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Experiences in old age: a south Indian example of how functional age is socially structured.

Penny Vera-Sanso

Birkbeck College

Abstract

Research on chronologically older people approaches 'the old' as a category of people sharing common problems and experiences that are rooted in the functional disparities between old and younger people. These functional disparities are seen as impinging on social and economic positioning leading to asymmetries in dependence and vulnerability. The argument here is that rather than simply being an objective functional condition, old age is a deeply contested, socially structured condition precisely because the definition of 'old' does not merely denote diverging abilities but also confers differential needs, rights and obligations both on the 'old' and on younger people. Drawing on research in rural and urban South India, the article illustrates how definitions of 'old age' are shaped by class position within local economies. This patterns older people's access to work and, consequently, not only the extent to which people can remain self-supporting in old age but also the degree to which younger people expect downward resource flows.

Introduction

For a number of institutional, funding and policy reasons, research on chronologically older people approaches 'the old' as a category of people that not only share common problems and experiences but that these problems and experiences differ significantly from those of young people. The premise is that these commonalities and differences are based in functional disparities between 'the old' and younger people, and that these disparities impinge on social and economic positioning creating, in turn, asymmetries in dependence and vulnerability. While this classification parallels popular

categorising of people into old and younger categories, as researchers we know that this classification is based upon the fiction that there is a 'thing' called old age; that it is readily identifiable and its impacts are measurable. Despite this knowledge we continue to operate as though old age is an objective condition that produces what can broadly be seen as *an* experience of old age, that is a decline into infirmity and dependence, and for which policy measures and other forms of intervention can be devised. The attempt here is to step back from this fiction to look at how old age is constructed, and contested, by exploring the way inter-subjective constructions of old age are shaped by socio-economic location and life course.

After arguing that functional age is not simply an objective condition but a deeply contested, socially structured condition centered on claims over resources the article will illustrate the argument with research undertaken in South India. A brief discussion of normative expectations of ageing based on life stage, that is generational ageing, and the associated expectations of intergenerational support will provide the starting point for an examination of how functional age is socially structured. The main body of the article will demonstrate how functional age is contextualized and the grounds on which it is contested by examining how older people see themselves, how they feel they are seen by others and the kinds of strategies older people employ to shape those perceptions and, thereby, their relations with family and potential employers. The article will conclude with some brief comments on policy implications.

The article is informed by living with or researching Muslims and Hindus from a wide range of castes and classes in Chennai (formerly Madras) and in two villages and an administrative town in the western region of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Residential fieldwork was conducted throughout the periods June-Dec 1989; Nov 1990-Feb 92 and Nov 1999 to Dec 2000 and comprised a mix of household surveys, occupational surveys and a sequence of one-to-one and group interviews by which informants were interviewed a number of times over the space of a year or

more. In the two villages studied all Scheduled Caste people (formerly known as Untouchables or Harijans) who were deemed by myself, themselves or others to be in late middle or old age were interviewed, as were their relatives and neighbours. In the two low-income settlements studied in Chennai, one being a squatter settlement and the other comprising a mix of municipal tenements and allotted self-build plots, 110 households were studied intensively. In order to obtain a perspective on the unique features and determinates of intergenerational relations in the villages and low-income settlements studied a snowballing technique was used to identify informants from a wide range of castes, classes and occupations in the villages, the administrative town and in Chennai for comparative analysis.

Rethinking chronological and functional age

While children, women, refugees, the chronically poor, and other disadvantaged or discriminated groups of people have become the focus of development research precisely because of their need for equity and inclusion and their potential for contributing to national development, the route to research theme and policy arena has been very different for 'the old'. Academic and policy interest in the welfare of older people in developing countries is a relatively recent phenomenon arising out of rapidly increasing life expectancies, a demographic convention that defines 60 years as the boundary of old age and the assumption that old age is a period of infirmity, disability and dependence (WHO 1998). In the Indian context, life expectancies at birth rose to 62 years by 1997 and is expected to rise to 71 years in 2025 (WHO 1998). In order to secure the elderly a place on the policy agenda most papers on ageing in India combine disturbing projections of the numbers of people in the over 60 age group with uncorroborated claims about the past adequacy of 'traditional family support' and pessimism regarding what are seen as declining trends in the availability of familial support for the old (see for example, Rajan, Mishra, Sarma 1999; Subrahmanya 2003; UNFPA 2002).

This chronological approach to ageing has put age on the international agenda and defined the central concern, that the inevitable infirmities of old age will place an unaffordable burden on the public purse and on young family's financial and labour resources and, although rarely explicitly stated in these terms, impede the development project (see for example, World Bank 1994; Holzmann and Hinz 2005). The need to find ways of delaying the infirmities of old age has opened up avenues of investigation into functional ageing in a quest for healthier 'lifestyles'. Inescapably such work has found correlations between poverty, illiteracy, caste-based discrimination and heightened disability and morbidity in old age (see for example, Duraisamy 1998; Gupta and Sankar 2003). This work is generally conducted from a bio-medical standpoint, where functional capacities are recognized as being shaped by class, gender and other factors and yet remain broadly and objectively measurable.¹ By focusing on the impact of long-term undernourishment, repeated untreated infections and injuries on morbidity and mobility and noting the correlation with illiteracy, bio-medical research can provide essential data for supporting pro-poor policies that could potentially delay the onset of functional old age.

Valuable though this approach is in making the case for poverty alleviation, it draws attention from two significant issues for policies on ageing. The first is that the conditions of work for certain sectors of the labour market are particularly arduous and create functionally old people well below the age of 60. Evidence in this area is not systematic but studies of Tamil Nadu beedi rollers (Dharmalingam 1993), of brick makers (Dharmalingam 1995) and of agricultural work (Erb and Harriss-White 2002) indicate that people are routinely made functionally old and forced out of work from the ages of 40-50 years. These findings are also confirmed by the Schedule Caste agricultural labourers discussed later in this article. The importance of this occupation-based differential can be seen in how it undermines the Tamil Nadu governments' Destitute Agricultural Labourers Pension Scheme (DALPS). In 1962

¹ WHO (2002) has laid down internationally recognized standards, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, for measuring function for comparative analysis and planning purposes.

the Old Age Pension specified, in addition to the no surviving adult son criterion, an age criterion of 65 despite a life expectancy at birth of 41 years in Tamil Nadu (Madras Institute of Development Studies 1988:45). In 1981 the DALPS was set up to reduce the age criterion for agricultural labourers to 60 years. Bearing in mind that the rural population of Tamil Nadu in the early 1980s had a life expectancy at age 1 of 59.4 years (Planning Commission 2001:222) it is clear that the DALPS entirely failed to meet the needs of a particularly disadvantaged sector.

The second issue is that functional ageing is not simply a 'scientific' concept rooted in objective conditions. While it is possible to measure degrees of capacity to do or perceive particular things it needs to be recognized that functional ageing is socially structured; that *a person's capacities gain meaning in social contexts*. Hence in an agricultural setting a declining capacity to make decisions in a complex financial, technical and organizational context is more a marker of functional ageing for farm managers/large farmers than would be a declining capacity for sustained, heavy manual labour. For the farm worker, however, it is a declining ability to undertake heavy manual labour that marks his/her old age, not their capacity to make timely and accurate decisions based on complex interconnected variables. Consequently labourers are deemed by employers to age faster than do those in a managerial role.

Yet the social structuring of the infirmity and dependence in later life that falls under the rubric of 'functional ageing' goes further than this. If one focuses not on infirmity and dependence itself but on people's perception, or representation, of their own abilities the social structuring of functional ageing becomes still more apparent. Erb and Harriss-White's (2002) research into self-reported disability in rural south India finds that disability onset in adult life is primarily associated with old age and that 'a long life of unremitting agricultural labour is associated with a high risk of disability towards its end' (2002:62) and that old age is cited as a disabling condition in Tamil villages for people as young as 50 (2002:51). This research found that 'class, as well as caste and gender play an important role in determining the work a disabled person

is able to do and in *defining incapacity and disability*' (2002:65, emphasis added). More specifically the research found that while the better off sections of the localities studied reported a greater prevalence of disability than did the Scheduled Castes, it was the latter who reported much more severe forms of disability. Yet it is the Scheduled Castes who suffer the most sustained predations of poverty and amongst whom, from a bio-medical standpoint, the prevalence of disability would be expected to be much higher. The answer to the conundrum of how the better off can have a greater prevalence of disability than do the poorest members of society lies in the social structuring of ability: 'In the extremely economically disadvantaged setting of the *colony* (where the Scheduled Castes live), individuals cannot 'afford' to see themselves as, or be seen as being, disabled' (2002:65).

Erb's and Harriss-White's argument that disability, including age-based disability, needs to be recognized as a *social condition* that is predominantly structured by class position but also by gender and caste is compelling. Yet there is a further step to be taken in the analysis of how functional age is socially structured and this is the objective of this article. To understand the processes through which people become defined as old we need to ask what is at stake in the way individuals or groups of people are defined. It is access to and control of resources that is at stake; being defined as old implies not only particular capacities, needs and rights but also confers duties of care and support on sons and, as shall be seen, these are deeply contested and context dependent. There are two registers against which old age is locally measured in the South Indian context, both of which are social in nature. One is generational ageing, whereby social identities change as succeeding generations reach specific life stages (menarche, marriage, parenthood etc). The other is functional ageing whereby people become classed as old in relation to their inability to undertake activities deemed necessary to their class, caste and gender position. Consequently not only might people find themselves defined, or define themselves, as generationally or functionally old in relation to one context yet not in another, but their location in terms of class, gender and the localized labour market will shape

those definitions. Interrogating what is at stake in the way individuals are defined in relation to age will reveal how ageing generally, but functional ageing in particular, rather than being simply a process that can be measured in bio-medical terms, is a highly contested issue that is strategically deployed in localized struggles over resources.

Normative Expectations of Generational Ageing

In terms of normative expectations of old age and of support in old age there is a slippage in popular and academic accounts between expected behaviour and relations, and typical or actual behaviour and relations. Consequently, instead of investigating actual intergenerational relations and resource flows, much research on India assumes old age infirmity and dependence and is limited to the analysis of co-residence patterns (Vera-Sanso 2004).² A closer examination of intergenerational relations across socio-economic positions reveals that normative expectations of generational ageing, rather than setting out an unambiguous framework for relations between sons and their aged parents, provides fertile ground for contesting functional age and the transfer of resources between generations.

In India the family is viewed as a chain of people that includes not only the living generations immediately above and below the household head but also recent ancestors and those who are yet to be born. In this context the life course is divided into clear stages of generational ageing that are marked by transitions in the family cycle. The period from marriage to the arranging of one's own children's marriage is deemed as the period of greatest need for resources for a husband and wife and for their children. During this period the role of the male head of household (or his replacement) is that of a steward who takes financial responsibility for the family. The role of the household head and his wife is to 'settle' their children, by arranging their marriages and providing the sons with the means to earn a living. What the

² See Vera-Sanso (2004) on the significance of differentiating co-residence and proximate residence (in the same dwelling or on the same property) for understanding intergenerational relations.

latter entails depends on socio-economic position. It ranges from on-the-job training as a child labourer through to advanced professional training and from putting sons in contact with labour contractors to giving them their share of the joint family property. The 'settling' of all children marks a focal shift in the family cycle; it is the new generation of husbands and wives and their responsibilities towards their children, not those of their parents, that lie at the centre of what families are considered to be about.

In Tamil Nadu, for instance, immediately after marrying off all their children men and women consider that their 'work is done' and their 'life is over' *vaalkai mudinchi pochu* (literally, 'life, having finished, has gone'). Having discharged their responsibilities to life people are deemed by themselves and by others to have entered old age, irrespective of their chronological age or functional capacities. From this stage onwards men and women are expected to have declining needs, in part because they no longer have the responsibility to 'settle' the younger generation but also because old age requires curtailment of needs, including the need for food, comfort and leisure (Vera-Sanso 2004; see Lamb 2000 for a North Indian example). This narrowing of needs is seen as an aid to severing attachments to the world prior to death (Lamb 2000) and as helping to conserve family resources, for family resources are construed as a fund that requires careful husbanding and investing for succeeding generations, not as something to be consumed without a return (Vera-Sanso forthcoming).

With early marriages, large families and short life expectancies the life stage to the marriage of all sons and daughters tended to be relatively long. Consequently the period of being classed as socially old was relatively short and correlated more closely with functional old age. In recent years there have been significant demographic changes that have unseated this correlation: families are smaller, life expectancy is much longer and, for the better off in particular, age at marriage is rising steadily, in part because of extended professional training (Census of India; WHO, 1999). These changes are having differential impacts depending on class. In

poorer families the life stage of parent to unmarried offspring, which lasted until the youngest child was married, is now more frequently cut short as later age at marriage and smaller families are reducing the age gap between the oldest and youngest child. When parents and unmarried siblings are working married sons feel that there is no reason for them to delay entering the life stage defining masculine adulthood, that of head of household. They do so by setting up their own nuclear family; frequently by requiring parents to subdivide the family home (Vera-Sanso 2000; 2004).³ For this class life stages are imploding, people are moving into the category of 'old' at a functionally younger age - that is, they are becoming socially old while remaining functionally young and this life stage is lengthening.

This is creating ambiguities regarding younger and older person's responsibilities both towards each other and towards the family as a whole. In particular it raises questions regarding in which direction property and income should be transferred. While the norm would suggest that the old should transfer property downwards and income, in the form of food, clothing etc should be transferred upwards to the older generation, the clarity of roles is lost when the older generation becomes socially old while remaining functionally young. As a socially old person, that is someone who is no longer the parent of unmarried offspring, they are deemed by family, society and, frequently, by themselves, to have limited needs. As a functionally young person they are *not* considered to be in need of support but as capable of being self-supporting – a view facilitated by the fact that poorer families are predominantly located in sectors of the labour market that do not have formal retirement ages. Further they are generally thought to be earning more than they need and married sons and married daughters consider it only right that socially old parents should hand over what they see as excess income to the younger generation, irrespective of whether they live as one household or not (Vera-Sanso 1999).

³ As custodians rather than owners of family property fathers have little ability to resist the pressure to subdivide dwellings or land (Vera-Sanso 2004).

The issue of when do parents become too old to undertake their own domestic work or to earn an income and whether and to what extent sons can support aged parents in addition to their marital families is at the centre of intergenerational relations in poorer families (Vera-Sanso 2004).⁴ In practice the question of parental dependence is highly gendered. Due to the age gap between husbands and wives, unless aged men are widowed they generally do not rely on their son and daughter-in-law for support. Instead, when work is available, they alternate working days with their wife, allowing for recuperation between days of work, eventually relying entirely on her earnings. It is aged widowed parents, of either sex, who suffer the most and of these women more frequently than men. Being alone, widowed parents are considered by sons to have the lowest income needs easily met by irregular work. The issue that divides aged men and women is that as men are more likely to be deemed unable to undertake their domestic labour they tend to receive regular help from the younger generation whereas women do not.

In the case of better off families demographic changes are giving rise to a number of different patterns. In some instances, such as government employees forced to retire between age 58-60 years, later marriages and protracted lengths of training are trapping parents in the householder role beyond what they consider to be their capacity to provide for the family.⁵ In other families where parents have married off their small number of children and sons want to take over the family business or farm, parents are feeling under pressure to relinquish control over joint family property before they feel ready to retire. And in yet further instances, sons who have become heads of separate households feel their socially old parents should be supporting their sons' professional ambitions: they should keep not only a smaller share of the joint family property than is their legal and customary right but should be transferring

⁴ In many households, particularly amongst agricultural labourers and those working in the urban informal sector, this discourse of men as providers masks the fact that sons rely heavily on their wife's income to support the marital family (Vera-Sanso 2000).

⁵ The need to reduce the retirement age of government employees in order both to create employment opportunities for the young and to reduce the State's pension burden has been the focus of public debate and union action since the late 1990s. The impact of earlier retirement on intergenerational relations, in the context of later marriages and protracted training, has been ignored to date.

down to sons what the latter deem to be 'surplus' income. Consequently in both poorer and better off families socially old people are under considerable pressure to transfer resources down the generations – in flat contradiction to the discourse of old age dependency.

In other words, now that life stage is shaped by class position and less likely to correlate with functional age, what is at stake is old age itself. When is a person old? When should they be handing over control of family resources to the next generation? When do they need support?

Discourse, strategy and inter-subjectivity

The discussion so far has focused on intergenerational relations, however the premise underlying this article is that all interaction between individuals is based on a varying degree of strategizing. Despite the appearance of a fixed framework of rights and responsibilities that positioning within the family, household and labour market seems to confer on individuals, it is in the arena of the micro politics of every day strategizing that fixity is contested. Attempts by one person or group to define the 'proper' content of roles and relations and, hence, rights, responsibilities and access to resources, are countered by an evaluation of whether those rights, responsibilities and rewards were fully met. In some instances this contestation may be explicitly articulated, in others the claims or counter claims may be implied.

One discourse that people deploy to define roles, relations and identities is that of old age. This discourse is used both to facilitate and constrain action or inaction. How these discourses are applied and how they are resisted is context-dependent: consistent they are not. A person may try to position himself or herself as old in one context and resist it in another. For instance, a person may strongly resist being defined as functionally old by an employer who is attempting to use the functionally old card to reduce the person's pay. Yet, in order *not* to be identified by their families

as a financial burden, that same person may underscore their old age in generational terms by claiming they have no need of luxuries, large quantities of food etc.⁶ In order for discourses to be effective, that is to have the power to shape perceptions they must fit the individual's socio-economic location and their life story as well as conforming to local values.

Listening to informant's descriptions of exchanges between themselves and farmers, labour contractors, fellow labourers and family members, as well as the commentary of neighbours, it is clear that in South India adults evaluate their interaction between themselves and other adults in terms of two qualitative poles. The first is that of respect versus disrespect. What connotes respect, depends on context. It covers a range of modes from courteous behaviour through love and 'fear'. It is demonstrated by obeying, that is 'listening to', and caring for people and through respectful forms of address and body language. Disrespect refers to the casual treatment of people, to not obeying them, to insult and humiliation. In my experience relations are generally described in heightened terms - as either one of tremendous respect or of insult and humiliation. The second pole, which links with the first, is that of independence versus dependence. Providing for oneself and one's family is a matter of self-esteem and engenders respect from others, being dependent on another, however, does not, because being 'fed' by another necessitates acquiescence and, due to the connotation of begging, can teeter dangerously close to humiliation (Vera-Sanso 2004). Beyond these two poles informants clearly took pride in, and are respected for, successfully striking out a new path for the family. Those who have either not managed to increase the family's resources or are not seen to have increased them (as commonly happens to wives) say that they have or expect to have this thrown back at them when disagreements arise with their adult children over the use of the family resources.

Having set out the argument that functional ageing is a discursive tool for shaping intergenerational and working relations the remainder of the article shows how the

⁶ What is seen as a luxury depends on class position (Vera-Sanso 2004).

micro politics of every day strategizing is shaped by class position within local economies.

Socio-economic context and life story

i) rural landless labourers

The area of rural Tamil Nadu in which I undertook research in 2000 is an overwhelmingly agricultural area with a widely varying annual and seasonal demand for labourers. Biennial irrigation sets the predominant cropping pattern of wet crops, that is paddy and sugar cane, one year alternating with dry, vegetable and cereal, crops the next. Barring a piece rate contract called *mottam coolie*, which in this region is only available to younger men, all men and women are employed on daily rates.⁷ During peak periods of labour demand farmers tended to organise their hiring into three day slots, frequently giving a partial advance on the daily wage to ensure people would work for them the following day.⁸ During the long periods of low and negligible demand even the labourers most sought after, that is young women, find it difficult to secure work. For older people it is only during the short periods of peak demand that they are likely to get regular work. Further, while in 2000 the standard pay for men was Rs60 (equivalent to £0.86 sterling) and for women Rs35-40, older women reported that farmers were citing their (functional) old age as the reason for paying them only Rs15-30 per day.

Many farmers are now selling up and moving to urban areas for work or for their children's education. Their land is being bought up by urban dwellers who have no intention of taking on the role of farmer. They, and older farmers whose sons have moved to the local town or even further afield, are taking advantage of the Tamil Nadu government's 25% subsidies for drip irrigation in order to switch to tree

⁷ In other areas of Tamil Nadu gangs of women are similarly working on a piece rate basis (Kapadia 1995).

⁸ This practice of giving small advances has largely supplanted the earlier bonded labour system whereby farmers would give large loans (typically Rs10,000) to families who would then provide one male labourer (locally known as a *pannaiyathal*) to the farmer until the loan was paid off. Although in 2000 there were still bonded labourers working off their debts, farmers and Scheduled Caste labourers said neither side found it economic to establish new bonded labour contracts.

cultivation which requires a regular supply of water but very little labour input. What is required is a means to power the bore pump, so the farms are primarily located near villages and along the main road. This is having two effects. First there is much less demand for labour and second, the distance to work for agricultural labourers is increasing. As the returns for dry and wet crops, especially when compared with the risks, are relatively low and as farmers now compete in national and international markets their farming strategy has changed. They are raising the level of inputs that can be bought on the market, securing government subsidies and taking increasingly tough measures to cut labour costs. Big farmers (who are the main employers) no longer take on uneducated bonded labourers. Instead they are taking out annual contracts with highly trained farm managers as well as hiring contractors to locate labourers and to ensure that the work is done rapidly and effectively. As mentioned earlier they are employing gangs of men on a negotiated piece rate basis called *mottam coolie*, a contract by which labourers agree to do a fixed task on a fixed area of land in order to speed up the work and reduce labour costs. The very largest farmers in the area are importing families from poorer regions on an annual basis to work their fields, in the manner described by Breman (1996) for Western India. Overall farmers are trying to restructure production costs by reducing their demand for labour and by increasing the return on labour via measures to link work and/or wages to productivity - a strategy that positions old people as unproductive and a waste of resources.

Because Scheduled Caste labourers take pride in their ability to work, in their strength, stamina and endurance, older men and women find the response to them from farmers, contractors and other workers humiliating and unjustified. They argue that they work because their families are unable or unwilling to support them - which is itself, in part, a response to low and irregular incomes for all landless labourers. An annotated excerpt from my field notes provides a pithy and entirely typical portrayal of older people's experience as labourers as well as the link between the two poles of respect/disrespect and independence/dependence.

One evening several months into fieldwork I came across a group of Scheduled Caste men sitting under the tree by the roadside where men wait for contactors to come and call them for work the following day. I initiated a general discussion regarding farming in the area comparing the situation before and after building the dams, and the situation for young and old men and women. I wanted to take the opportunity to discuss employment for old men while there were 4 old men and 2 young men present. It was the time of day when people were coming back from work, getting food ready, resting and preparing for the next day - people were crossing the area and several men and women came along, joined in the conversation for a while and moved on. Up to that point I had mixed data on whether old men worked - old men said emphatically that they do not get given work and their knees were too weak to work in the field yet I had seen old men returning home from working in the fields.

I asked the old men if they get work in the fields.

They all replied: people do not call us for work now because we are weak.

The middle-aged Scheduled Caste assistant to the village officer interjected: The work of the old men and the young men is equal but people only want the young men.

Sensing yet another stall, I began to explain what the women had said to me - that they were never called for work and had to follow the young women to the fields, that the young women go very quickly so the old ones can't follow them. They don't want them to come, they say they spoil their money. In fact women had gone much further, they said that once they got to the fields they had to beg and cajole farmers to give them work and that when contractors come to the villages, rather than being asked to work, they had to beg the contractors to give them work - something they found extremely humiliating but to which they had no alternative.

The old men got very excited saying: 'yes, it is exactly the same - the young men are called and we follow them to the field. There the young ones ask the farmer and contractor not to take us - they say 'the old ones spoil our money and time'. This is '*maanam kedu*' (*maanam* spoilt) for us.⁹ It is better to simply sit in the house without food. Why should we go to get work only to be insulted (*kevalam* - being thought badly of) by others?'

'When the farmer pays *mottam coolie* (piece rate wages) the farmer says nothing and hands over the *mottam* to the contractor who divides it between all those who work.¹⁰ The young

⁹ *Maanam* means personal honour or reputation. Tamils view *maanam*, not as something which can be built, but as something which can only be lost and hence requires protection (Vera-Sanso 1995).

¹⁰ By working hard and fast *mottam* contracts enable labourers to raise their daily earnings above the standard male rate of Rs60.

men complain to the contractor that their money is spoilt and that they have had to make up the work that we have not done.

'If the farmer is paying daily *coolie* (wages) he then scolds the young men for bringing us along with them. They say 'why do you bring this *kilavan* (old man) along with you - why are you wasting my money and spoiling my work? From tomorrow onwards you won't bring him along with you.' The farmer will also tell us to our face not to come the next day.

To avoid us coming along the young ones walk very fast. They also call each other secretly for work saying 'nobody should know there is work available'.

I said this sounds like the same situation as it is for the women which I then described in detail (although the women are not offered *mottam* contracts). The men emphatically said that the experience described to me by the old women about the difficulties and insults they receive in trying to get work and the competition with younger people is exactly the same for them.

At this point a young man said: 'yes, we young men complain about the old ones to the farmer and contractor and yes, we secretly call young ones for work.' He was laughing but he was also serious. When I said why do you do this when you will have to face being old, he said 'yes, we will have to face the problem and are ready to face it', (that is, they are braced to face the challenge). 'Having to make the old men's work up for one or two days is no problem but how can we make it up continuously? It is also hard work for us. The farmer takes our '*bend*' (breaks our backs) so how can we do the old people's work as well as our own?'

At this point I could see Marathal, a very lined and frail-looking elderly woman, walking home at a strong speed from the field. She was carrying her tools, she came straight over to me. She told me she had set out for work at 6am and was returning at 5pm having walked 6kms to and from the fields. She worked yesterday and today digging up and cutting onions and filling baskets. She didn't carry the baskets because they are too heavy for her. She is promised Rs15 (half the wages younger women get) for each day and the contractor will bring her money (Rs30) tomorrow which she will have to fetch but she won't be given any more work. By the time she has walked the 6km to the field and back to pick up her money tomorrow she will be too late to start work with another farmer.

As Marathal left to drop her tools at home and to bring out a sweater for me to see what she uses to keep the chill off when she heads out to work at 6am, others said with admiration 'she is very independent and won't ask anyone for anything. She would rather go hungry than ask her daughter-in-law for food.' They are saying she is no beggar. 'She has pride (*rosham* as in *tan-maanam*, self-respect/or self-pride) and is *veiraggiam*, strong in heart. Even when she falls into her deathbed (*padukkaiyil vilunthalum*) she won't expect help from others.'

Beyond the humiliation and anger felt by these older workers and the kinds of values and self-perceptions operating amongst this class and caste, this extract begins to reveal the way functional age is not just an objective condition, but serves as a strategic discourse. Scheduled Caste people age more quickly than other castes because of generations of malnutrition, untreated illnesses and long hours of arduous physical labour. Women visibly suffer from severe anemia and men from severe knee problems and it is not uncommon for men not to be working by the age of 50 years. Even those we might refer to as middle-aged as well as older people are not able to work everyday during the peak periods of demand - they have to take rest days. But functional age also serves as a discourse, it is used by contractors and farmers against older people (including those in their late 40s) to reduce their wages and it is used by younger family members to escape the obligation to provide for their parents. Older people use the discourse of functional age to get out of work - something men tend to use with greater success than do women because they have younger wives upon which to rely. They also use it when cajoling farmers to give them work and certainly use it when railing against the unjust triangle in which they are caught - a triangle comprising on one side sons who are unable or unwilling to support them, on the second side younger labourers who try to exclude them and on the third farmers who cut their wages or hand out punitive conditions - including having to come back the next day to pick up their pay.

ii) middle class families in a small administrative town

It is not only amongst Scheduled Caste workers that functional age serves as an effective discursive strategy. Better off families negotiate relations around functional age. What older people can and cannot do, what they do and do not need is not an objective matter but that of the micro politics of the common place strategizing over rights, obligations and decision-making. The detail of the discourses used depends on gender and life story. Poorly educated women who were, or were defined, in their youth as dependent, non-working wives, are defined in later years as dependent

widows. Landed older men and their families use discourses about functional age and filial love to disguise complex struggles over control, esteem and masculine hierarchy. Sons and daughters-in-law, for example, argue that fathers are too old to work in the family business, too old to oversee workers or farm labourers, that they should stay at home and rest. But older men are well aware that, irrespective of whether they bring in money (as pensions or rental income) unless they are seen to be contributing *significantly* to the family 'nobody will listen to them', that at best they will be indulged and tolerated much as is a child, at worst they will be considered 'a burden' or suffer abuse.¹¹

If men and women cannot contribute significantly to the family's income they need to find other ways of being seen as contributing to the family, as being functionally young despite being old in generational terms. While most older people combine domestic responsibilities with the protest that they are not old until they 'fall into their (death) bed', the most successful strategy combines a central role in the family with some means of keeping younger family members aware of the extent to which the family's contemporary wealth is due to the older person's exceptional skills and hard work when young. This strategy is largely limited to urban areas where opportunities for more diversified incomes are available to younger adults than they are rural areas. Take for example Rajan, a farmer who moved to the local administrative centre because 38 acres of land, prior to the coming of the dam in the 1950s, provided too uncertain an income to support his family. He became a clerk and sold all but 13 acres of land to put his only child through medical college. Aged 78 at the time of fieldwork Rajan reports with manifest pride that his son now owns three houses, two of which are let out, and a fifteen-bed clinic. Rajan saw opportunities, took the risk and it paid off. Rajan is trying to manage a complex situation where what is at stake is the way he is perceived both by others and by himself. By retaining the 13 acres, which only produces an annual income equivalent to 2 months' rent on their two let

¹¹ See Vatuk (1990) on the elderly's concern not to be 'a burden' on the family and Mahajan (1992) on elder abuse.

houses, Rajan ensures that the family remains aware that their roots are rural and that their contemporary wealth is in large part the result of the risks he was bold enough to take in the past. Further he asserts his current centrality to the family, for which he claims household headship to me on the grounds that his son, despite being the main earner and controller of the family's combined income, 'does not see to the family matters (on a day-to-day basis), he only goes to his clinic'. By retaining the role of family escort and representative Rajan attempts to ensure that he is seen as having a useful function and therefore not a 'burden' on his family.

It is not only men who combine a necessary or valued contemporary role in the family with a visible reminder of the decisive role they played in the family's fortunes. However, the only women able to do so at a discursive level, as well as in objective terms, are women without men - that is women who were deserted or widowed at a young age, for the precise reason that this kind of success is always attributed to men unless there is patently no man around to claim it. Mani, who was deserted at the age of 26, managed to save enough money, after much hard work selling millet and other grains, to buy some agricultural land. This she sold to buy land on the edge of an administrative town on which she eventually built two modest houses and a workshop in which she set up a business making metal bureaus using workers paid on a piece rate basis. There she lived with her only son until he built a large modern house nearby in order to attract well-off husbands for his daughters. Mani did not move into her son's house. Instead she remained where she had lived even when her son and his family was living in one of her houses, that is, in the collapsed lean-to in the courtyard of her property. While Mani says she did this in order to look after her business interests and because she didn't want to be alone all day in her son's house while her son and daughter-in-law worked in their electrical shop, the conditions in which she lives conspicuously proclaim her impoverished roots, her selflessness and her generational age (via her acceptance of reduced needs). Mani combines playing up her old age with small daily and as well as more dramatic displays of her enduring ability, despite her chronological age, to make a significant economic contribution to

the family. Everyday Mani's son records her business details as she cannot read and write and she saves her rental and business income and then hands over Rs40,000 at a time to her son.

What is striking about Rajan and Mani is that they are able to secure their position within the family by building on the respect that their bold and successful past strategies to increase the family fund engenders, by having an independent income, by consuming less than they bring to the family and by the fact that their son and daughter-in-law have very large time commitments to newly forged careers and businesses thereby leaving Rajan and Mani with credible roles in the family. It is the mix of strategies that makes their situation quite unlike that of people whose sons wish to take over the family business or family farm.

iii) 'self-employed' hawkers in large urban areas

While small urban centers provide opportunities for educated people or for those with some capital to invest, it is metropolitan cities, such as Chennai, formerly Madras, that provide economic opportunities for those without capital or education. Because of the restriction on female mobility when young, it is women who are deemed either to be in significant need of an income or who, in generational terms, are approaching old age that benefit most from living in cities (Vera-Sanso 1995). It is they who are able to travel to the wholesale market to buy their stock and to middle-class neighbourhoods or to open markets to sell in. The constraints on their work is set by their capital, the difficulty of transporting their wares, the difficulty of finding a retail site and the obstacles to them employing others in order to expand their business. But as hawkers older women can contour their business to their physical capacities by reducing the hours worked and distance traveled. In doing so they inevitably decrease their incomes as they buy from retailers rather than wholesalers and sell in their own neighbourhoods rather than in markets or middle class neighbourhoods. Their position is in marked contrast with the agricultural labourers described above who must be prepared to work six hours a day or not work at all.

Being self-employed these women are not as obviously engaged in discursive battles ranged over the ground of functional age as are the Scheduled Caste men and women and those whose sons have taken, or want to take, over the family business or farm. What they do face, however, is heightened battles over a concomitant of generational age - how much of their income they need and how much of it they should be passing onto their married sons (Vera-Sanso 2004). These battles over need are intensified by the amplified demand for expenditure on housing, electricity, education, training, ritual expenses and consumption goods that is characteristic of large urban areas. While Scheduled Caste women in rural areas describe the way in which daughters-in-law put pressure on aged in-laws by sending grandchildren over to grandparents to ask for money, it is striking how many older widows living both in smaller urban areas and in Chennai report verbal and physical abuse if they do not pass resources downwards. The difference is that these widows are deemed by their sons to be earning considerably more, or receiving larger pensions, than they need. It is not, however, because they are widows *per se* that they suffer this abuse - it is not because widows are inauspicious as some Indianists might argue. It is because these women have no dependents; many have been supporting their husbands and once they have died families consider these widows to have excess income. What families are not taking into account is that incomes are going down because of the declining economic space available to older petty retailers. This is happening for two reasons. First because of declining capacities to carry and move goods on congested public transport; due both to age and to the moving of wholesale markets to the city perimeter. Second because of the competition from supermarkets and the municipality's sweeping away of local markets and street hawkers.

The evidence presented here illustrates the way the experience of old age is determined by socio-economic positioning within local economies. It shows how local labour markets and economies shape the possibilities open to older people to either work directly or to substitute for the domestic responsibilities of younger men

and women. What becomes apparent is that the size, complexity and planning of rural/urban form have significant impacts on older people's ability to be self-supporting or to have a readily recognizable and valued role in their families.

Read together with the way demographic changes have had a differential impact on intergenerational relations depending on class position, it is clear from the evidence presented here that family relations and the transfer of resources between generations are much more complex and diverse than the norm of family support for the old would suggest. Specifically, rather than being dependent and vulnerable older people frequently need to be self-supporting even supportive of younger families (in terms of both capital and income) because the needs of the young, especially those of children, are considered to take priority over the needs of people defined as old. This is not unique to South India. Moller and Ferriera's study of the impact of non-contributory pensions across black and coloured households in rural and urban South Africa found that 'few black pensioners (who were the poorest in the sample) are able to use their pension income for themselves but must share the income to meet the survival needs of their family' (2003:8), particularly the needs of children. They noted that rural/urban location impacted on pensioners ability to draw individual benefit from their pensions because rural households were poorer, lacking employment opportunities and having less access to government services and benefits than did urban households. Moller and Ferriera's recommendations for policies which would support families generally (free education, free water, free health care and child support grants) as a means of enhancing the ability of rural pensioners' to benefit from their old age pension clearly supports the view taken here that older people's needs are defined in relation to the needs of other family members and that the needs of younger people are deemed to take priority.

Conclusion

This article has provided grounds for a number of arguments originating from the uncontroversial statement that there is no one experience of old age, rather that the

experience of old age is shaped by socio-economic location and life story. It has demonstrated that the convention that age 60 adequately delineates the boundary between middle and old age is seriously misplaced, as is the assumption of old-age dependence, infirmity and disability. What has been shown is that old age itself is both socially structured and contested; that functional old age should not be viewed as only an objective measure of the functional disparities that elude a chronological approach to ageing. Rather, functional ageing is also a discursive and strategic tool wielded by local people in local struggles over resources. The article has shown how these struggles, and the ageing process itself varies, by the specificities of local labour markets; particularly by dominant agricultural practices and by the broadening opportunities that urban forms offer older people, either directly through self-employment or indirectly through the filling of family roles not taken up by sons and daughters-in-law working long and fixed hours in the professional and commercial economy.

The diversity and complexity of the contexts in which older people are located reveals that policies targeted at a category of people seen as universally vulnerable and dependent from the age of 60 will have limited positive impact. What is needed is an approach that investigates, rather than assumes, the nature of family relations and the way these and ageing, in both bio-medical and social terms, are shaped by local labour markets. Taking this perspective, it becomes clear that pensions for particularly punishing sectors of the labour market, such as casual agricultural work, should not be tied to destitution (ie no adult son) and should not be arbitrarily fixed at 60, as is Tamil Nadu's Destitute Agricultural Labourers Pension Scheme, but should reflect the occupation's functional ageing. Second, governments need to withdraw subsidies that encourage farmers to turn over large tracks of land to farming practices that have disastrous affects on the availability of work for rural landless and land-poor labourers. Third, municipalities should be facilitating economic niches for people whose abilities, or commitments, do not allow them to work long and fixed hours. Small local markets widely dispersed throughout the city and linked with good, cheap

access to the main wholesale markets would help older people to tailor their working practices to their physical capacities. And finally, the government needs to interrogate its development policies, both economic and human development, to see what knock on effects they have on older people's welfare - until government and the general population, including older people, revise the view that old people have very limited needs, increased pressure on family incomes be it for consumption, education or health will impact negatively on older people, especially those in poorer families.

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