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Vera-Sanso, Penny (2004) Modeling intergenerational relations in South India. *Generations Review* 14 , pp. 21-23.

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Modeling Intergenerational Relations In South India

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Economic models of intergenerational relations in developing countries revolve around the idea of a contract: parents look after the young in return for support in old age. Using comparative data on intergenerational relations amongst the poor in rural and urban south India I argue that it is unwise to base policy measures on a model that cannot capture the complex and shifting patterns of family relations.

Framing intergenerational relations as a contract between parents and children misses a number of essential points, the most important of which is that intergenerational relations are not fixed at one point in time nor made between fixed parties, as are contracts. As the more nuanced versions of the intergenerational contract argue, family relations must be seen in terms of three generations, ageing parents, the working generation and children (Collard, 2000). Although the model suggests an equity of exchange between one generation and the next, what the multiple-generation version correctly implies is competing claims on family resources. Ironically, rather than suggesting support for the elderly, the multiple-generation model implies that where the working generation's future welfare is determined by their care of children they will have little incentive to honour obligations to their parents.

Beyond the logical shortcomings of the model lies its inability to account for other forces and relations that impinge on intergenerational relations, including the factors determining what 'support' of parents entails. Rather than being based on a contract, intergenerational relations are informed by the principle of 'generalised reciprocity'.² They are founded on the idea that families help each other as much as they can, when and to the extent that help is needed. In the context of parent/child relations this

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² Close relationships are marked by generalised reciprocity by which those that give do so without the expectation of return (Sahlins, 1974).

reciprocity can go in both directions no matter what the age of the recipient and donor. Earlier models of generalised reciprocity suggested a cosy familialism unsupported by evidence on actual resource allocation within families (Papanek, 1990). If, however, the principle of generalised reciprocity is combined with the recognition that needs are shaped by concepts of personhood (age, gender, position within the family and society) we see that intergenerational relations are about contestation, not upholding or breaking contracts. Determining what family members need, when they need it and the extent to which any one family member is able to help another lies at the heart of intergenerational relations, determining the extent, direction and content of support.

The two variables, differentiated conceptions of need and of the ability to help, tie intergenerational relations into the wider social and economic environment. The discourses embedded in government policy and economic relations reflect and effect changes in social values, altering concepts about different categories of persons; changing ideas about their needs, rights and obligations. In order to begin to predict how social and economic policy will impact on intergenerational relations we need to combine an analysis of local perceptions of personhood with an analysis of how family members are differentially positioned within the domestic and wider economy. This requires an examination of the impact of differential capacities for earning and inheritance patterns on the interests and inclinations husbands and wives have in supporting in-laws over their own parents and children.

SOUTH INDIA

This paper is based on ethnographic research undertaken in urban and rural Tamil Nadu. Families living in low-income settlements in Chennai (formerly Madras) were studied between 1990-2. They comprised a mix of low castes and Scheduled Castes, formerly known as Untouchables. The overwhelming majority work in the informal sector. Scheduled Caste people in two villages in western Tamil Nadu were studied

between 1999-2000. All were landless labourers; many of the men are or were bonded labourers.

My objective here is to describe, in brief, how intergenerational relations vary by social and economic context. I describe the gradations of need associated with age that operate in Indian families, highlight discourses embedded in social and economic policy that have increased the needs of some while leaving the needs of others untouched and, by contrasting the villages with the low-income settlements of Chennai, show how local economies impact on intergenerational relations

PERSONHOOD AND NEED

Based on the assumption that the old and young are unable to support themselves the stereotype of intergenerational relations in India, where families are organised on patriarchal principles, is that fathers support children and sons support their aged parents. In practice the principle of reciprocity does not produce relations matching the stereotype; they vary considerably according to economic location. Better-off parents are not deemed to need support, while in most impoverished families aged parents do not receive help until all other means of support are exhausted. Support may well flow against the tide of the stereotypical model; children in impoverished families make significant financial and physical contributions to their families and, irrespective of class, many aged parents are being asked to bale-out their married sons. The mismatch between stereotype and practice is explained by differential conceptions of personhood.

Indian concepts of personhood prioritise the needs of the young over the old. Life and the expenses it entails are conceived of in stages; the need for pleasure is limited to the early years of marriage, thereafter a person's duty is to settle their children in arranged marriages and, in the case of sons, equip them for work and provide a home for their families. Once an older person's children are 'settled' their own life is described as 'over'. They are deemed to have limited needs. They are expected to curb their desires: they should simplify their dress, control their appetite, and spurn physical comfort. How far old people's needs, in absolute terms, are reduced varies

according to class. For the poor, whose needs are regularly unmet, the placing of the old at the bottom of the hierarchy of family need can only increase their vulnerability.

Concepts of need, being modified by discourses embedded in the wider political and economic environment, vary over time. Three discourses have had a significant impact on intergenerational relations. First, the importance placed on children's right to education and western styles of health care has increased the range and level of children's needs, and the associated expense, while discouraging their contribution to family incomes (see also Caldwell 1988). Second, in 1991 the opening up of the Indian economy to global capital has increased perceived needs. The expansion of consumerism is not limited to the middle classes: the poor are specifically targeted by the packaging of western, products such as shampoo, toothpaste etc, in very small quantities. In poor families, these products are increasingly seen as necessary cosmetics for younger people. Third, the rhetoric espoused by social and political movements against the injustices Scheduled Castes face has raised Scheduled Caste aspirations. Having been excluded from the status markers reserved for other Hindus, such as education, wearing upper garments and footwear, Scheduled Caste people now have increased access to state education and marketed goods. They describe themselves as having become 'civilised' (*nagariham*) and feel a strong need to maintain the markers of a socially valued identity that other castes take for granted. Government policies on education and the Scheduled Castes and import barriers [have] meant that valued social identities are increasingly predicated on visible markers secured in the market place. In the context of differentiated needs within families, and particularly the low-level of need attributed to the elderly, government policies are having a deleterious affect on old people's access to family resources.³

RURAL TAMIL NADU

Barring the few men who find construction work during the agricultural low season and the elderly women who clean toilets of wealthier, higher caste families, the Scheduled Castes are entirely dependent on casual agricultural work. Work is seasonal, alternating relatively long periods of no work, with low and peak seasons. Older people are not called for work except during periods of severe labour shortage.

Their incomes during peak seasons are curtailed first by their need to recuperate for a day or more after one day's work and by their inability to undertake the more arduous forms of work.

Due to the general level of poverty and the long periods of unemployment that Scheduled Caste families face, old people marshal a number of strategies to remain self-supporting. Couples alternate work days between them in order to balance the need for work and recuperation and, in periods of no or little work, if they have the fare, old people visit daughters for up to 10 days. Why do old people work long beyond a reasonable capacity to do so? The simple answer is that, first, they have means to compel their children to support them; the inheritance pattern is effectively pre-mortem as parents vacate their homes in favour of their sons' families because the latter are considered to be in greater need of privacy. Second, women are significant income earners and as one man put it:

"there is more work here for women than men. Our wives are feeding us. How can we ask them to feed our parents as well?"

As more landowners turn to markedly less labour-intensive farming practices, the inability of young Scheduled Caste families to match rising needs with a declining economic base can only intensify competing interests between generations and within marriages.

URBAN TAMIL NADU

The significant difference between urban and rural areas is the wider range of work opportunities for older people, the value of land, and the pressure for upward mobility.⁴ Compared to villages, cities provide opportunities both to earn less widely fluctuating incomes and to gradually reduce their intensity of work. Not only does this mean that families are more likely to deem their elderly parents not to need financial support but they are more likely to consider them to be earning incomes beyond their needs. In the latter case sons, and daughters, press their parents to hand over 'surplus' resources.

³ See Vera-Sanso (forthcoming) [for] a more comprehensive account of personhood and access to family resources.

⁴ See Vera-Sanso (1999) for the impact of land holding on intergenerational relations.

The pressure for upward mobility characteristic of cities is driving a wedge between the interests of older people and their sons' families despite comparatively higher incomes and more secure livelihoods. It is a mistake to consider these aspirations and demands as indicative of younger people's self-interest. Rather they are generated by a system in which people must secure their own futures and that of their children from early on in life. Education, visible material resources and 'good' jobs raise a family's social status thereby increasing its chances of arranging materially and socially secure marriages for sons and daughters.¹ After marriage parents have obligations to their son-in-law and daughter-in-law which, if unmet, have the potential to undermine their children's position, or, in the case of daughters, their physical well-being in their marital homes. The lack of job security and the paucity of pensions outside the government sector forces people into strategies which they and their families can draw on later such as improving property for letting or giving bribes in the hope of securing a government job. Recognising these pressures on young families, particularly the diverging interests of daughters-in-law, many parents undertake various strategies right from the beginning of their son's marriage to make the parents-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship less onerous to daughters-in-law (Vera-Sanso 1999).

CONCLUSION

In contexts where poor families bare the brunt of social reproduction, the care of old people can only increase their economic difficulties. For the really poor, care of the indigent old is untenable. Recognising the realities, old people from poor families know they must, and frequently do, work right through to the end of their lives. Whatever their inclinations, poor families are not structurally placed to provide the support that governments in developing countries like to think is the norm. Three conclusions arise from the ethnography. First, all policies affecting the economy, the young and the old need to be examined for their impact on intergenerational relations. Second, concepts of personhood, particularly about the rights and needs of old people, need close examination to see how interventions can be made to raise perceptions of old people's entitlements. Without this strategies to improve old people's economic situation are likely to founder on the principle of reciprocity within families. Third, that instead of framing intergenerational relations in terms of a contract between individuals we need to see intergenerational relations as a contested arena shaped by

the principle of reciprocity, differential concepts of personhood and economic positioning.

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¹ Parents are concerned to prevent the likelihood of desertion, alcoholism and bigamy on the part of husbands