Housing and Social Habitation of the Elderly among the *Kanis*, a Tribal Community in Tamil Nadu, India

R. Maruthakutti

*Department of Sociology, Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli 627 012,
Tamil Nadu, India
Fax: 0091 462 2322973, E-mail: maruthakutti@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT The paper describes the meaning of home for older people among the *Kanis,* a tribal community in southern Tamil Nadu, India. It uses the data from an ethnographic study of *Kanis* in Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve. Participant observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used. House for the elderly in this community is not merely a shelter, but a place for intensive family interaction and extending hospitality, thus sustaining family and community ties. Tribal as they are, the home gets its meaning only in its symbiotic relationship with the environment, especially with certain species of trees. The striking finding is that the older people are central in the house both structurally and socially; they view sociability, and not privacy, as an important aspect of living arrangement. Privacy is not regarded as a privilege, but as isolation.

INTRODUCTION

The Copenhagen Summit on Social Development in 1995 has emphasizes housing and habitation as one of the crucial indicators of social development which has been further re-emphasized by the 'UN Millennium Development Goals'. As a commitment to Millennium Development Goals, Indian Government has formulated National Housing and Habitat policy, 1998 in which providing sustainable habitation for each citizen assumes priority. In this context, the exploration of habitation of elderly in the tribal community warrants our attention to have a complete grasp of ageing in Indian society.

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), in general comment 4, outlines seven elements required in order for housing to be adequate. These are a) legal security of tenure, b) availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure, c) affordability, d) habitability, e) accessibility, f) location and g) cultural adequacy (UN Report 2005).

Safe and satisfactory shelter in a conducive ecological environment is vital for the well-being of human beings. Housing in fact affects the quality of life of all members of a group. Suitable housing is even more important for the elderly, who limited mobility, since many of their activities revolve around the four walls of their homes. In addition, close proximity to intimate social ties, including family members ensures social integration and enables the flow of services and support. 'Housing has a major part to play in ensuring continuity of community life' (Sills 1968).

Housing and family organization are inseparably interlinked. The type of housing has universally been associated in some way or other to the family organization. It has also sustained and reinforced the existing forms of family organization. It is the spatial limitation and arrangement which makes it feasible for relatives to live as nuclear and joint family. The joint / extended family system requires more space for the large number of persons to live in. It may also require a kind of spatial arrangement such as separate rooms for different units of the family or common hall for certain units of the family as the culture of living demands.

Vulnerability of Elderly

With the growth of industrialization and urbanization the traditional pattern of housing has given way to the modern houses, which are constructed with a view to accommodate individuation. Several factors account for the rise of this pattern of housing. Individuation within the family for the affordable sections and separation for the poor sections of the society happen with the availability of / or restrictions in the housing space. In the former case, the value of individualism accompanies the spatial separation of family members within the same house. In the latter case, separation of family members is a forced one for want of space. In such cases

there is conflict between the material culture and nonmaterial aspects of culture. Hence, nucleation of family in this case may be driven by either or both of them. The issues of elderly are often viewed chiefly in terms of nucleation of family in the Indian culture.

Fewer children, employment opportunities and other better avenues of livelihood have induced a large scale migration from rural to urban areas. Globalization has further accelerated international migration in India as well. All these factors cumulatively contribute to the vulnerability of the elderly which in turn forces the State to address the problem through legal measures. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 is such a measure and its impact is to be evaluated in terms of concrete results. The present paper addresses the vulnerability of the elderly in a marginalized community like *Kanis* in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu, India.

The decisive impact of housing upon the lifestyles and well–being of the elderly is well documented. There is a growing commitment to provide adequate housing for the elderly on the part of policy makers. Even then housing remains a major problem for the elderly. Only a small fraction of them have been rehoused (Carp 1976).

Housing forms an important element in the environment of the aging person. Characteristics of housing interact with other aspects of the living situation to produce their effects on the well being of the elderly. As Rapoport (1990) stresses, the "behaviour and environment can't be separated but form a part of a single system". Built environments encode or give expressions to a particular set of cultural values and also influence both social and cognitive environments. How people build not only results from but also influences, how people think. It facilitates or inhibits behaviour. Kelly (1955) points out that individual differences increase with chronological age so that the oldest population segment is the least homogeneous. This gives the impression that uniform policies cannot be evolved for the entire elderly population. It has been recognized that mere housing and living environment will not result in the desired behaviour on the part of the elderly, as suggested by Carp (1976). The need is rather to understand the complex interplay of physical and social environment with the characteristics of the resident.

The place of the elderly in the house and housing for the elderly vary from culture to culture. Thus, the situation of the elderly and the perception of such situation in India are different from those in the West. Even in India, they are not homogeneous. There are sub cultural variations in terms of religion, caste, class and rural and urban residence. While much research attention has been paid on the situation of the elderly in the urban centres and to some extent in the rural areas, the situation of the elderly in tribal communities is yet to be explored in detail.

Review of Literature

The available literature on tribal housing mostly relate to construction, materials, internal structure, labour cost and modern technology adopted in house construction (Pandit 2006; Bahadur and Shaski 1995). However, there is scanty literature available on housing related to social habitation of elderly among the indigenous communities in India.

In the developing countries of Asia, demographic ageing has been rapid for which families and other groups have not been prepared. Ageing takes place in the context of urbanization and industrialization dispersal of kin members and competing demands for resources from the third generation in accordance with changing values and arising value of children. Consequently a large number of people are ageing in isolation in the rural areas rather than in the traditional environment of residential extended family. They lack affordable housing and other services.

Housing developments typically designed to meet the requirements of young people while the elderly could be cared for with the aid of young family members in those houses (Chakraborti 2004). Consequently on large scale migration, the special needs of the elderly without the support of active kin ties remain unattended. The concept of housing, keeping the partially or fully immobile old parents is yet to creep in. This problem is accentuated by non- availability of health care and other services locally, particularly among those who lack adequate resources to engage private transport. Other older persons are left to live in houses that they are unable to maintain after other members have moved out. There is an increasing tendency for

old people to live alone, particularly the widowed. Older women, older widows in particular, are often poor who tend to live in shelters that are inadequate and unsafe. They run the risk of social isolation, both objective and subjective, and ill health.

Ownership and Property Rights

House ownership and control vary across societies and between rural and urban communities. In developed societies like Australia, rising proportion of elderly tend to own houses (Yates 1997). Though 63 percent of the rural, 58 percent of the urban elderly own housing and some other kind of property according to NSS data (1998), only about 40 percent retain de facto control over those properties. The rest are at the mercy of younger family members.

Since the *Kanis* inhabit the forest land, they do not enjoy the property rights over the land. National Forest Policy 1988 has just ensured the tribal's access to minor forest produce and largely remains silent on all other entitlement rights. The absence of any such legal security to property rights forces these people live in a sort of insecurity continuum. However, The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 addresses the rights except hunting.

House ownership has been more common in rural communities than in urban areas. One half of the Asian elderly are dependent on the houses owned or rented by their children and other relatives. Inadequate space and high cost are among the factors for living old parents behind when their children migrate to urban areas. Institutions supplement the housing needs of the seniors in developed societies not even one percent of the elderly in India live in old age homes (Chakraborti 2004). Among the inmates rural people predominates. Eventually the old people in less developed countries are bereft of the traditional support system while institutional care is yet to take roots.

Living Arrangements and Elderly Care

Even with independent living arrangements for the elderly the pattern of housing tend to vary. Australian data showed the increasing tendency to move into apartments from independent houses (Hugo 1992). This is also true of the elderly in urban India. The reasons are given as follows: Family size is reduced as couples enter the "empty nest" stage of the life cycle, the elderly have a reduced physical capacity to maintain large dwellings and in some cases, their reduced financial circumstances lead them to "trade down" in housing.

Another tendency has also been reported in Japan, India and elsewhere. Accordingly the senior people are brought into co- residence for reasons of convenience (Hirosima 1992; Maruthakutti 1993). Care for grand children by the parents of the young couple and care of a property are the motives cited for this kind of arrangement.

The present paper discusses the concept of housing among the *Kanis,* its socio-cultural relevance, the concept of ownership and the way the old *Kanis* are integrated into the living arrangement expressed in the form of co-residence or proximate residence binding them effectively with their family and community.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The *Kanis* or *Kanikkars* inhabit the hills of Ambasamudram taluk of Tirunelveli district and Kanyakumari district, which lie on either side of the Western Ghats. They are also found in large numbers in Neyyatinkara and Nedumankadu Taluks of Trivandrum district and also live in adjoining district of Quilon in Kerala. There are 49 *Kani* settlements in the Kanyakumari and five in the Tirunelveli district.

The data for this paper are drawn from the findings of 'Ethnographic study of *Kanis* in Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu (1998)'. There are 5 *Kani* habitations, namely, lnjikuli, Periya Mylar, Chinna Mylar (Adukku Parai), Servalar (Thervatam Parai) and Agasthiar Nagar Kanikudiruppu situated in the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve. The study settlements are small, containing 402 individuals. Injikuli and Periya Mylar (each with 9 households) are relatively isolated, situated in the interior forests. The methods adopted in the study were participant observation, in depth - interview and focus group discussion.

In-depth interview was employed to collect specific kinds of qualitative data from *Kani* leaders, the *Moottu Kanis* and the elders between 60 years and centenarians during 2005. As the

investigator had already established fairly good rapport with *Kanis* and noticed certain changes during subsequent visits over a period of 12 years, it was decided to compile data on housing during 2010. Since it was part of the ethnographic study, questions mainly deal with the purpose, significance and importance attached with the meaning of home, traditional housing, the knowledge and practice of housing, technology and labour involved, surrounding environment, relationships, changes in housing and the reasons for such changes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are married spouses, widows and separated who have had very little or no education. The male population is more in the age group of 60 and above in all *Kani* habitations. They are engaged in own occupation (agriculture) or coolie with fishing. Their occupation is purely seasonal in nature depending on the seasons they involve in agricultural activities.

Most of the elderly among *Kanis* spend their time in a productive manner. The males are busy with their agricultural works in the morning, engaged in guarding the crops from wild animals, erecting fencing (made up of poles) weeding and fishing. The women folk perform weeding, cooking, collecting firewood and digging wild roots from the forest during the off season. There is clear sex typing of these roles.

It is customary among the *Kanis* that as and when a son gets married, he leaves his parental family to establish a nuclear family with his wife. The present study confirms such a practice and as 78.43 percent of the *Kanis* lives in nuclear family. However, the last son lives with his parents for their lifetime. This tendency shows the general pattern observable in plains. However, the tribals remain at the fringe of cultural rules. The four stages of human life ascribed in the traditional dharma, could not be applied to the tribal communities. The human life strategies (Hiebert 1981) differ with each cultural group, the *Kani* strategies of incorporating the old people in everyday life is very inclusive.

It is noteworthy that all elderly live in their own houses. In this tribal community there is no such term as a 'rented' house. Neither is there any idea of selling or buying a house. The home is so attached to the person sentimentally that it cannot be sold or leased out. It is not merely a shelter, but a place for intensive family interaction and extending hospitality, thus sustaining family and social ties.

Ethnography of Habitation

In the earlier days the *Kani* house was a single hutment. It was called as 'Ottha Kaal Kudumbai', referring to single pole abode. It was made up of a wooden pole in the centre with wooden sticks tied to the top of the pole in the design of an umbrella, covered by certain types of leaves (*eethai, aaval, naar vaazhai, kal podavu*) available in the forest. The house was meant for a nuclear family, that is, for a couple with or without young children. Those who attained puberty would be put in the '*Oor Chaavadi*' (community shelter). There were two shelters meant for men and women. In these shelters, the unmarried young and the elderly were staying. This contributed for intergenerational solidarity in the community. It also facilitated for a high degree of knowledge transfer from the older generation to the younger generation.

Today construction of the house is undertaken with great care and well thought out plans. While constructing the house for any family, it is important that the entire community takes part in it in some way or other. This arrangement is called "*Mathu Velai*" (exchange of labour). Labour is provided by the community and construction materials are collected from the forest. The construction cost as such is small. The concerned family in turn provides food, tea and other refreshment to those engaged in construction work.

Wood poles and grass (*Sorghum halebense L. pers, poaceae*) are the major construction materials used. The walls are built with mud and coconut leaves are used for interior paneling (Krishnan and Mahadevan 1992). The house must be located in or around the place where the elder had earlier lived. Thus, the continuing of generations in terms of living places is maintained.

The site for the construction is selected through divining by the elderly (Pilathi) in the community. After worshipping *Bhooma Devi* (Goddess Earth), the divining is done with 12 tiny pebbles or paddy seeds. The elderly person would take a pinch from among the pebbles or seeds and place them in twos in a row. If a single pebble or seed remains at the fag end, the site

considered as auspicious for building / constructing house. This is ensured by performing the ritual thrice. A similar practice, of course in a larger framework, has been described by Edgar Thurston (1909) with 'when selecting a site for a new dwelling hut, the *Maaliah Savaras* place on the proposed site as many grains of rice in pairs as there are married members in the family, and cover them over with a coconut shell. They are examined on the following day, and, if they are all there, the site is considered auspicious. Among the *Kaapu Savaras,* the grains of rice are folded up in leaflets of the *bael* tree and placed in split bamboo'.

The entrance should face either north or south. The *Kanis* believe that if the house faces otherwise it will lead to poverty, sickness and death. There are two entrances – front and rear – in the north and south of the house. The front entrance is meant for men whereas the rear entrance is meant for women. The housing is gendered in such a manner that kitchen is accessible for women through the rear entrance and women are mostly confined to that area. The front portion is occupied by men. There is a central hall, meant for the elderly. This central hall is not gendered; both male and female elderly share. The young male adults are allotted space in the front room whereas young female adults are allotted in the kitchen. The front portion called *"Tharsa"* is meant for resting and receiving guests. In every house, there must be a front yard to accommodate large number of guests (usually around 50), on ceremonial occasions.

The house should be surrounded by certain species of trees and plants which provide shadow and pure air. Tribal as they are, a home gets its meaning only in its symbiotic relation with the environment especially with certain species of trees. They should also yield fruits for exchange with outsiders. All the trees and plants must have some or other medicinal properties.

New houses are built for those who get married. When a male person attains the age of 18, he is supposed to pay a tax called half-tax amounting to Rs. 100/- per year to the community. For the married couple, it is full-tax amounting to Rs. 150/-. The tax so collected is used for meeting the expenses of community festivals. It is also used for honoring the dead elderly by providing food and refreshments to the mourners.

Nucleation of family is common place among the *Kanis.* When a son gets married, he builds a house with the help of the parents and the community. However, it is the duty of the last son to remain with the parents and take care of them even after he gets married. Though culturally the patrilineal system prescribes that older people should live with sons, emotionally they state that they prefer to live with daughters which they seldom do. The structural separation emanating from marriage migration of daughters from the parental home appears to precipitate a longing for being together in later life.

In the earlier days building of a house was not difficult. They used the materials available in the forest and they were free to roam into the forest and also to set fire in the forest to the dry grass (*Tharukampul*) so that they can use the new shoots of grass that would grow later. This was used for roofing the house. Now they have restrictions from the Forest Department. Hence it has become very difficult for them to construct a house with that grass that would last for five to seven years. Now they have to look for other sources and methods of constructing a house, which is expensive. They looked for other alternatives such as using thatches made up of coconut leaves. But they were not durable and also not strong. It would not stand even the invasion of monkeys. Now as many of them use tins and asbestos sheets for roofing. They make their own bricks for constructing the walls. Masons and carpenters are available in their own community, who has learned the techniques from the plains people. Thus, their housing is now undergoing a process of modernization from what they used to have once. The new conditions of life with the introduction of self help groups, banks, salaried employment as anti-poachers, watchers and guards in the forest department and exposure to the wider society through modern communication systems have started to show their impact on their housing, family life as well as community life. The *Mathu Velai* system (community labour) is eroding and giving way to family labour for constructing the house.

Even though elder sons establish their own family with new houses, they are not to live far away from the parental house. Thus, the proximity of consanguinal relationships is maintained. Thus, there arise no such problem as the neglect of elderly. One of the striking features

of these findings is that these older people, unlike those in the West, view sociability but not privacy, as an important aspect of living arrangements. The cultural values place these older people in the web of other family members. Older people do have access to all rooms (which is a privilege), however they are allocated to a particular room to sleep. From the perspective of *Kanis,* privacy is not a privilege, but is regarded as isolation.

In conclusion, it is affirmed that the cultural context of aging is still predominantly provided by their traditional ethos despite the marginal intrusion of modern ways of living. To put it in the ways of Sokolovsky (2009) 'the elderlyscape is relatively free from the kinds of vulnerability that one can observe from the plains'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

NOTE

An earlier version of this paper was presented in the symposium on "The Meaning of Home in the Old Age: Conceptual and Empirical Contribution" at 18th World Congress of Gerontology, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2005.

REFERENCES

Bahadur KP 1977. *Caste, Tribes and Culture of India: Assam.* New Delhi: Ess Ess Publications.

Carp Frances M 1976. Housing and living environments of older people. In: Robert H Binstock, Ethel Shanas (Eds.): *Handbook of Ageing and the Social Sciences.* New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, pp. 244-271.

Chakraborti Rajagopal Dhar 2004. *The Greying of India.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Government of India 2006. *The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Right) Act.*

Government of India 2007. *The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act.*

Hiebert Paul G 1981. Old age in South Indian village. In: Pamela T Amoss, Stevan Harell (Eds.): *Other Ways of Growing Old.* Stanford: University Press, pp. 211-226.

Hirosima Kiyosi 1992. Living arrangements and familial contacts of the elderly in Japan. In: P Krishnan, K Mahadevan (Eds.): *The Elderly Population in Developed and Developing World*: *Policies, Problems and Perspectives.* Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, pp. 68-86.

Hugo Graeme 1992. Australia's ageing population: Patterns and policy implications. In: P Krishnan, K Mahadevan (Eds.): *The Elderly Population in Developed and Developing World*: *Policies, Problems and Perspectives.* Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, pp. 151-185.

Kelly L 1955. Consistency of the adult personality. *American Psychologist*, 10: 659 – 681.

Krishnan P, Mahadevan K (Eds.) 1992. *The Elderly Population in Developed and Developing World*: *Policies, Problems and Perspectives.* Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.

Maruthakutti R 1993. *Women Employment and Household Role Structure*: *A Network Analysis of Working Class Families.* Ph.D. Thesis, Unpublished. Coimbatore: Bharathiar University.

Maruthakutti R 1998. *Ethnographic Study of Kanis in Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve.* World Bank assisted Research Project Report (Forestry Research Education and Extension Programme). Unpublished. Tirunelveli: Manonmaniam Sundaranar University

National Sample Survey Organisation – NSSO 1998. *The Age in India. A Socio-economic Profile*. NSSO Department of Statistics, Ministry of Planning and Programme Implementation, Government of India, Calcutta, 52nd Round.

Pandit Apoorva 2006. *Tribal Studies of India: Tribal Culture and Technology*. New Delhi: Inter- India Publications.

Rapoport A 1990. *History and Precedent in Environment Design*. New York: Plenum Press.

Shaski S S 1995. *Encyclopedia of Indian Tribes: Kerala*. New Delhi: Anmol Publication Private Limited.

Sills David L 1968. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences,* New York: The MacMillan Company and the Free Press.

Sokolovsky Jay 2009. Families, communities and elder-scapes: Transforming cultural spaces for aging. In: Jay Sokolovsky (Ed.): *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives.* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, pp. 371-382.

Thurston Edgar 1909. *Caste and Tribes of South India.* Delhi: Cosmo Publications (Reprinted 1975).

United Nations 2005. Indigenous Peoples' Right to Adequate Housing: A Global Overview. *United Nations Housing Rights Programme, Report 7*, Nairobi: UN-Habitat

Yates J 1997. Changing directions in Australian housing policies: The end of muddling through. *Housing Studies*, 12(2): 265-277.