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Dominant daughters-in-law and submissive mothers-in-law? :

Co-operation and conflict in South India

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Abstract

The stereotype of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations in India is that of a dominating mother-in-law and submissive daughter-in-law. However, residents of low-income settlements in Chennai (formerly called Madras) argue that daughters-in-law no longer submit to the demands and wishes of their mothers-in-law as they do in rural Tamil Nadu, a South Indian state of which Chennai is the capital. Rather than being culturally determined, relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are shaped by shifting physical, social and economic dependencies and expectations of dependence in the future. In many families social and economic developments are redefining relations between older and younger generations. Where such developments have had, or are expected to have, a deleterious effect on older women's capacity to support themselves or secure the support of their family, mothers-in-law are adopting a variety of strategies towards their daughters-in-law including that of appeasement.

Amongst Indians and the general public in the West the predominant image of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations in Indian joint families is that of the dominant mother-in-law and submissive daughter-in-law. However, many residents of low-income settlements in Chennai (formerly called Madras) complain that in the city daughters-in-law do not submit to the demands and wishes of their mothers-in-law as they do in rural Tamil Nadu, a South Indian state of which Chennai is the capital. Younger women in these settlements, wishing to stress the inversion of the 'typical' order of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship, state 'here it is the daughter-in-law who lies on the bed ordering her mother-in-law around'. In practice many women in these low-income households are wary of their daughters-in-law and anxious not to antagonise them. Such claims and relations not only contradict the

predominant image of Indian mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations but also the Indianist view that relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in South India are more equitable than in North India.

This article explores the disparities between the predominant and Indianist depictions and my informants' claims by examining the basis of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations amongst those living on low-incomes. The evidence suggests that intra-gender, inter-generational family and household relations are not static, that improvements in the circumstances or opportunities of one generation in a family may be detrimental to another and that the quality of family and household relationships are based as much on expectations (including fear) of the future as on current circumstances. The article shows that economic developments can have a deleterious effect on older women's capacity to support themselves or secure the support of their family. Clearly this is not a problem confined to India, yet the consequences of economic development for the welfare of older generations and their relations with younger, related adults has failed to draw much interest from anthropologists.

Fieldwork was undertaken between November 1990 and March 1992 in two settlements in central Chennai: one is a squatter settlement and the other comprises a mixture of municipal tenements and open plots allocated by local government. Residents of both areas are either born in Chennai or are long term rural-urban migrants. They belong to the disadvantaged castes designated by the state as the 'Scheduled Castes' (once known as Untouchables), 'Most Backward Castes' and 'Backward Castes' (the largest castes are Adi Dravidars, also known as Paraiyars, and Vanniyars). The majority work in the informal sector.

The thrust of my argument is that social and economic positioning in conjunction with family demographics, rather than culture, has the primary role in shaping mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations. The first section of the article

identifies the source of the conflict between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law underlying the predominant view of their relations. Amongst academics this conflict is considered to result from the North Indian pattern of gender and family relations. In the second section I argue that the Indianist view that gender and family relations in South India differ from those in the north results from emphasising abstract kinship patterns at the expense of actual kin relations and social and economic positioning. Section three examines the anxieties women in Chennai's low-income settlements have about their relations with their daughters-in-law and some of the strategies they use to keep daughters-in-law compliant.

Structural conflicts and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations

The predominant view of 'typical' mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations as one of dominating mother-in-law and submissive daughter-in-law largely coincides with early studies of landed, North Indian joint families. In the 1960s and 1970s scholars of North Indian joint families focused on how, when and why joint families break up. When they considered mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations they were largely interested in how stranger brides were incorporated into the joint family and took little interest in the transfer of power and authority from the older woman to the younger, taking it to be a logical consequence of the younger woman's role as mother of the next generation. Drawing on their studies and more recent work on gender and household relations the following picture of the North Indian, landed, joint family emerges.

The North Indian pattern of male inheritance, village and kin exogamy, virilocal residence, and restrictions on women's economic activities makes women dependent on men (Sharma 1980:200-1) and positions brides as strangers in their husband's home. Initially a woman's economic prospects are tied to those of her husband. Subsequently they are tied to those of her sons for two reasons: first, she and her husband will become reliant on their sons in old age and second, by custom, a woman has no right of inheritance although she has a right to maintenance from her husband's estate.¹ Thus

the economic interests of the older woman (and her husband) are best served by the joint household. Conforming with the cultural ideal of joint families, this arrangement also confers prestige.

Frequently joint family interests do not coincide with the interests of individual sons and their conjugal families for contributions to, reliance upon and consumption of joint family resources are generally unequal (Parry 1979:182-192). Unequal fertility rates within joint families not only result in differential consumption rates but also differential inheritance as joint property is not divided equally within generations. Instead the most widespread inheritance pattern is one where the joint property is inherited equally by the coparceners which in most Indian states comprise up to four generations, that is a man, his sons, his sons' sons and their sons living or conceived at the time of partitioning the property.² Thus the wife who produces the most sons increases her family's share of joint property. In these circumstances the interests of individual sons and their families may be better served by an early partition of the joint household and property. The timing of partition depends on the brothers' assessment of the benefits of remaining together as against their opportunities post-partition as well as their ability to dissuade those keenest on partition at any one time. This is not to suggest that assessments are made on purely economic grounds, consideration of the social prestige of remaining joint and of cultural mores, such as providing the necessary framework for the seclusion of women, is also brought into the equation (see, for example, Parry 1979:173-194). Thus in a landed joint family a bride is seen as potentially threatening for women and their children embody and accentuate the structural conflicts between the interests of joint families and their (potentially) nuclear family constituents; in this way wives are blamed for conflicts between brothers (Parry 1979:173-178, 193-4; Berreman 1972:174-175; Madan 1965:169-172).

As control over the bride and management of family relations are in the mother-in-law's hands it falls to her to ensure that her daughter-in-law does not develop the

confidence nor gain the loyalty of her son sufficient to encourage him to break the joint family. She wears down her daughter-in-law's confidence through ridicule, rebukes, physical exhaustion and beatings (Jeffery et al 1989:31) and restricts the bride's access to the groom by determining when they will be alone together (Dandekar 1981). This, in the context of arranged marriages, combined with prescriptions on their interaction, militates against young couples developing a close relationship (Jeffery et al 1989:28-31; Parry 1979:176).

It is this kind of treatment which generates the stereotype of the cruel, dominating mother-in-law jealously protective of her preeminent position in her son's affections. Commenting on popular Indian cinema, Das Gupta states:

In that last high status [of mother-in-law], [a woman] can revenge herself upon society for the destruction of her own youth by visiting it upon her daughter-in-law. In so doing, she has the additional sadistic satisfaction of alienating her beloved son from his newly acquired wife, her rival for his affection. The family's perceived economic need to extract more and more dowry from the bride's father sometimes leads to murder of the new bride with the help of the [bride's] husband giving the mother[-in-law] a physical thrill that may go far deeper than economic gain (1991:159).

While the popular stereotype suggests fixed relations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law the studies mentioned above imply (but do not explore) something more complex, for with the birth of children a daughter-in-law's confidence rises while at the same time tensions over contributions to, and distributions of, household resources sharpen. Not only are mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations strained, reflecting the structural conflict between the landed joint family and its 'nuclear' constituents, but rather than declining structural conflict increases with time. Recognising the structural positioning of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law advances

our understanding of the determinants of their relations beyond the stereotype of the dominating mother-in-law and submissive daughter-in-law. It reveals that rather than short term power struggles and the immediate problems of incorporating a stranger into the family, their relations entail recognising and strategising around long-term differential, even divergent, interests and are rooted in expectations and fears of what the future might hold.

As the image of the dominant mother-in-law and submissive daughter-in-law is rooted in the specific economic tensions found in North Indian, landed joint families it is unlikely that this image is generalisable to landless North Indian families as the crucial issue of property inheritance does not apply. It is even questionable to what extent the image adequately depicts mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations in landed North Indian joint families for household demographics, the participation of family members in non-farm work, often located in urban areas, and the size and quality of landholding will create variations within mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations. These variations are not simply to be found between households but also within households. If the objective of the mother-in-law is to retain the joint family in a context where sons have differential interests in doing so, mothers-in-law will adopt strategies according to how they read the personalities and changing circumstances of sons and daughters-in-law as well as changes in, and expectations of, their own and their husband's circumstances as they move into old age and dependency.³ It is in terms of this variation that studies focusing on the bride's or joint family perspective fail to problematise the process by which daughters-in-law gain power and mothers-in-law lose it. More nuanced investigations are needed of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations which take a contextualised processual focus in relation to age and material circumstance to reveal the very complex and changing set of relationships and strategies on the part of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Such investigations will take us beyond the North Indian model's stereotyping of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations.

North and South Indian models

Until recently the anthropology of India was dominated by a framework that approaches cultural diversity by taking cultural units (castes, tribes, religions and races-as-culture-bearers) as the appropriate objects of analysis. This approach underplays diversity within cultural units as well as the commonalities between them. Such a framework is seen in the construction of North and South Indian models of kin and gender relations. Dyson and Moore (1983) provide the most explicit and influential comparison of these two models. They draw a diagonal line across India from the Gujarat/Maharashtra border to the Bihar/Orissa border approximately along the Satrupa hill range. North of the line and extending into parts of the Mediterranean lies what they identify as the Aryan/West Asia pattern of kin and gender relations. South of the line and extending to Sri Lanka and to the border of the Confucian cultures of China, Japan and so on is the Dravidian/South and East Asian pattern of kin and gender relations (Dyson and Moore 1983:fn 59).

Dyson and Moore posit two ideal-types (the Aryan, North Indian model and the Dravidian, South Indian model) in which the South Indian model is drawn in contrast to the North Indian model. The latter is characterised by village and kin exogamy, in-marrying women are considered a threat to the family resulting in the segregation of the sexes, conjugal reserve and the domination of young women by senior women. There is an emphasis on the wedding ceremony and size of dowry, restrictions on female mobility and work and women do not inherit or transfer property. South Indian marriage is characterised as village and kin endogamous, resulting in closer relations between spouses, less conflicts between a woman and her husband's family (for they are her own family), the underplaying (even dropping) of the wedding, bridewealth, less restrictions on women's occupational choice and, as there is 'less need to repress and resocialize females in their affinal home', fewer joint families (Dyson & Moore 1983:45). In addition, women in the south may inherit or transfer property (ibid).

Dyson and Moore argue that these two models reflect typical cultural patterns generating observable differences in demographic performance and female autonomy in North and South India.

Alongside championing the two models Dyson and Moore recognise several limitations to their schema. They acknowledge that there is no unequivocal distinction in demographic performance and female autonomy across the two regions, that the differences which can be identified are not only relative but 'subtle' (ibid fn 31), and in some instances even 'slight' (ibid p41). They concede that adherence to the model varies by caste and class, a statement which undermines their racial-cultural arguments. They also concede that the state level statistics on which they base their argument could be obscuring quite different relationships between demographic performance and female autonomy. The latter reservation is well founded for district level statistics for Tamil Nadu (which show no consistent correlation between high female literacy and low fertility) do not support Dyson and Moore's argument that the higher rate of female literacy in South India reflects the southern kin pattern's promotion of female autonomy, higher contraception and lower fertility (Swaminathan 1996).

Dyson and Moore's schema denies the continuities between marriage patterns in North and South India despite bridewealth being a feature of North Indian marriage amongst impoverished higher castes, lower castes and in more remote districts (Sharma 1980:137-143; Sax 1991:104-115). Sax states that the widespread shift to dowry began in the 1960s in North India. Kapadia saw a similar shift occurring amongst upwardly mobile lower castes in rural South India in the 1980s, a shift which had already taken place amongst wealthy upper castes in the 1960s (Kapadia 1995:46-67; see also Viramma et al 1997:15-28). The widespread view, implied in Dyson and Moore's work but more explicitly stated by Trautmann, is that in North India marriage results in the 'complete dissimilation of the bride from her family of birth and her complete assimilation to that of her husband' (Trautmann 1981:291) which leaves her more

vulnerable in her conjugal home as compared with the South Indian woman. Yet the life-long ritual links between brother and sister, gift-giving, and extended visiting which sustain close post-marital bonds between a woman and her natal kin in North India (Dube 1988; Vatuk 1975; Jacobson 1977) belie the patrilineal ideology to which Trautmann refers. Further, Raheja and Gold (1994) find that where links between people can be traced through both marriage and birth (including coming from neighbouring villages) the discourse that 'natal ties can never be supplanted by conjugal ones, that even genealogically very distant natal ties are really "closer" than any ties to the husband's kin' (1994:116) also operates. Rather than a defining feature of kin and gender relations in North India the patrilineal ideology of complete assimilation to the husband's family is better seen as a strategic tool in shaping power relations within families (see Jeffery et al 1989:31-36; Sax 1991:77-78). Similarly, rather than disjunctive attitudes to female employment in North and South India there are continuities between the kinds of restriction on occupational choice that women in North and South India experience (cf Sharma 1980 with Lessinger 1989, Ram 1991 and Vera-Sanso 1995).

It is, however, true that marriage *preferences* in South India are distinctly different to those of the north where kin endogamous marriages are usually prohibited and the preference is for long distance marriage. In the south there is a strong preference for marriages between specific genealogically related persons (MyB:eZD, FZS:MBD, MBS: FZD). A bride's mother-in-law could be her maternal grandmother (MyB:eZD marriage) or her paternal aunt (FZS:MBD marriage) or she could be her aunt by marriage (MBS:FZD marriage). It is often assumed by academics that these forms of marriage put daughters-in-law in a more favourable position than their counterparts in North India. However, it would be a mistake to presume that such marriages produce good mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations for two reasons. First, the economic interests of mothers-in-law/daughters-in-law may still conflict. Second, because families have multiple social and economic ties natal families can be less willing to

support their daughters/sisters for fear of jeopardising kin relations (see also Kapadia 1995:44-45). The complexity of the relations involved can make daughters-in-law less willing to complain. In Chennai, for example, women in matrilineal marriages often hide unhappy domestic relations from their natal families in order to protect their mothers from emotional distress and, where their fathers had proposed a patrilineal marriage, from recriminations or beatings. Thus even close-kin endogamous marriage does not ensure good mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations nor realisable natal support for brides.

Despite marriage preferences most marriages are not arranged between kin and nor are they village endogamous. Several studies have found that MyB:eZD marriage, FZS:MBD marriage and MBS:FZD marriages amount to a third or less of all marriages and are on the decline (Beck 1972:238, 253; Trautmann 1981:218-9; Good 1991:75-96; Kapadia 1995:61-66; Caldwell et al 1988:86). Not only are most women not genealogically related to their mothers-in-law but marriages with less closely related kin do little to raise the overall rate of kin endogamous marriage (Trautmann 1981: 220-221). In practice, marriages are shaped more by economic and demographic factors than cultural ones. The availability of a marriageable relative of the appropriate age is merely one factor. Beck (1972:252) finds that wealthy and poor families marry outsiders more often than do others either because they are cutting off poorer relatives or being cut off. Tight intermarriage is more common amongst households of middle income status which have special inherited rights they wish to preserve (ibid). Similarly Beck finds that village endogamy is related to the demographic spread of castes, availability of work for service castes and whether a family is seeking support to maintain local rights and privileges (ibid: 230-232). She finds that only 6% of marriages are village endogamous, and for the smaller castes upwards of 40% of marriages are contracted between families living over 20 miles apart (ibid; see also Harriss 1982:138-146). In the two low-income settlements I studied in Chennai only a small minority of women are married to relatives or to men from the same locality.

Contrary to the South Indian stereotype the majority of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law do not benefit from the potentials of kin endogamous marriage and, in the context of virilocal residence, the area to which brides move is often not well-known to them either.

The features which are said to strengthen the position of South Indian women also hold for North India. Thus in both North and South India women have rights in their natal families which can strengthen their position in their conjugal families. They have rights to economic transfers on ritual occasions (Jeffery et al 1989:26-27; Vatuk 1975), rights to extended visits with their natal family (Jacobson 1977) and the right to return home permanently after widowhood or desertion. The one right which may be unique to South India is the right to return home for the first confinement (cf Jeffery et al 1989:72-74). We need more evidence to accept that women in the south are systematically more able to exercise their rights than those in the north. Rather than regional differences it is more likely that class, demography and property tenure determine women's ability to realise their rights. In Chennai's low-income settlements, for example, a woman's right to take up residence in her natal home after widowhood or a failed marriage is only realisable in rented accommodation or, in the case of property treated as inheritable, during the limited period before all her brothers have married, after this time her sisters-in-law will prevent her permanent return (Vera-Sanso 1997).

Rather than cultural differences, it is social and economic positioning in conjunction with family demographics which shapes mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations. Fears and expectations of old-age dependency are what condition a woman's strategies towards her sons and daughters-in-law. In households where livelihoods and unpaid work depend on the labour of family members, ageing women must develop strategies to ensure someone will undertake both the physical and economic support they and their husbands will need in old age. Where old age without the support of an adult son results in serious hardship (see Cain 1988) and where sons set up nuclear

family households after a few years of marriage a woman's strategies towards her sons and daughters-in-law will reflect her perception of her own and their current and future circumstances. Although early partition does not necessarily mean that in old age couples are completely abandoned nor that ageing mothers will not eventually be taken in by a married son, such arrangements can flavour domestic relations quite differently from those in which a young couple remain in or move into their parent's home (Vatuk 1982:37). Caldwell et al (1988:128) find that although in practice the majority of women in the South Indian state of Karnataka have their youngest son's family living with them, it is usually the son and daughter-in-law 'who feel the need for separation less urgently' that live with her. This lack of formality regarding who has responsibility for an ageing mother introduces not only a degree of insecurity regarding who will care for her but also the possibility that no son will actually house her. Quality of care is also a concern in old age and evidence from South India points to a degree of intra-family neglect in even better off households (Gillespie and McNeill 1992:98). Although not all ageing women without supporting sons suffer penury and not all ageing people living with married sons experience hostility or intra-family neglect this occurs sufficiently often to create anxiety in mothers-in-law (see Vatuk 1995).

Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in Chennai

If one accepts that mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations are shaped by social and economic positioning claims that in rural Tamil Nadu daughters-in-law submit to the wishes of their mothers-in-law cannot, in the light of the enormous changes which have taken place in the rural economy, be taken at face value (Athreya et al 1987; Kapadia 1995; cf Harriss 1982). While it may be that in many rural households daughters-in-law do not submit to the demands of their mothers-in-law, the basis of their relations differs from those in urban areas. The main difference lies in the greater degree of caste-based segregation in rural residential and occupational patterns. In villages younger men and women benefit from their parents' and in-law's expertise and networks for training and gaining access to housing, work and other resources. By

contrast cities are much more heterogeneous and can provide a greater range of opportunities for work, residence and independent networks for the younger generation. Even at the local residential level, such as the low-income settlements studied in Chennai, cities are frequently heterogeneous in terms of caste and occupation and the older generation's knowledge and contacts are less significant for the younger generation. This is exacerbated by three trends: first, the greater education of sons and daughters-in-law as compared with their parents and in-laws, many of whom are illiterate; second, increased age at marriage for men and women and third, the vast majority of urban men establish independent livelihoods before marriage. Consequently, sons and daughters-in-law feel more confident and independent of the older generation. In villages the co-operative conflicts that exists between landpoor and landless mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are rooted in extremely low and uncertain incomes.⁴ While this is still the case in Chennai's low-income settlements there is the additional, and considerable, pressure for upward mobility characteristic of cities which places demands on a family's income that can drive a wedge between the interests of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Government jobs, english-medium education, extra tuition, good marriages, improved housing materials, and electrification are all sought after and all require money. This pressure to 'come up in life' sharpens the co-operative conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

Evidence for the relative independence of sons and daughters-in-law can be found by examining household structure (see Table 1). In Chennai, household structure is heavily conditioned by tenure; in this case rented or 'owned'. The land I have classed as 'owned' includes government-allotted plots, for which land titles are being or have been obtained, and squatted land. As there is no legal title, squatted land (and the housing built upon it) cannot be legally inherited, however, the issue of transfer after the death of the occupants remains. In popular thinking squatted property is treated as self-acquired (as opposed to property inherited from a coparcener) and can be disposed of freely. Unlike property which is legally owned, however, there is no authority which

can arbitrate between those claiming inheritance to squatted property. In practice the occupants' acceptance of a family setting up an independent household on squatted property, rent free, signifies inheritance rights. Claimants defend their interest by preventing others setting up independent households on the site.

Table 1 : Household structure (n=110)

<u>Household structure</u>	No. of <u>households</u>	Rented <u>housing</u>	`Owned' <u>housing</u>
Compound households	26	6	20
Joint households	15	9	6
Extended households	14	12	2
Nuclear households	36	29	7
Female-headed households	8	6	2
Single-women households	4	3	1
Couple	4	4	-
Polygynous households	3	2	1

Compound households are defined here as those in which two or more families share a common residence but cook and budget separately. In squatter settlements and government-allotted plots this usually entails a physical subdivision of the house site. Joint households comprise two or more families living, cooking and budgeting together. Nuclear families are defined as a couple with unmarried children. Extended households comprise a couple or nuclear family supplemented by one or more people who themselves do not form a family, all of whom live, cook and budget together. The polygynous households occur where one man marries two sisters. We can see from Table 1 that nearly 56% of households are either nuclear or compound and that compound households predominate in `owned' housing. If we were to classify only in terms of separate cooking and budgeting (which is the basis on which local classifications are made) the number of nuclear households is considerably higher as each compound household encompasses at least one nuclear household. Classifying these households as nuclear would obscure important dynamics in the relations between the older and younger generations. The household trajectory in `owned' housing is

usually as follows. After marriage a son and his wife form a joint household with his parents' household until one or more of his children are weaned, at which time the property is subdivided allowing them independent cooking and budgeting. In some families married daughters are also given a share of 'owned' property. Eventually all sons are married and living independently leaving their parents living, cooking and budgeting as a couple. In most instances the ageing father dies before his wife and she remains on her own as a single-person household in her section of the property. Thus of the 20 compound households in 'owned' property 45% include the separately cooking and budgeting households of either ageing couples or ageing women. A truncated trajectory occurs in rented housing. Here the property is not subdivided so once children are weaned married sons move away and find their own housing and all daughters join their husbands on marriage (although they may return to form a compound household if they fall out with their in-laws). This leaves ageing couples and ageing women without the physical and financial help which they stand a better chance of obtaining when sons and daughters live 'next door' as occurs in compound households.

A critical issue for the long-term residential security and welfare of ageing women is who is living with whom. If daughters-in-law or married daughters are living on the older woman's property the latter has security of residence. As giving property to a daughter is considered exceptionally generous ageing women can expect physical and material assistance when it is needed. If, on the other hand, a mother-in-law joins her son and daughter-in-law's household her access to household resources and care in older age is less certain. Where deserted or widowed women (and their families) join their married daughter's household they do so either as 'paying guests' or 'temporary, self-supporting' additions to the family. These statuses effectively curtail their rights even where in practice ageing mothers may not be entirely self-supporting and may reside with daughters for many years.⁵ Such statuses serve to safeguard the reputation and masculinity of the son-in-law for whom the permanent arrival of a dependent mother-in-

law threatens to mark him out as hen-pecked. Hence mothers living with their daughters are usually in a precarious position for they have no right to being housed or to household resources. Instead they are reliant on maintaining good relations with their son-in-law as he has the right and authority to demand that they leave.

**Table 2: Patterns of co-residence:
mother/daughter; mother-in-law/daughter-in-law
(n =55)**

	<u>no. of households</u>
Older women taken in by younger women	12
- mothers-in-law living with daughters-in-law	3
- mothers living with daughters	9
Younger women taken in by older women	43
- daughters living with mothers	16
- daughters-in-law living with mothers-in-law	27

In fifty-five of the 110 households studied in Chennai older women and younger married, widowed or deserted women co-reside. Table 2 depicts the incidence of mother/daughter and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law co-residence across the 110 households studied. `Daughters' refers to daughters who are or have been married. The table does not give the total number of older and younger women co-residing as some households will contain more than one younger woman standing in the same relationship to the older woman. We can see from the table that the younger generation of women are over three and a half times more likely to be living with the older generation than the reverse and that women are three times more likely to allow their mothers to join them than their mothers-in-law. It is worth repeating, however, that mothers taken in by their daughters lack residential security and must, at the very least,

be seen to be self-supporting. The long term prospects of women dependent on their own labour, or the generosity of others, relies on them maintaining good relations with, in the first instance, their daughters-in-law and, in the second, their sons-in-law. While the likelihood of a woman having her daughter or daughter-in-law living with her is three times greater if she has squatted land or government-allotted land than rented housing, in practice it is nearly three times more likely that person will be her daughter-in-law rather than her daughter. This reflects differentials in property inheritance between sons and daughters. With most married daughters moving away and the general opposition to married daughters giving money to their mothers, the majority of older women must rely on maintaining good relations with at least one daughter-in-law.

While the foregoing is suggestive of the relationship between property and trends in the care of ageing women it gives little indication of the movement in co-operative conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The emphasis on female modesty and semi-seclusion for young wives underlies a daughter-in-law's initial dependence on her mother-in-law. The latter preserves her daughter-in-law's reputation by being there to supervise her within the home, chaperoning her outside it and taking on much of the 'outside work' such as the daily shopping and taking infants to school.⁶ The importance of this role is exemplified by one daughter-in-law who returned to her mother's house in protest after her mother-in-law, who had suddenly fallen ill, asked her to fetch medicine late one night. Other than this daughters-in-law have little dependence on mothers-in-law. As most husbands do work and support their families in the early stages of marriage young women are not dependent on their mothers-in-law for childcare while they work.⁷ It is only some time after the birth of children that wives are forced out to work by men withholding significant sums of money for their own expenses. By then most couples have moved out of the mother-in-law's home. Indeed, if a son fails to support his conjugal family and is living off his parents they soon ask them to move out, as happened to Nagamma, a young Adi-Dravida women of 33 with three children.

Nagamma : *'At the beginning we lived with my mother-in-law but because my husband was not earning much they asked us to leave. They had been feeding us until then. After we moved he would get painting jobs irregularly but spent the money on drink. From that time only I started working.'*

The situation of mothers-in-law is more complex. Their older age enables them to undertake the most lucrative forms of self-employment not considered suitable to younger women. While the latter tend to be restricted to trading from home or within their settlement and getting their stock from local retail outlets, older women have less constraints on their mobility and can, therefore, earn greater profits.⁸ However, in the long term their incomes decline as they become too weak to travel and they too must compete in the low profit, low turnover markets located within the settlements to which the younger women are confined. Due to the long hours involved in earning even small incomes and the heavy, labour-intensive and inflexible nature of domestic tasks in low-income settlements most mothers-in-law dread being abandoned by their sons. They fear their sons will eventually 'go behind their wives', that is, do as their wives wish and set up a separate household.

Whether ageing mothers-in-law are left vulnerable by sons setting up a separate household largely depends on two factors: the number of sons and the amount of squatted or government-allotted land the family has. Some families have enough land to build single-roomed homes for several sons while others have only enough room for two single-roomed homes.⁹ If ageing mothers-in-law live on subdivided property on which more than one married son lives, they are generally cared for both physically and economically although they usually continue to work. In these circumstances, as the cost of maintaining the mother-in-law, both in terms of money and labour, is shared between the sub-units of the compound household she is considered less of a burden and tensions between individuals can be tempered by others.

Where ageing mothers-in-law share land with only one son's family they do not obtain physical or economic help from their son or daughter-in-law but must support themselves on their own, usually meagre, incomes. While intra-family neglect is difficult to assess it is striking that in families where ageing mothers-in-law share the property with more than one son their dwelling is well maintained. However where they share property with only one son's family their home is often best described as a tumbled-down shack while their son's home is not only well maintained but is frequently being improved. Almost all ageing mothers-in-law who share property with one son's family suffer from considerable verbal (and in some cases physical) abuse from the son and possibly the daughter-in-law. In a few instances these tensions arise because the mothers-in-law refuse to participate in their son's household as they disapprove of his marriage or consensual union. In other cases, where the original reason for the household breaking into two is not exceptional, current difficulties are sustained by sons expecting their working mothers to hand over what the sons deem to be surplus income. To quote from an elderly informant squatting on a small piece of land on which only one of her three sons are living:

Jellammal : *'When my husband was alive I didn't have to work and we lived separately from the rest of the family. My son never used to beat me when my husband was there. My husband and son used to argue. They were both drunkards. I don't know what they argued about. My daughter-in-law and I weren't speaking then either. Now I have to work and my daughter helps me out with money. Her husband is my [maternal] aunt's son so he doesn't mind. Nobody else gives me anything. Now my daughter-in-law tells my son 'your mother gives money to her daughter' so he shouts and beats me without checking.'*

Elderly working women in single-person households also report that married daughters expect to be given food or money. Clearly, elderly women's needs are considered to be few and easily met by the incomes they earn. Similarly elderly couples are thought to have few wants and are able to earn an adequate income. This reinforces their vulnerability and isolation and is portentous of intra-household resource distributions if

they receive support when they can no longer look after themselves.

For the large number of mothers-in-law living in rented accommodation the prospect of their sons 'going behind their wives' is not only very distressing but a strong likelihood. This reflects the comparatively low pressure on housing in Chennai and the low market value attached to the illegal transfer of municipal tenements. Kamala is an elderly Mudaliar widow who has one son and lives in a rented room. Since her husband's death she has been a housemaid but is now too weak to continue.

Kamala : *'I have a meals shop. I sell curry, fish and rice which I cook at home and then take to the pavement near Lakshmi Nagar. Because I am selling food my son and daughter-in-law don't want to keep me. They don't like it because I have to wash other people's plates and my son's friends see me doing this business.¹⁰ They feel insulted that I do this work but they don't want to feed me instead. (Crying) My daughter-in-law is not willing to live with my son if I am there. She wants to live separately. She moved back to her mother's house. My son is following her. He wants a separate house.'*

For elderly women living alone, or indeed with an abusive son, is particularly difficult because they are not surrounded by relatives and caste members, as they would be in a village, and therefore are less able to appeal to others for physical, moral or even jural support (for example see Kapadia 1995:171-174, but cf Mencher 1989:140). It also means that just at the time when their incomes are lowest they have to pay neighbouring children to fetch water and carry the heavy and cumbersome subsidised groceries on which the poor rely, thereby reducing their ability to pay for food and medicines.

Faced with these grim prospects mothers-in-law living in rented accommodation or on small squatted and government-allotted plots try to appease their daughters-in-law, using several strategies to keep their daughters-in-law compliant. The most common of which occurs in joint households which include the groom's unmarried siblings. Fearing that daughters-in-law will resent taking on the full burden of what they see as two families' domestic labour and thus force a split, mothers-in-law tend to undertake considerably more of the 'heavy' and demeaning tasks (washing, sweeping, cleaning toilets) than is usually done by a mother-in-law.¹¹ One of the major causes of the move from joint budgeting under the control of the mother-in-law to separate budgeting under either the control of the son or daughter-in-law is disputes over how much of the son's income should be put into the common household fund and how that fund is spent. Hence a common strategy is the stricter control of the joint domestic budget once daughters-in-law join the household so that they cannot accuse their mothers-in-law of 'needlessly' spending the groom's contribution on 'personal expenses'. This can create a very disturbing situation for mothers-in-law as these 'personal expenses' inevitably comprise financial assistance to distressed female relatives, usually married daughters. From the daughter-in-law's point of view this represents a misappropriation of household resources in order to satisfy the individual emotional needs of her mother-in-law. We have already seen from Jellammal's case that sons and daughters-in-law not only consider that married daughters should not receive money from the common household fund but parental income, even if they live in a separate household, should come to a son rather than a married daughter.

Women have two further strategies which they can employ to secure their long-term future. One is to arrange a cross-kin marriage for a son or a daughter in the hope that the daughter-in-law or son-in-law will be willing to provide physical and financial support. While, by convention a son-in-law does not support a mother-in-law, he is expected to do so if she is his actual or classificatory sister. The second strategy is to give some land to another relative, most commonly a daughter. This strategy virtually

guarantees, but usually reflects, poor relations with a son and daughter-in-law. The degree to which people consciously distribute property to safeguard their future can be seen in the following frank statement.

Nalini : *'I owed money and had to sell my tenement flat. I don't trust my sons to look after me so I sold it to my niece for a very low price. If I am sick [incontinent] during my old age my niece will have to wash my clothes. I know she will do this for me and her husband will feed [pay for] me.'*

Although tenement flats do not have a high exchange value in Chennai, Nalini hopes that transferring her flat at well below market value will be treated as an exceptionally generous gesture and will secure her future.¹² Similarly parents or mothers who give land to their daughter expect their daughter's assistance in old age as well as their son-in-law to turn a blind eye to food transfers.

The co-operative conflicts between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law living in low-income settlements in Chennai reflect the greater opportunities for residential and financial independence for young families that cities provide while at the same time increasing their aspirations and the demands on their income. Although semi-seclusion imposes constraints which make brides initially dependent on mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law have little long-term interest in remaining on good terms with their mother-in-law. Consequently, mothers-in-law undertake various strategies to maintain more encompassing households and make the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship less onerous to daughters-in-law. The degree to which women need to do this is conditioned by the size of land they control, the number of sons they have and their expectations of their sons-in-law and (to a lesser extent) other kin. Those with larger pieces of land which are subdivided between several offspring fare significantly better than those without land, with a small piece of land or only one son.

Conclusion

The predominant image of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations in India

is drawn from the particular circumstances of landed rural families and does not accurately reflect mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations amongst those living on low-incomes in urban South India. As the economic circumstances and opportunities for the younger generation changes with migration and urban employment it is questionable to what extent the dominant image is generally applicable to landed families. It is unlikely to hold for landless rural families. Instead the quality of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations reflects their comparative interest in the relationship which, in turn, depends on the control of property (whether legally held or squatted) as well as their relative positions and sources of support within the family, local community and labour market. These comparative interests vary over time because their position and sources of support both within and beyond the family are not fixed but changing. In the long-term, however, all mothers-in-law face a degree of vulnerability, although that degree widens the more a woman, and her husband, are dependent on earned income. In the heterogeneous low-income settlements of Chennai mothers-in-law have few economic and social resources on which daughters-in-law depend beyond the early years of semi-seclusion. In addition, there is considerable demand on household resources which can increase the resentment of daughters-in-law towards their mother-in-law. As sons are usually given priority in property rights it is only those older women who have land on which more than one married son can and is likely to set up a home that a mother-in-law is in a strong position vis-a-vis her daughter-in-law. However, as land is further subdivided it will be increasingly less possible to accommodate more than one son's family. In these circumstances the numbers of mothers-in-law adopting strategies of co-operation or even appeasement towards their daughters-in-law will increase.

On the basis of the evidence from Chennai we can see that mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations are extremely complex, diverse and changing. We can also see from more recent research that the North Indian and South Indian models have emphasised abstract kinship patterns at the expense of actual kin relations, social and economic positioning and family demographics. Such an approach to culture, as well as

a greater empathy with brides than with mothers-in-law and the priority given to inter-gender relations in family studies, has inhibited anthropologists' exploration of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship both in and beyond India. More research is needed into mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations to consider the long and short term impact of changes in production, urbanisation and lowered fertility as well as the pressures towards upward mobility and increased consumption levels. Ironically, in the long term, a daughter-in-law's pursuit of upward mobility, lowered fertility and good jobs for her own sons may further increase the latter's independence and her own vulnerability in old age. If, as is demonstrated for low-income households in Chennai, intra-gender, inter-generational household relations are not static and improvements in the circumstances or opportunities of one generation in a family may be detrimental to another, there is an urgent need to investigate which economic and social developments have a deleterious effect on older women's (and, indeed, older men's) capacity to support themselves or to secure the support of their family.

NOTES

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1. The Hindu Succession Act (1956) only gives wives and daughters rights of inheritance in cases of intestacy. Frequently even these rights are not upheld (see Parry 1979:169-171; Agarwal 1998).

2. Although some states have extended the status of coparceners to widows or daughters they frequently forego their right to property (Agarwal 1998:15).

4. In societies without a standard retirement age 'old age' must be used as a relative term connotating local, and often contested, assessments of physical abilities and needs. For example, while employers may consider a woman as unemployably old her family may not yet feel she needs much, if any, physical or economic support. Such women are forced into the low profit, low turnover end of self-employment in the informal sector (Vera-Sanso 1995). For this reason I have largely used the term 'ageing' rather than old and reserved the term 'elderly' for specific instances where I wish to convey a sense of frailty or disability resulting from the ageing process.

5. Co-operative conflict refers to the shifting balance of interests partners to an association have in maintaining that association. The question in relation to domestic groups is why do people maintain their association despite often

glaring inequalities. Instead of seeing domestic inequalities as rooted in culturally-based biases in perception of needs and contributions, as Sen (1990) does, they are better seen as the outcome of struggles over meaning and identity (Hart 1992; Vera-Sanso 1994).

5. See Vera-Sanso (1997) on differential rights in households.
6. Drinking water, for instance, is usually only available at a public pump sometime between the hours of 2am-5am and a mother-in-law's chaperonage is vital. Without chaperonage a young woman would not only be inviting malicious gossip but would be exposing herself to sexual harassment.
7. The labour force participation rate for women in Chennai is 8.4% compared to 29.9% for the state as a whole (Census Handbook 1991:52-53).
8. See Vera-Sanso (1995) on cultural and economic constraints on female labour participation and incomes in Chennai.
9. Since the 1960s many government-allotted plots have been repeatedly subdivided and frequently sold making it impossible for several sons to build separate one-roomed homes on the plot.

10. As people in Tamil Nadu eat with their hands washing plates necessitates contact with saliva which is considered polluting.

11. Contrast this with what an elderly woman sharing a large squatted plot with several sons says of her daughter-in-law:

'I am not speaking with my first daughter-in-law. The house doesn't have proper drainage and she asked ME to remove the sewage!'

12. Sharma (1980:56) reports a similar strategy in North West India.

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