

## Socio-Demographic Setup of the Rural Oldest Old: An Anthropological Assessment

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**Abstract:** In the year 2011, the Election Commission of India has started to publish separate voter list who belonging to 80 years and above age. However, Department of Finance, Government of India categorized as ‘Super Senior Citizen’ for the purpose of income tax assessment. The term “Oldest Old” was coined in 1984 in a session at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to refer to the population aged 85 and older. In India most of the gerontological studies considered the ‘elderly’ (aged 60 years and above) as a single age category and therefore, did not deal with the problems of oldest old population separately despite the fact that the octogenarian, nonagenarian and centenarians sub-population were very much in existence in the demographic scenario of India from the remote past. Therefore, the present study aims to highlight socio-demographic milieu as well as the social status of the rural oldest-old people of Paschim Midnapore district, West Bengal, India, that’s why the researcher focused on age group, sex, caste and community, marital status, living arrangement, educational attainment, and family types, house hold size which significantly associated with the social status. Therefore, as an introductory ventures the researcher is an attempt to focus a micro-level study (Micro refers to small-scale or small group interactions) on the socio-demographic profile of the rural oldest old population in the arena of social gerontological study in India.

**Keywords:** Oldest-old, AAAS, Super Senior Citizen, Socio-demographic milieu, micro-level study.

### PRELIMINARY STATEMENTS

The term “Oldest-old” generally used to refer to the population aged 85 and older, was coined for a 1984 session on this population at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). However, even in US, limitations of survey data, resulting from small sample sizes at the oldest ages, forced several studies of the oldest old to define them as those ages 80 and older [1].

Since the last decade or so, the Election Commission of India has started to publish 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 the purpose of income tax assessment [2].

However, one may be tempted to assume that such categorization in India has its genesis in the United States of America since it is evident that the term “Oldest Old” was coined in 1984 in a session at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) to refer to the

population aged 85 and older. But even in US, limitations of survey data, resulting from small sample sizes at the oldest ages, forced several studies of the oldest old to define them as those ages 80 and older.

The oldest old have 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 [3] conceptualization of the “young old” (60-70 years of old) and “old old” (70-80 years of old) . But, unlike Neugarten’s concept, which joined age, health, and social characteristics, the term oldest-old, in its basic usage, simply defined the chronological age group of those age 80 and older, without implying that all, or most, of the oldest old were necessarily frail.

Demographic analyses throughout the world suggest that the oldest old (i.e., people of age 80 years and older) are the fastest growing portion of the population. Specifically, in the past years anthropologists observed that people living in Sardinia (Italy), Okinawa (Japan), Loma Linda (California), and Nicoya Peninsula (Costa Rica) have very high life

expectancy, with the present of people over the age of 90 being at amazing rates as compared with the developed world average rate. Particularly, “some lifestyle characteristics, like family coherence, avoidance of smoking, plant-based diet, moderate and daily physical activity, social engagement, where people of all ages are socially active and integrated into the community, are common in all people enrolled in the surveys”. Clearly, longevity is a complex attribute, determined by factors such as, exposure to disease, variability in sleeping patterns, smoking, physical activity, and dietary habits, in addition to the indirect emotional and cognitive influence on physiological pathways.

As India is witnessing industrialization, urbanization, globalization and rapid changes in the socio-economic milieu, it is urgently necessary to assess the condition of the oldest old to gauge the nature and proportion of the problems emerged due to such transformation. Only then it may be possible to put the problems in their proper perspective and to find out effective ways to address those problems. Full and clear grasp of the whole problem is basic to the successful planning in this regard.

It is revealed that population perspective, socio-economic setting, health and socio-psychological aspects of Indian elderly in general are closely interrelated and the oldest old population is no exception of it. However, the present authors thought that it is wise to consider the problems of the oldest-old from the economic perspectives. Therefore, in the present paper, as a matter of micro-level study, an attempt has been made to highlight the socio-economic condition of the oldest old women in an urban location since such study is very limited or may be almost absent in the field of social gerontological studies in India.

#### **BACKGROUND OF THE PRESENT STUDY**

In India, first gerontological research was initiated by Prof. P.V. Ramamurti in the early 1960s. The major aim of his research was to find out the specific psychological problems faced by the elderly people after their retirement. In the late 1960s Prof. H.D. Marulassidiah started his research work among the old peoples of Makunti village in Dharwar district of the state of Karnataka. The major emphasis of his research was to understand the influence of urbanization on older person.

Most countries around the world are in the midst of demographic ageing [4]. International Brief on Gender and Aging, Washington, DC: United States Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration. Living alone, lack of a confidant and psychological well-being of elderly women in Singapore: the mediating role of loneliness. *Asia-Pacific Psychiatry*, 2(1): 33–40. This has been especially true in the case of developing countries like

India, where the elderly population is increasing rapidly, both in absolute numbers as well as in proportion to the general population.

On the other hand, due to recent sociological trends towards the nuclearisation of family structure and the resultant decline of extended families, falling fertility rates, increasing life expectancy, widowhood, singlehood or strained inter-generational relationships, an increasing number of elderly are living alone in India. In India, elderly living alone has increased from three per cent during the period 1998–1999 (International Institute for Population Sciences & ORC Macro 2000 International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) AND ORC MACRO 2000 National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2) [5], 1998–99, IIPS, Mumbai, India. The number of the elderly people living alone in India will increase more in the coming years, with increasing urbanization and migration of young people coupled with decreased cohesiveness in family bonds. Therefore, the effect of living alone on the health and well-being of the elderly people is of grave societal concern.

Elderly people living alone have been described as an ‘at risk’ group by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization 1977 World Health Organization (WHO) 1977 Prevention of Mental Disorders in the Elderly, WHO, Copenhagen. In India, a micro-level study found significant gender differentials in socio-demographic characteristics as well as in the health status of the elderly [6]. Socioeconomic and demographic diversity in the health status of elderly people in a transitional society, Kerala, India. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 41(4): 457–467.

However, there is a general dearth of well-established evidence on the association between the elderly's living arrangement and their health status in the Indian population. The present study has been designed to respond to the existing gap in knowledge. In India, the understanding of the health status of the elderly living alone is limited because of the paucity of population-based representative demographic data. Also, due to numerous methodological problems related to the determination of health status at older ages [7]. “Principles of epidemiology in old age”. In *Epidemiology in Old Age*, Edited by: Ebrahim, S. and Kalache, A. 12–21. London: BMJ Publishing Group.

#### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

In view of the above background the present work aims to study on the following aspects of the oldest old population:

- To study the socio-demographical aspects of the oldest-old population living in Konkabati Gram Panchayet under Medinipur Sadar Block in Paschim Medinipur District of West Bengal, India.

The socio-demographical aspects of the oldest-old population with respect to assessment of age-sex composition, marital status, family types, household size, living arrangement, working status, household chores, receipt of pension, economic dependency, care during illness are used to measure. Different studies have demonstrated that socio-demographical scenario can strongly effect on future generation of society [8-11].

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The present study was conducted among the oldest old (80 years and above) populations across both the sexes distributed over seventy villages under eleven Gram Panchayet of Sadar Block in the district of Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India.

For the purpose of locating and sampling the oldest-old population residing in the villages mentioned above the present researcher at the first stage downloaded the voter list of the Assembly Constituency no 236 uploaded in their official website by the Election Commission of India in the year 2015. This list, under its different part number, bears the name, age, sex and address of the voters residing in the villages under above referred five Gram Panchayets.

It appears from the said voter lists that there are altogether 242 ‘oldest old’ people residing in the above referred villages among whom 121 are male and 121 are female. However, for the present study the researchers selected 22 oldest-old (equal number of

male and female) elderly from each of the eleven Gram Panchayets respectively using S+ random sampling table which formed the sample size of 242 respondents.

In case of sampling of respondents the provisions were made for one substitutes from each village so as to replace the same in case of the originally sampled respondent were not available, unwilling or physically unfit to respond during the field survey.

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. It was initially difficult to gain access to those sampled elderly persons owing to their special fears of crime or exploitation. A few of our study participants expressed concern that their responses to our questions/interview may create misunderstanding within the family. However, such difficulties an over cum with the help and cooperation of the local Club and /or Gram Panchayet members

Data on socio-demographical assessments of the oldest-old respondent have been collected by interview technique and observation method with the help of structured questionnaire schedules. Based on the socio-demographical indicator like age-sex composition, marital status, family types, household size, living arrangement, working status, household chores, receipt of pension, economic dependency [12].

**RESULTS**

**Table-1: Age-sex wise Distribution of the Respondents**

Age Group	Male		Female		Total no. of M & F	% against total no. of respondent
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
80-84	76	31.4	67	27.69	143	59.09
85-89	38	15.7	43	17.77	81	33.47
90 and above	7	2.9	11	4.55	18	7.44
Total	121	50.00	121	50.00	242	100.00

**Table-2: Marital Status wise Distribution of the Respondents**

Marital Status	Male		Female		Total no. of M & F	% against total no. of respondents
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
Married Having spouse	72	29.75	27	11.16	99	40.91
Widowed	47	19.42	89	36.78	136	56.2
Divorce	0	0.00	1	0.41	1	0.41
Separated	2	0.82	3	1.24	5	2.07
Unmarried	0	0.00	1	0.41	1	0.41
Total	121	50.00	121	50.00	242	100.00

**Table-3: Housing Arrangements wise Distribution of the Respondents**

Housing arrangements	Male		Female		Total no. of M & F	% against total no. of respondents
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
Non-kin's house	7	2.89	13	5.37	20	8.26
Relative's house	5	2.07	9	3.72	14	5.79
Own House	32	13.22	23	9.5	55	22.73
Son's house	58	23.3	49	20.25	107	44.21
Daughter's house	19	7.85	27	11.16	46	19.01
Total	121	50.00	121	50.00	242	100.00

**Table-4: Living Arrangements wise Distribution of the Respondents**

Living Arrangement	Male		Female		Total no. of M & F	% against total no. of respondents
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
Only with Spouse	49	20.25	23	9.5	72	29.75
With married Sons	29	11.98	36	14.88	65	26.86
With unmarried Sons	15	6.2	21	8.68	36	14.88
With married daughter	19	7.85	27	11.16	46	19.01
With unmarried daughter	2	0.83	9	3.72	11	4.54
Living alone	7	2.89	5	2.07	12	4.96
Total	121	50.00	121	50.00	242	100.00

**Table-5: Working Status wise Distribution of the Respondents**

Working Status	Male		Female		Total no. of M & F	% against total no. of respondent
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
Worker	27	11.16	34	14.05	61	25.21
Marginal Worker	21	8.68	38	15.7	59	24.38
Non-Worker	73	30.16	49	20.25	122	50.41
Total	121	50.00	121	50.00	242	100.00

**Table-6: Distribution of the Respondents as per their House-hold Chores**

Chores of the Respondents Within the family	Male		Female		Total no. of M & F	% against total no. of respondents
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
Helping hands during cooking	3	1.24	45	18.6	48	19.83
Cooking food	1	0.41	13	5.37	14	5.78
Gardening and Farming	23	9.5	7	2.89	30	12.4
Sweeping	1	0.41	0	0.00	1	0.41
Daily marketing of House hold necessities	17	7.02	7	2.89	24	9.92
Miscellaneous light task	76	31.40	49	20.25	125	51.65
Total	121	50.00	121	50.00	242	100.00

**Table-7: Recipient of Pension wise Distribution of the Respondents**

Types of Pension	Male		Female		Total No. of Recipients of Pension	% against total no. of pensioner
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
Old age pension	39	16.11	12	4.96	51	21.07
Post service pension	11	4.54	7	2.89	18	7.44
Widow pension	13	5.37	58	23.97	71	29.34
Total Pension Recipients	63	26.03	77	31.81	130	53.72
Non Recipients of Pension	58	23.3	44	18.18	102	42.15

**Table-8: Age group wise Financial/Economic Dependency Distribution of the Respondents**

Age Group	Independent		Partially Dependent		Fully Dependent	
	N	(%)	N	(%)	N	(%)
80-84	48	19.83	72	29.75	23	9.5
85-89	26	10.74	38	15.7	17	7.02
90 and above	0	0.00	5	2.07	13	5.37
Total	74	30.58	115	47.52	53	21.9

**Table-9: Main Source of Care of the Respondents during their Illness**

Source of Care	Male		Female		Total no. of M & F	% against total no. of respondents
	N	% against total no. of respondent	N	% against total no. of respondent		
Spouse	40	16.53	3	1.24	43	17.77
Children	42	17.35	58	23.97	100	41.32
Kin Relatives	25	10.33	36	14.88	61	25.21
Non kin relatives	14	5.79	24	9.91	38	15.70
Total	121	50.00	121	50.00	242	100.00

**DISCUSSIONS**

The table no-1 shows the age group wise distribution of the respondents. The maximum number of oldest old males and females both are found in 80 – 84 years of age, which represent 59.09 % against total no. of respondents where 31.4% male oldest old respondents and 27.69% female oldest old respondents. Then 36.37% against total no. of respondents comes under the 85 – 89 years of age; that includes 15.7% male oldest old respondents and 17.77% female oldest old respondents. And among the others, only 7.44% respondents come under the 90 and above years of age where 2.9% male oldest old respondents and 4.55% female oldest old respondents. So, from the table it found that the numbers of respondents in the above age group are respectively decreased with the increasing of their age.

The table no-2 shows the marital status wise distribution of the respondents. It is found that there was no divorce and unmarried male person among the oldest old respondents yet only 0.41% female oldest old respondents exist in divorce and unmarried category.

However, it is evident from the table that the total number of respondents across both the sexes having their respective spouse is alive where male 29.75% and 11.16% female i.e. 40.91% of the total respondents. These oldest old respondents have been considered under the category of married having spouse. Among the total number of respondents the number of widowed male is 19.42% and 36.78% female and the maximum number of oldest old respondents i.e. 56.2% represents the widowed category. However, only 2.07% respondents were existing across both the sexes under the category of separation.

The table no-3 shows housing arrangements wise distribution of the oldest old respondents. It is evident that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 8.26% live in non-kin’s house, 5.79% live in their relative’s house, 22.73% live in their own house, 44.21% live in the son’s house and 19.01% live in the daughter’s house. In the cases of the respondents living in non-kin’s house, 2.89% male and 5.37% female lived in the total number respondents. Whereas, 2.07 percentages of male and 3.72% female



respondents living in relative's house. However, respondents living in own house, percentage of male is 13.22 where, only 9.5% female respondents living in own house. In the cases of respondents living in their son's house, percentage of male is 23.3 and 20.25% female of the total number respondents. The table also shows that the respondents who living in their daughter's house, percentage of male is 7.85 and where, 11.16% female of the total number respondents living in their daughter's house.

The table no-4 explains living arrangements based distribution of the respondents. It is discovered from the table that among the total number of respondents across both the sexes 29.75% are respectively living with their spouse; 26.86% are respectively living with their married sons; 14.88% are respectively living with their un-married sons; 19.01% are respectively living with their married daughters; 4.54% are respectively living with their un-married daughters and 4.96% of the total number of respondent across both the sexes are living alone. It is found that under the category of living with respective spouse 20.25% are male and only 9.5% of female living with her respective spouse. It is evident that under the category of living with married sons 11.98% are male from total respondents where, 14.88% are female respondents living with married sons. But under the category of living with un-married sons only 6.2% are male and 8.68% are female respondents. The table shows that under the category of living with married daughters there are 7.85% male besides 11.16% are female respondents. But under the category of living with un-married daughters merely 0.83% are male moreover 3.72% are respondents living with married daughters. Finally, it is observed that under the category of solitary living 2.89% are male also 2.07% are female respondents living lonely.

The table no-5 shows working status based distribution of the respondents. It is evident that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 25.21% are workers, 24.38% are marginal workers and 50.41% are non-workers. Under the category of worker percentage of male is 11.16 and while under this category percentage of female is 14.05 from the total number of respondents. Under the category of marginal worker percentage of male is 8.68 although under this category percentage of female is 15.7. Under the category of non-worker percentage of male is 30.16 however under this category percentage of female are 20.25.

The table no-6 exhibits distribution of the respondents as per house-hold chores performed by them. It is evident that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 19.83% regularly participate as helping hands during cooking, 5.78% take the responsibility of cooking food, 12.4% participate in gardening and farming, 0.41% performs the duty of

sweeping of the family home, 9.92% is engaged in daily marketing of house-hold necessities, 51.65% is engaged in miscellaneous light tasks within family. It is found that under the category of house-hold chores, 1.24% were male respondents where 18.6% were female who serving as helping hands during cooking within family. The table indicates that under the category of cooking food, there were only 0.41% male respondents who cooking food however in case of female 5.37% were female respondents. The table displays that under the category of gardening and farming, the percentages of male respondents were 9.5% but in case of female there were only 2.89% female respondents who participating gardening and farming. The table shows that under the category of sweeping, there were 0.41% male respondents but in case of there were no female respondents who performing the duty of sweeping within the family. The table shows that under the category of daily marketing of house-hold necessities, the percentages of male respondents were 7.02 however only 2.89 percentages of female respondents. Finally, it is further revealed from the table under discussion that among the total number of respondents performing miscellaneous light tasks within family 31.4% are male respondents. While, under this category 20.25% is female respondents.

The table no-7 shows recipient of pension wise distribution of the oldest old respondents. It is revealed from this table that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 42.15% are non-recipients of pension. It is found that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 53.72% are recipient of pension where 26.03% are male oldest old respondents and 31.81% are female oldest old respondents out of the total oldest old respondents.

To get the scenario of pensioner in details the present researcher has subdivided the pensioner in different categories which are namely: old age pension, post service pension and widow pensions. Thus, it is found that among the total number of recipients of pension inclusive of both the sexes 21.07% (i.e. 16.11% male respondents and 4.96% female respondents) are receiver of old age pension; 7.44% (i.e. 4.54% male respondents and 2.89% female respondents) are receiver of post-service pension and rest 29.34% (i.e. 5.37% male respondents and 23.97% female respondents) are receiver of widow pension.

The table no-8 exhibits distribution of the respondents as per their Economic Dependency. It is evident out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 30.58% respondents were fully independent. The age group wise distribution that said 19.83 percentages seen in 80-84 years of age group and 10.74 percentages seen in 85-89 years of age group.

It is evident that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 47.52% respondents

were partially dependent. The age group wise distribution of the total number of fully partially dependent 29.75% respondents were belong in age group 80-84 years; and only 15.7% respondents were belong in age group 85-89 years however in the age group of 90 and above was only 2.07% respondents who was economically partially dependent.

It is evident that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 21.9% respondents were fully dependent. The age group wise distribution of the total number of fully dependent 9.5% respondents were belong in age group 80-84 years; 7.02% respondents were belong in age group 85-89 years moreover 5.37% respondents were belong in age group 90 above years of age.

The table no-9 demonstrates the distribution of the respondents as per their main source of care during illness. It is evident that out of the total number of respondents across both the sexes 17.77% respondents are cared by their respective spouse, 41.32% respondents are cared by their respective children, 25.21% respondents are cared by their respective kin relatives within the family of the respondents, finally, it is revealed from the table, 15.70% respondents are cared by their respective non kin relatives living outside the family of the respondents.

It is evident that out of the total number of respondents 16.53% male respondents are cared by their respective spouse whereas only 1.24% female respondents are cared by their respective spouse. Therefore, it is found that among the total number of respondents 17.35% male respondents are cared by their respective children although 23.97% female respondents are cared by their respective children. Thus the table demonstrates that among the total number of respondents 10.33% male respondents are cared by their respective kin relatives within the family of the respondents while 14.88% female respondents are cared by their respective kin relatives within the family of the respondents. Hence, the total numbers of respondents 5.79% male respondents are cared by their respective non kin relatives outside the family of the respondents whereas 9.91% female respondents are cared by their respective non kin relatives outside the family of the respondents.

## **CONCLUSION**

“Super Senior Citizen” or “Oldest-Old” which started at the age of 80 and above population encompasses biological, mental and socio-economic change of human being as they age. The changes vary from person to person and place to place depending on physical and socio-economic and socio-demographic environments that reflects by the worthy demographical portrait. Therefore, to gain an understanding on the issues of the socio-demographic factors present research was carried among the rural oldest old respondents. The

numbers of male respondents in the various age groups are respectively decreased compared to the female counterpart and with the increasing of their age. Compared to the widowed female within the sampled population may lead us to conclude that higher mortality rate among the male compared to their female counterpart may be responsible for such demographic scenario.

The oldest old male respondents and female respondents live either within own family or within the family of their close relatives and the economic condition in general are not very satisfactory. From the living arrangements wise distribution of the oldest old respondents it is found that the number of male respondents living with spouse are higher compare to the female respondents. Maximum numbers of female respondents are living with their married sons compared to the male respondents. The fact that among the total oldest old respondents under study there is more number of female working force compared to their male counterpart may tempt us to conclude that female oldest old respondents have lesser scope of rest, leisure and recreation compared to the male oldest old respondents. This is yet another example of the existing disadvantageous position of the women in Indian society. In the family sphere most of the males oldest old respondents are living with their spouses whereas, most of the female oldest old respondents are living with their children. This implies the gender characteristics that the grandmothers are more closely associated with the family members, compared to the grandfathers who mostly feel comfortable reportedly with their spouse.

Although it is found that the receipt of pension among the oldest old respondents ironically find that in terms of the recipient of Government pension among the female has outnumbered the male respondents. This scenario may be explained in terms of introduction of widow pension scheme by the Government as well as presence of greater number of widowed female compared to widowed male in the sampled population under study. Thus, it is interesting to notice that in the present study find that in terms of financial independence the female elderly are over all in better position compared to their male counterpart.

The study reveals that in case of main source of care during illness of the oldest old respondents the maximum numbers of male respondents are cared by their respective *spouse* compared to the female counterparts. In fact that among the female oldest old respondents the maximum numbers of females is cared by their respective *children*. This reveals the close association of female oldest old respondents with their children as well as family and daughter-in-laws, grandchildren, and household activities, in contrast to the male oldest old respondents.

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