area have a significant role and importance to tackle the problems of the aged people and make a bridge between the socioeconomic needs of the aged and existing resources. However, the term “oldest old” refers to aged individuals who survive in the upper segments of the age pyramid. The present paper aimed to highlight the socioeconomic milieu of the oldest-old women residing in different municipal wards under Midnapore Municipality of Paschim Medinipur district, West Bengal, India. The study explored some basic demographic features as well as other features like housing and living arrangements, different sources of financial support, which dealt with the information related to the economic condition of the oldest old.

Keywords : gerontological study, aging studies, oldest-old, age pyramid, senior citizens, super senior citizens, socioeconomic milieu

JEL Classification Codes : I3, I31

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Gerontology has developed as a discipline to study aged people, and it is becoming a subject of immense significance all over the world. Besides, social-gerontology is the part of gerontology, and it is becoming the latest field of interest to anthropologists, wherein the socioeconomic, physical aspects of the aged in society have been studied. However, aging is a typical progression in human life, and it affects each human being in the world. The oldest-old as an identifiable category within human population always existed, even if its definition in terms of biological, social, or chronological age was varying and unclear. The oldest-old (80 years) constitute 7% of the world's 65 years-and-over population. However, the term “oldest-old” is generally used to refer to the population aged 85 years and older coined for a 1984 session on this population at the annual meeting

¹ *Junior Research Fellow, Anthropological Survey of India & Ph. D. Student, Department of Anthropology, Anthropological Survey of India, Ranchi Field Station, Ranchi - 834 002 and Department of Anthropology, 35, Ballygunge Circular Road, Kolkata – 700 019. (E-mail : parikshitchakraborty1@gmail.com) ; ORCID Id : <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4374-4993>*

² *Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta, 35, Ballygunge Circular Road, Kolkata – 700 019. (E-mail : sutapamukhopadhyay.anth@gmail.com)*

³ *Professor and Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Calcutta, 35, Ballygunge Circular Road, Kolkata – 700 019. (E-mail : arup_cu@rediffmail.com)*

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of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Therefore, limitations of survey data resulting from small sample sizes at the oldest ages forced several studies of the oldest old to describe the oldest-old as the ages 80 and older (Suzman & Riley, 1985).

Since the last decade or so, the Election Commission of India has started to publish a separate voter list for the Indian citizens belonging to 80 years and above age, and it was in the year 2011 the Department of Finance, Government of India categorized such population as 'super senior citizen' for income tax assessment.

The oldest-old has the highest age prevalence of morbidity, disability, and institutionalization of any age group. The term does perhaps imply the progression of frailty associated with Neugarten's 1974 conceptualization of the "young old" (60–70 years of old) and "old-old" (70–80 years of old). However, unlike Neugarten's concept, which joined age, health, and social characteristics, the term oldest-old, in its primary usage, simply defines the chronological age group of those aged 80 and older, without implying that all, or most, of the oldest old, were necessarily frail (Neugarten, 1974).

The oldest-old are much more likely to need help in daily living than the younger elderly. The oldest-old consume medical care and other services, and benefits of government and private transfers are far out of proportion to their numbers. The percentage of individuals leading active daily lives declines and the disability rates increase dramatically with age among the oldest old (Yi, Vaupel, Zhenyu, Chunyuan, & Yuzhi, 2002). As the oldest - old subpopulation is growing much faster than any other age group, and because they are the most likely group to need medical and social services, it is necessary to investigate the demographic, socioeconomic, and health status of the oldest-old (Yi et al., 2002). In a few countries, notably the United States and a few European countries, efforts have been made to attract the attention of academics and policymakers to the circumstances of the oldest-old (Baltes & Mayer 1999 ; Suzman, Willis, & Manton 1992 ; Vaupal et al., 1998). Elsewhere in the world, on the contrary, little attention has been paid to ensure statistically sufficient representation of the oldest-old in national surveys, and most studies on the elderly include few or no subjects aged 80 and older (Grundy, Bowling, & Farquhar, 1996).

In India, significant aspects covered by the researchers on gerontology primarily center around economic crises ; family environments and care ; extra-familial rehabilitation and living conditions under such repair, abuse, leisure, and recreation ; socio-psychological adjustment, health status, etc. of the elderly living in different parts of India (Chakrabarty, 2003). However, these studies considered elderly as a single age category (age 60 years and above) and, therefore, did not find the problems of oldest-old population separately, even though the octogenarian, nonagenarian, and centenarians subpopulation has been very much in existence in the demographic scenario of India from the remote past.

In recent decades, as the population has aged, aging has increasingly become a burning topic in gerontology, and also, its addresses many disciplines. Thus, the study of the aging population is sensational in the 21st century in subjects like sociology, social-cultural anthropology, and social gerontology to study age, aging, and the life course. The oldest old persons aged 80 years or older – majority of them live in more developed states. However, India has 80,38,718 populations of 80+, out of which 20,22,345 live in urban areas (Registrar General and Census of India, 2006).

As India is witnessing industrialization, urbanization, globalization, and rapid changes in the socioeconomic milieu, it is urgently necessary to assess the condition of the oldest old to gauge the nature and proportion of the problems emerging due to such transformation. Khan's (1997) study only dealt with the demographic and socioeconomic aspects of the elderly (Khan, 1997). However, he did not focus on anything about the health aspects of the elderly residing in New Delhi. Finally, it may be said that none of the studies mentioned earlier considered 80 years above aged elderly (referred to as oldest-old in different kinds of literature) as a particular category while dealing with various issues of the elderly population of India. Along with demographic assessment, some studies indicated the implication of the aging phenomenon through current dependency ratios (Kumar, 1991 ; Rajan, 1989 ; Rajan, Mishra, & Sarma, 1999). In many situations, it is also found that the rural

elderly continue to work, though their number of working hours comes down with increasing age (Singh, Singh, & Sharma, 1987).

Studies have revealed that the population perspective, socioeconomic setting, health, and socio-psychological aspects of Indian elderly in general are closely interrelated, and the oldest old population is no exception to it. However, we thought that it was wise to consider the problems of the oldest-old from a socioeconomic perspective. Therefore, in the present paper, as a matter of micro-level study, an attempt has been made to highlight the socioeconomic conditions of the oldest old women in an urban setting since such research is minimal or maybe almost absent in the field of social gerontological studies in India.

Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted among the oldest old (80 years and above) population across both the sexes distributed over 10 municipal wards under Midnapore Municipal Town in the district of Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India. The municipal wards are namely Ward No. 3, Ward No. 4, Ward No. 6, Ward No. 7, Ward No. 8, Ward No. 9, Ward No. 10, Ward No. 14, Ward No. 15, and Ward No. 16.

For locating and sampling, we selected the above mentioned municipal wards; at the first stage, we downloaded the voter list of the Assembly Constituency No 236, which was uploaded on the official website by the Election Commission of India in the year 2015. These lists, under their different part numbers, bear the name, age, sex, and address of the voters residing in the different municipal wards under Midnapore Municipal Town.

It appeared from the said voter lists that there were altogether 342 'oldest old' females residing in the different municipal wards under Midnapore Municipal Town. However, for the present study, we selected 25 oldest-old females from each of the 10 municipal wards under Midnapore Municipal Town, respectively using systematic random sampling table, which formed the sample size of 250 respondents. After the sampling of the respondents, a door to door survey was made to locate the specific address and/or resident of each sampled person.

Data on the socioeconomic background of the individual respondents were collected by interview technique with the help of household Census surveys and structured questionnaire schedules. The primary data is analyzed through percentages calculation based on an odd prime number using Microsoft Excel.

The 'economic dependency' parameter is calculated based on respondents' views as well as their financial sources and sources of pension. This means that if the respondents were getting service pension, then they stated that they were economically independent; the respondents who were dependent on their retail shops also stated that they were economically independent, however, when the respondents were getting pension under the scheme of Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Govt. of India, then some of the respondents stated that they were partially dependent and some stated that they were independent. The remaining respondents indicated that they were entirely dependent on their respective sons, daughters, and relatives.

Analysis and Results

Table 1 deals with the demographical aspects of the respondents under study. From this table, it is revealed that in case of age group wise distribution, out of the total number of respondents, the maximum number of respondents were in the age group 80 – 82 years, this age group presents 30.40% of the total respondents. This is followed by the respondents in the age group of 83 – 85 years (24.80% respondents), 86 – 88 years (21.20% respondents), 89 – 91 years (14.40% respondents); however, the noticeable fact is that the age group of 92 – 94 years had 5.60% respondents. Similarly, 95 above age group had only 3.60% of the respondents. Therefore, with respect to the age distribution of the female oldest old population, it can be said that the number of oldest-old females in the higher age group was decreasing gradually.

In case of religion wise distribution of the respondents, Table 1 exhibits that the maximum number of the

Table 1. Demographic Variables such as Age Group, Religion, Marital Status, and Educational Status of the Oldest Old Females

Demographic Variables	No. of Persons (N)	Percentage
Age Group (in years) :		
80–82	76	30.40
83–85	62	24.80
86–88	53	21.20
89–91	36	14.40
92–94	14	5.60
95+	9	3.60
Religion		
Hindu	151	60.40
Muslim	62	24.80
Chrsanity`	9	3.60
Other	28	11.20
Marital Status		
Married	67	26.80
Unmarried	3	1.20
Widow	171	68.40
Separated	9	3.60
Educaonal Standards		
Non-literate	61	24.40
Ability to sign	74	29.60
I – IV	72	28.80
V – VIII	29	11.60
S.F.	14	5.60

oldest-old females were Hindu (60.40% respondents) followed by Muslims (24.80%), Christians (3.60%), and the remaining other 11.20% respondents practiced tribal religions that included Santal, Munda, and Lodha tribal communities.

In case of marital status wise distribution of the respondents, it is observed from the table that most of the oldest old women were widows (68.40%) followed by the married oldest-old women (i.e. spouse is alive) (26.80%). The separated and unmarried category had 3.20% and 1.20% oldest-old females, respectively. The remarkable fact is that not a single case of divorce was found among the respondents in the study area.

In the case of educational standard wise distribution, out of the 250 oldest-old female respondents, 61 respondents (24.40%) were illiterates, 74 respondents (29.60%) had the ability to sign their names, 72 respondents (28.80%) had attended the primary level of education, followed by respondents who had attained middle school level of education (11.60%), while only 5.60% respondents had passed the school final examination. Therefore, the educational status of the respondents reveals that approximately 60 years ago, the undivided Medinipur district had women who were conscious of their educational levels.

Table 2 deals with the economic variables such as sources of financial support, sources of pension, amount received upon retirement, and financial or economic dependency to convey the economic scenario of the studied population. It is inferred from Table 2 that 20.40% respondents were financially dependent on their respective spouses or husbands. On the other hand, 53.20% respondents were dependent on different types of pensions, and the remarkable fact is that only 15.60% of the respondents were economically reliant on their respective sons. It is

Table 2. Economic Variables such as Source of Financial Support, Source of Pension, Amount of Pension, and Financial Dependency of Oldest Old Females

Economic Variables	No. of Persons (N=250)	Percentage
Source of Financial Support :		
Spouse	51	20.40
Pension	133	53.20
Sons	39	15.60
Daughters	15	6.00
Own small scale retail shops	5	2.00
Other relatives	7	2.80
Source of Pension :		
Govt. service own pension	18	13.53
Govt. pension after the death of spouse	26	19.55
Widow pension	55	41.35
Old-age pension	34	25.56
Amount of Pension (in ₹) :		
Below 1500	89	66.92
5001–7500	9	6.77
7501–10000	12	9.02
10001–12500	9	6.77
12501/– above	14	10.53
Financial/ Economic Dependency :		
Independent	112	44.80
Parally Dependent	89	35.60
Fully Dependent	49	19.60

further revealed from this table that 6% respondents were dependent on their respective daughters, and correspondingly, 2.80% respondents were dependent on their respective relatives other than spouse and children ; whereas, 2% respondents were financially dependent on the profits earned from their small scale retail shops.

Therefore, above 50% oldest-old female population was dependent on various types of pension schemes ; whereas, very few, that is, approximately 20% of the oldest-old female population under the study area was dependent on their respective children.

In case of sources of pension wise distribution, according to Table 2, out of the 250 oldest-old female respondents, 133 respondents (53.20%) were benefited by the various types of pension. Therefore, Table 2 reveals that 13.53% respondents received pension due to the death of their spouse who was in govt. service, and 19.55% respondents received their pension after retirement from govt. service. The table also depicts that 41.35% of the respondents received widow pension, and 25.56% of the respondents received old age pension. It may be mentioned in this context that the said two types of pensions are under the scheme of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Govt. of India. Therefore, they have been included simultaneously in more than one category under the heading of 'Sources of Financial Support.' Thus, the total number of respondents mentioned under the title of 'Sources of Financial Support' in Table 2 exceeds the actual number of respondents as a sample for the present study.

However, in some cases, the same person was receiving a pension for both the said two reasons, and therefore, she has been simultaneously included respectively in both the two categories, namely 'Own pension after retirement from govt. services' and 'Govt. pension of respective spouse after his death'. It is pertinent to mention

here that in a number of cases, it is found that a single respondent was financially dependent simultaneously on two or more than two sources.

It can be deduced from the Table 2 that about 66.92% of the respondents received less than ₹ 1500/- per month and the receiving amount indicates either an old-age pension or widow pension as stated by the respondents, and both the pension schemes are sanctioned by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Govt. of India. Furthermore, the data also clearly demonstrates that the maximum number of oldest-old females were dependent on the old-age pension or widow pension. This means that the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Govt. of India has been playing a significant role in improving the later life of aged people as well as the oldest-old female population. The table also illustrates that followed by the post-retirement monthly service pension, 6.77% of the respondents received the amount which ranged from ₹ 5,001 – ₹ 7,500 ; 9.02% of the respondents received the amount which ranged from ₹ 7501 – ₹ 10,000 ; 6.77% of the respondents received the amount which ranged from ₹10,001 – ₹12,500/- and 10.53% of the respondents received the pension amount which ranged from ₹ 12,001 and above.

Table 2 furthermore exposes that in case of economic dependency, 44.80% of the total respondents were economically independent ; whereas, 35.60% of the respondents were economically partially independent and 19.60% of the total number of respondents were economically dependent.

Table 3 deals with the aspects of housing arrangements and living arrangements of the respondents under study. In the case of housing arrangements wise distribution, 38.80% of the respondents were living in their own house ; whereas, 36.40% of the respondents were living in their respective son's house ; 6% of the respondents were living in their married daughter's house ; and the remaining 15.20% respondents were living in a rented house ; 3.60% of the respondents were living in their respective neighbour's house without paying any rent. Thus, there is fundamental evidence that after attaining 80 years and above age, the majority of the women were dependent upon others.

In the case of living arrangements of the respondents, it is inferred from Table 3 that 18.80% of the respondents were living with their respective spouses, 39.20% of the respondents were residing jointly with their married sons ; whereas, 20.40% respondents were living with their unmarried sons. It is further revealed from the table that 9.20% of the total number of respondents were living with their married daughters and 5.60% of the

Table 3. Living Variables such as Housing Arrangements and Living Arrangements of the Oldest Old Females

Living Variables	No. of Persons (N)	Percentage
Housing Arrangements		
Neighbour's house	9	3.60
Own house	97	38.80
Rented house	38	15.20
Son's house	91	36.40
Married Daughter's house	15	6.00
Living Arrangements :		
Only with spouse	47	18.80
With married sons	98	39.20
With unmarried sons	51	20.40
With married daughter	23	9.20
With unmarried daughter	14	5.60
Living alone	17	6.80

respondents were living with their unmarried daughters, respectively. Finally, the table also exposes that 6.80% of the total numbers of respondents lived in solitary conditions.

Conclusion

This study provides a socioeconomic portrait of the oldest old females residing in Medinipur Municipal town in West Bengal, who are likely to need assistance from programs organized by the Government both at the State as well as at the Central levels. Marital status wise distribution of the oldest old females reveals that most of the oldest old women were widows ; whereas, very few respondents were separated but divorced women were absent. Despite the marital status, some negative issues have been raised through this study, which are exemplified by the following facts : they were far less educated ; economically more dependent; a considerable number of them (about 59% respondents) did not get/receive any pension from any sources. Moreover, even among the respondent pensioners, about 92% of the total number of respondents received a pension below ₹ 1500/- per month. However, some of the facts like housing arrangements and living arrangements reveal the presence of thick family bondage between the oldest-old females and their children.

The present study also reveals that the oldest old people survive in a fast-changing socioeconomic scenario — industrialization, rapid urbanization, the increase in nuclear families, and eroding of the traditional joint family system. In urban areas of the Midnapore Municipal town, the conventional joint family system has become a thing of the past. In such changing situations, majority of the oldest-old persons, who have passed most parts of their life with their joint/extended families, are on the verge of isolation or marginalization in old age and at this age, when they need family support the most, they have to live on their own, and this livelihood pattern raises different social issues among the oldest old population in urban areas.

The intended research tries to reflect the current portrait of the socioeconomic characteristics of the oldest old female persons who were living in a particular municipality area of West Bengal, India. However, the present study is a micro level study which, in turn, may help to understand the macrocosm scenario of the oldest old female population of India. Moreover, the study may be useful to formulate policies relevant for the welfare of the oldest old population living in the rural areas of India.

Finally, the present study may be helpful to raise different issues like the social dimensions of aging in urban areas, successful aging in urban areas, problems of aging in urban areas, and others in the aged study, especially in gerontological studies for further researches.

Limitations of the Study

The present study has several limitations such as the use of a purposeful sampling method could have resulted in some selection bias. The living arrangements status of the oldest old females are over-represented, which might have influenced the results. Therefore, the sample is not representative and cannot lead to generalization for the entire oldest old female population.

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About the Authors

Mr. Parikshit Chakraborty is currently working as a Junior Research Fellow at Anthropological Survey of India and along with this, he is pursuing Ph.D. from Dept. of Anthropology, University of Calcutta and before that, he was a UGC - MRP fellow at Dept. of Anthropology, Vidyasagar University. His study mainly concentrates on the socio-demographic and health aspects of the oldest old population.

Dr. Sutapa Chaudhury is currently working at the Department of Anthropology as an Associate Professor. She is a Former Head of the Department. She did her Ph.D. from University of Calcutta. Her special domain of research is social-cultural anthropology.

Dr. Arup Ratan Bandyopadhyay is a Professor of Anthropology and is the present Head of of the Anthropological and Behavirol Sciences section of the Indian Science Congress in its Centenary year.