

The Aged and the Marginal: Social Geography of Older People in Nepal¹

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Abstract

Much has been written about the geographic marginality, physiographic diversity and marginalized ethnic groups in Nepal. However, very little attention is paid to a large section of population that is considered aged i.e., 60 years of age and over, most of who are marginal in physical, social and economic sense. This group has emerged noteworthy due to significant increase in life expectancy and clear decline in total fertility rate in the country. According to the population census of 2001 there are a total of 1,504,311 aged people, who constitute 6.5 percent of the total population in Nepal. Between 1991 and 2001 this group of population has increased by 3.40 percent per annum. During the same period the total population of the country has increased by 2.25 percent. This paper presents the geography of aged population in Nepal demonstrating them as marginal people in the society. Data are drawn from population census 2001 plus earlier censuses and other surveys such as labour force survey. The paper argues that aged sections of population in Nepal are not paid proper attention. In terms of earning livelihood and the physical capability, they are perceived as non-productive, socially dependent and physically weak. Their proportions are higher in the physiographically marginal areas and they are further marginalized with the deteriorating economic and security situations of the country, rural exodus of supporting young adults, changing occupation of young generation and increasing family nucleation in the society. While the proportion of the aged is higher in marginal zones of the country, the aged women, i.e., further marginal group, are growing faster in the total group of the aged. With the turn of the 21st century, the need to implement realistic programs for the welfare of this marginal group in general and those supporting the households with older people through state subsidies has become critical in Nepal.

Key words: Aged, marginalization, empty nest syndrome, occupational mismatch, competing demands.

Putting Ageing in Nepal into Perspective

Population ageing is an inevitable consequence of age structure transition. A general tendency in age-structure analysis of population is to categorize them into young, mature and aged, and examine their reproductive and productive roles in the household and society. In general the two groups namely the young (less than 15 years of age) and the aged (60 years of age and

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over) are regarded as dependents and thus unproductive, the mature (15-59 years of age) are conceived as productive (economically active) and reproductive. More importantly, in the social landscape of the traditional societies such as Nepal the aged or the old are regularly portrayed as frail, dependent and vulnerable members of the household and the society. Physically they are weak, psychologically they are delicate, and economically they are in need of support from adults since they are likely to loose command over productive resources.

Nepal has obtained its notoriety as one of the poorest nations of the world especially over the last few years. Physiographic diversity and ethnic diversity are both much-talked themes in Nepal. Likewise, population as aggregate feature has also obtained much attention in the field of social research in Nepal. However, issues related to aged people who are largely marginal, have not obtained proper attention. This is an evolving social and demographic challenge (Subedi 1999a) and specific studies on ageing issues are grossly lacking. This paper is concerned with aged populations, who are marginal and are being further marginalized over time.

In the context of low life expectancy, low level of human development and retirement age of civil servants at 58 years, life expectancy of 60 years, the population aged 60 and over is considered as older people in Nepal². The Population Census 2001 reported 1.5 million people aged 60 and over. This constitutes 6.5 percent of total population in the population. This paper argues that aged people in Nepal are not only marginal sections of population they are further marginalized given the contemporary socio-economic and political context of the country. Their proportion in the total population may not compare with developed countries but the sheer size and the rate of growth makes it a matter of concern when the economy is on the downturn, youths are leaving home, traditional land based occupations are changing and support programs for the aged people are completely lacking.

Size, Growth and Regional Pattern of Aged Population

Changing Size

The Population Census 1961 reported 489 thousand persons aged 60 and over. The number increased by more than 132 thousand in 1971 reaching a total size of 621 thousand. By 2001 the number of aged population reached 1.5 million and between 1991 and 2001 its size increased by 40 percent. More importantly, the rate of growth has been 2.85 percent per annum between 1961 and 2001 (Table 1). During the same period the total population of the country increased from 9.413 million (1961) to 23.15 million and the rate of increase was 2.27 percent per annum. Over the last four decades the country has witnessed a significant decline in mortality and a moderate decline in fertility especially in the later part. As a result, not only the sheer size of aged population increased but its share in total population has also increased.

² The terms “older people,” “aged population” and “elderly population” are used interchangeably throughout the paper.

Table 1. Changing Size of Aged Population 1952/54-2001

Population Census Year	Population Size	Change	
		Absolute	Percent
1952/54	409,761	NA	NA
1961	489,346	79,585	19.4
1971	621,597	132,251	27.0
1981	857,061	235,464	37.9
1991	1,071,234	214,173	25.0
2001	1,504,311	433,077	40.4

Among total aged population in 2001 males slightly outnumber females, which is quite contrary to many countries. In particular, males constitute 50.4 percent whereas females 49.6 percent. The sex ratio of the aged population is 101.7. This is against the corresponding figure of 99.9 for the total population in the country. This is likely a reflection of high maternal mortality. Nepal has highest maternal mortality ratio in Asia except Afghanistan (UNFPA 2003).

Growth

For reasons of having high proportion to the total population and higher rate of growth, the concern for population ageing is often considered as an issue of developed countries. However, countries such as Nepal are not indifferent with respect to the growth of aged population. The sheer size and growth rate of aged population who form marginalized section of Nepalese population is already a concern to provide social security and other support services they deserve as a dignified citizen of the country.

By all demographic standard Nepal's total population has been growing rapidly over the last 40 years. During these years the growth rate of country's population has remained consistently over 2 percent per annum. In particular, between 1961 and 2001 the total population grew by 2.25 percent per annum (9.4 million to 23.15 million). Continuation of this rate means doubling of population in every 31.1 years. While this indicates a very rapid growth, the growth rate of aged population has been even higher. In all the census records since 1961 the growth rate of older population has always far exceeded the growth rate of total population in the country (Figure 1). Overall in contrast to average growth rate of 2.25 percent for the total population between 1961 and 2001, the growth rate of older population has remained 2.81 percent per annum. If this rate continues which is likely, the population size of aged people in Nepal will double in less than 21 years.

Elderly population is growing faster in recent years. While the growth rate of aged population during various intercensal periods is consistently higher than the growth rate of total population the difference has further widened in the latest census. In none of the earlier census counts the difference between two growth-rates i.e., of total and aged population, was as wide as recorded in the latest census (2001).

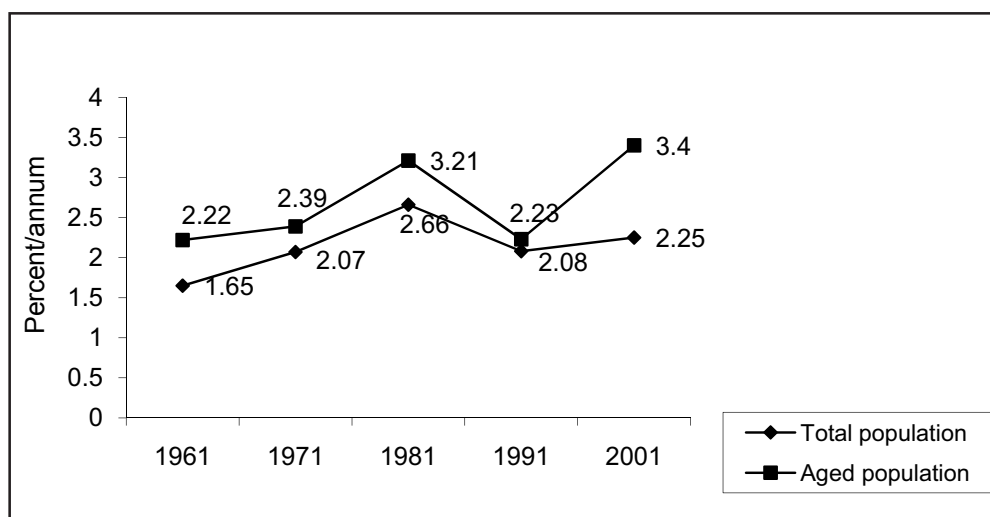


Figure 1. Growth Rate of Total and Aged Population

The growth of aged population affects the dependency ratio and the index of ageing. Both of them are measures of population ageing. Table 2 depicts the proportion, dependency ratios and the index of ageing for the six censuses. While measures such as the proportion and index of ageing reflect consistent and rapid growth of aged population, the dependency ratios (both total and aged) suggest implications of growth to the supporting generation in the country. More importantly, the consistent rise in the old dependency despite some irregularities in the total dependency ratio over these census periods clearly demonstrates additional economic burden to the economically active population of the country.

Table 2. Proportion, Index of Ageing and Dependency Ratios

Population Census year	Proportion of aged population	Total dependency ratio	Old dependency ratio	Index of ageing
1952/54	5.0	76.7	8.8	12.9
1961	5.2	82.2	9.5	13.1
1971	5.4	90.5	10.3	13.9
1981	5.7	89.0	10.8	13.8
1991	5.8	93.0	11.2	13.7
2001	6.5	84.8	12.0	16.5

Regional Pattern

The distribution of aged population in Nepal shows regional inequality. Of the three ecological zones namely the Mountain, the Hill and the Tarai, largest proportion of aged population lives in the Hill. The Tarai region follows this. Demographically, the Tarai and the Hill are the main regions of residence of Nepalese population. The Mountain region shares the least proportion and exemplifies the uneven distribution.

This uneven distribution of aged population in the country needs to be interpreted in terms of proportional distribution of total population by ecological zones. While the distribution of total population is uneven, the distribution of aged population is further imbalanced. Whereas the Tarai shares largest proportion of total population it is the Hill region, which shares the largest proportion of aged population (Figure 2). This result has much to do with internal and external migration with the Hill characterized as migrant sending area and the Tarai as the receiving area (details later).

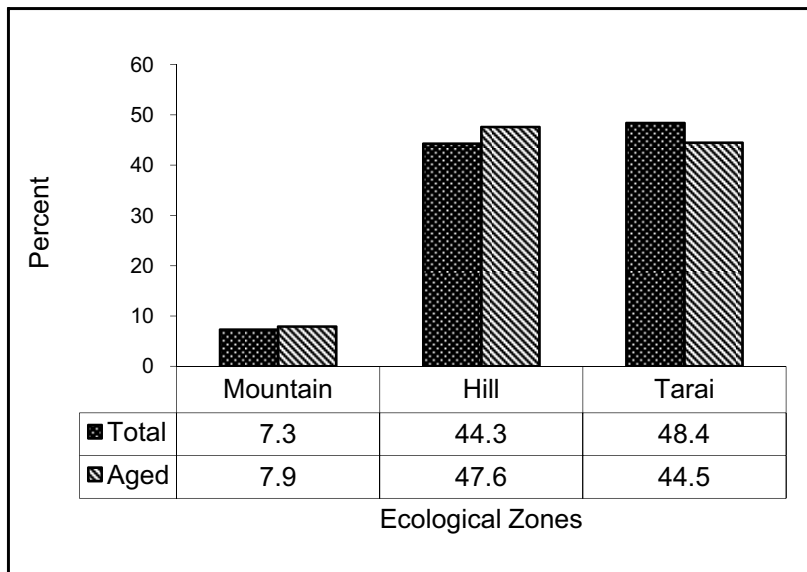


Figure 2. Distribution of Total and Aged Population, 2001

The proportional share of both the total and aged population in the Mountain region is lowest. However, there is a slight over representation of aged population compared with the total population. The Mountain region is also characterized by out-migration of young adults.

The uneven distribution by ecological zones is further evident when total figures are disaggregated by gender. Nearly 49 percent of the female elderly in the country live in the Hill whereas for male this proportion is 47 percent only. The Tarai is no exception. Of the total male elderly 45.5 percent live in the Tarai but among female elderly the corresponding proportion is 43.6 percent (i.e., a difference of 2 percentage point). In other words, the difference in the total volume and/or proportion of male elderly living in the Hill and the Tarai is far greater i.e., 48.5 % against 43.6% (Table 3). Gender difference in the total size and proportion in the Mountain region is insignificant.

Population ageing has affected not only economically developed areas of the country but also to the deprived areas as well. Based on cross-sections of ecological zones and development

regions fifteen eco-development regions are identified³. An analysis of the proportion of older people in these regions suggests their share ranging from 4.6 percent to 9.2 percent (Table 4). Whereas eco-development regions within Western development region demonstrate higher proportion of aged population, the corresponding regions of Mid-western development region demonstrate the contrary.

Table 3. Gender Distribution of Aged Population by Ecological Zones, 2001

Ecological zones	Size distribution			Proportional distribution		
	Total*	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Mountain	118928	59371	59557	7.9	7.8	8.0
Hill	715745	354294	361451	47.6	46.7	48.5
Tarai	669638	34 4704	324934	44.5	45.5	43.6
NEPAL	1504311	758369	745942	100	100	100

* Adjusted as per total population figure provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics, HMG Nepal for 2001.

Eco-development regions associated with Western development region not only show higher proportion of aged population but also they display noticeable gender differences. The proportion of aged female is far higher in the Western Mountain whereas the proportion of male outnumbers female in the case of Western Hill and Western Tarai. The specific reasons of this need further investigation. Nevertheless, the prominence of return migrants especially of British/Indian military recruits (or *lahure*) and higher education and health status compared with all other regions can be attributed to have some impacts for this result. The regions of Mid-western development section also show some gender difference but since census enumeration in some districts there was disturbed for major part of the district specific statements in this respect is likely to be premature. In rest of the eco-development regions gender differences are insignificant.

Rural Urban Differences

The proportion of population living in urban areas was 6.4 percent, 9.2 percent and 13.9 percent in 1981, 1991 and 2001 population censuses respectively (MOPE 2003). Despite small proportion of urban population differences are discernible by rural urban residence. The proportion of older people is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. This is not a unique observation of Nepal but a general observation throughout the developing countries. Rural urban migration of young adults has much to do with this situation. Urban areas demonstrate large proportion of mature population while rural areas demonstrate larger proportion of aged and children (Table 5).

³ For administrative purposes the country is divided into five-development regions namely Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-western and Far-western development region. These development regions comprise of several districts. There are 75 politico-administrative districts in the country.

Table 4. Distribution of Aged Population by Eco-development Regions, 2001

Eco-development region	Size of aged population			Proportion of aged population		
	Total*	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
MOUNTAIN						
Eastern	29976	15029	14947	7.5	7.6	7.3
Central	46976	23213	23764	8.5	8.4	8.5
Western	2253	1108	1145	9.2	8.4	10.1
Mid-western	14345	7487	6858	4.6	4.8	4.5
Far-western	25378	12535	12843	6.4	6.5	6.3
Total	118928	59371	59557	7.0	7.0	7.1
HILL						
Eastern	117872	59781	58091	7.2	7.4	7.0
Central	235716	115320	120396	6.7	6.4	6.9
Western	236721	117417	119304	8.5	9.0	8.0
Mid-western	73139	37731	35408	5.0	5.2	4.7
Far-western	52296	24045	28251	6.5	6.2	6.9
Total	715745	354294	361451	7.0	7.1	6.9
TARAI						
Eastern	201623	102120	99504	6.1	6.1	6.1
Central	242064	124066	117998	6.2	6.1	6.2
Western	114211	60093	54118	6.5	6.8	6.2
Mid-western	62870	33221	29649	5.1	5.4	4.9
Far-western	48870	25204	23666	4.9	5.0	4.8
Total	669638	344704	324934	6.0	6.0	5.9
Nepal	1504311	758369	745942	100	100	100

* Adjusted for Salyan, Kalikot and 10 other districts as per the proportion used by Central Bureau of Statistics for the total population.

The lower proportion of older people with relatively higher proportion of mature people in urban areas is reflected in the lower aged dependency ratios in the urban areas in all three-census periods (Table 5). On the contrary, rural areas with lower proportion of mature population and higher proportion of aged population reflects higher aged dependency ratios. This demonstrates a situation captured in a local Nepali saying *Janha gahro unhi sarho*, which translates, it is the poorer areas and/or people that further get pauperized.

Aged Population and the Syndrome of Marginalization

As the number and proportion of aged population is growing over the years, increasing number of older people are being trapped in poverty and poor care. With clear improvement in overall mortality status in the country (decrease in crude death rate from 36 per thousand in 1950s to 9.6 in 2001) and a decline in fertility (decrease in total fertility rate from 6.3 children in 1971 to 4.1 children in 2001), the doubling time of total population reflected in the current growth rate is bound to slow down, whereas the doubling time for aged population can be faster than 20 year as has been indicated by the latest intercensal growth rate.

Table 5. Proportion of Population in Broad Age Group by Rural Urban Categories

Population Census Year	Urban				Rural			
	Young	Mature	Aged	Aged dependency	Young	Mature	Aged	Aged dependency
1981	39.1	55.8	5.1	9.2	41.5	52.8	5.8	10.9
1991	37.3	57.7	5.0	8.7	42.9	51.2	5.9	11.5
2001	33.1	61.2	5.7	9.3	40.4	53.0	6.6	12.5

The number and proportion of aged population in Nepal has increased in a situation where neither the family nor the state is in a position to genuinely support and provide comfort to their living let alone the healthy living. Never in the history of Nepalese society, such a three to four generational living existed. In other words, most families facing the problem of older people have to learn to deal with the problems of aged parents/grandparents from trial and error and there are no role models to follow. The socio-economic context in which Nepalese older people are living suggests them to be trapped in a syndrome of marginalization. These syndromes are reflected in their activity status, emerging family nucleation, occupational mismatch with new generation, empty nest syndrome, and competing demands of household with limited resources of the family and the state. Brief analysis of these issues is presented below. Some of them need further investigation but it is assumed that existing information is sufficient to indicate the syndrome of marginalization of aged population in the country.

Aged and the Activity Status

Despite disabilities associated with ageing many Nepalese older people are found to be still active but with less hours of work per week (Subedi, 2003). For the first time Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99 has provided data on activity status of aged people (CBS, 1999)⁴. According to this survey, 55 percent of the total aged population was usually active and 45 percent inactive (Table 6). While it is not known how many of these usually active older people are forced to be part of the labour force for subsistence survival, at least 45 percent of them are clearly inactive and are dependent to others for their livelihood. They clearly are marginal sections of population who need support from family, community and the state. This is so when the country is enmeshed with armed conflict and when young-adults are finding it difficult to stay in the villages.

⁴ The Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99 estimated 6.9 percent of total population aged 60 and over in the country. The proportion was 7.0 percent for male and 6.7 percent for female.

Table 6. Usual Activity Status of Aged Population

Activity status	Male	Female	Both sexes
Usually active	66.3	44.4	55.4
Usually inactive	33.7	55.6	44.6
Total	100 (662)	100 (653)	100(1315)

Source: Nepal Labour Force Survey 1998/99.

Note: Figures in parenthesis are estimates of population aged 60 & over (in thousand) in 1998/99.

Aged Population and Family Nucleation

There are good indications that Nepalese society is headed towards family nucleation over time. This nucleation has implications for isolation of older people. Decrease in average household size and increase in the proportion of households with small size are two related measures that indicate trends towards family nucleation when life expectancy is on the rise. Increase in life expectancy means an increase in the size and/or proportion of older people. Under normal circumstances when there are more survivors in the old age the average household size increases. But Nepal's demographic profile shows that the household size has been decreasing while percent of aged has been increasing (Figure 3). This is symptomatic of family nucleation where couples tend to begin their own households early in their life cycle after marriage and/or after the birth of first child.

The family nucleation is further suggested by the proportional distribution of households by number of persons in the household over three decades. Data from three recent Population Censuses show inclination towards small family sizes. In particular, a few observations are notable especially in the context of population ageing. First, there has been a nominal increase in the proportion of households with four or less members. Second, a significant decline in the proportion of households with eight or more members is apparent. Third, the proportion of households with four and five members is on clear increase. Fourth, there has been virtually no change in the proportions of households with six and seven members (Figure 4).

Recent DHS surveys have also noted the preeminence of three-child family in Nepal and the preference level of roughly 3 children (MOH/New ERA/ORC Macro 2002, Pradhan et.al. 1997). Taking this number of children into consideration, the increase in life expectancy (Human Development Report 2001) and increase in the proportion of aged population, the likelihood of the proportion of households with seven or more member to increase is obvious. However, the change in the household size over the last three decades does not confirm this. Rather, the trend is towards small families and/or family nucleation. It is likely that this contrary trend has separated the aged parents from their siblings thereby further marginalizing them by depriving the most needed care and support from the supporting generation.

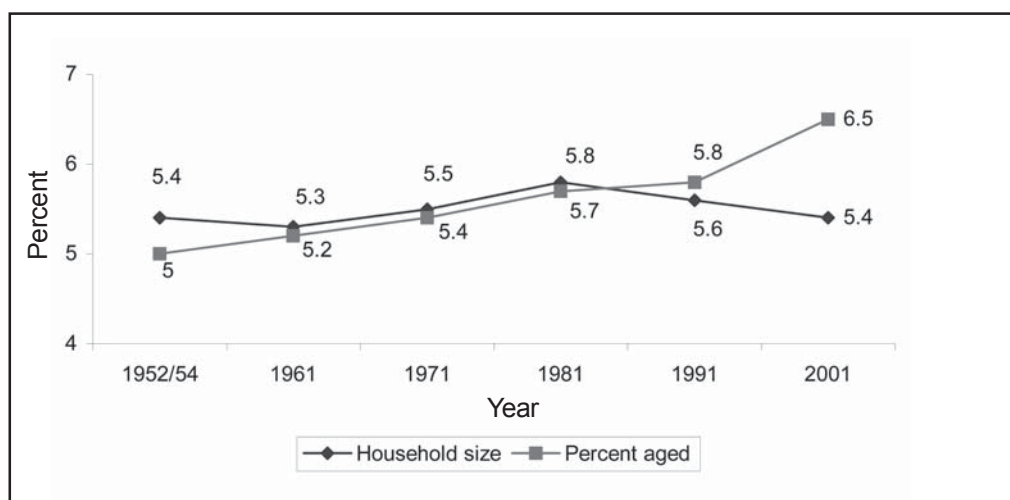


Figure 3. Changing Average Household Size and Proportion of Aged

Occupational Mismatch with New Generation

Traditional agriculture is no more one and only occupation for Nepalese young adults. With exposure to outside world through education, transport and communication more and more young adults intend to move out of agriculture to other activities as their way of earning livelihood. Records from the Population Census 2001 show that of the total economically active population 10 years of age and over in the country i.e., 9.9 million 40.3 percent or 4.0 million was engaged in non-farm activities. In 1971 the proportion of economically active population engaged in non-agriculture was 6 percent and in 1991 this proportion was 19

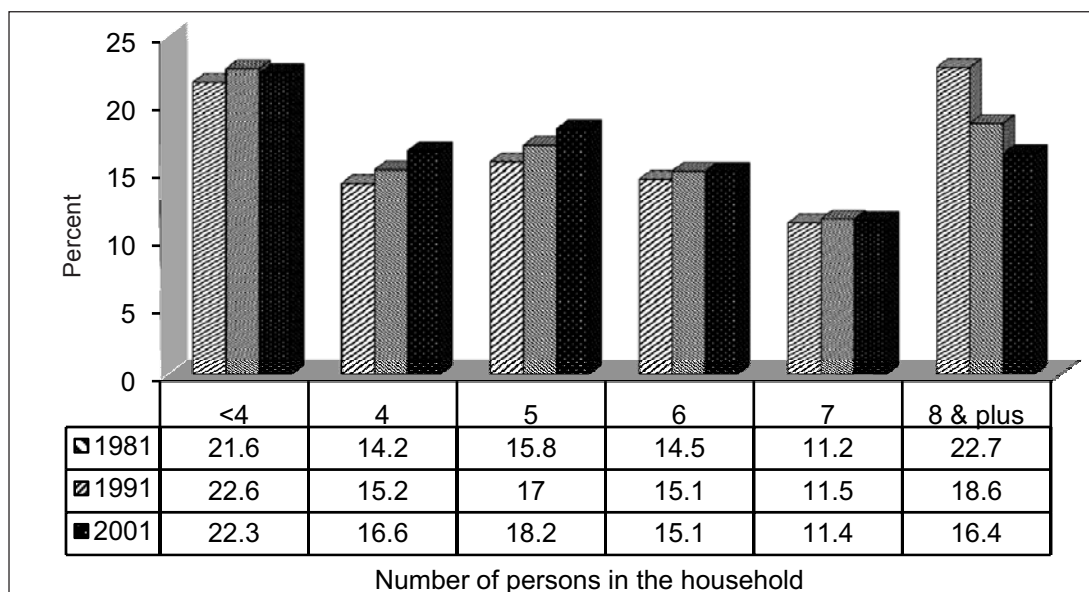


Figure 4. Changing Size of the Households by Number of Persons

percent (CBS 1995). This shift is a welcome approach in many respects but it also has impact on the daily living of the older people and their command over household decisions through control of productive resource.

Change in occupation and/or primary means of earning livelihood is evident over generation. Data on major economic activities in the last 12 months available from the latest census suggests a difference in the occupational pattern between old and new generation. The differences in the proportion of population engaged in major economic activity among three age groups namely 60 years of age and over, 45-59 years of age and 30-45 years of age clearly shows this (Table 7). For lack of longitudinal data information on economic activity of these three age groups are assumed to indicate change if any, over generation.

Only 42 percent of the new generation (represented by 30-45 years age group) reported agriculture as main economic activity. It is safe to state that when currently aged population was economically active, more than 75 percent depended entirely on agriculture.⁵ The proportions that depend on salary/wage and own enterprise have increased over generation and/or over time. In a society where resources are transferred through inheritance, a shift of occupation from traditional agriculture to others by succeeding generations clearly suggest syndrome of marginalization of older people. First, this implies that the older person's control over resources e.g. land etc., are no more effective mechanism of "power" over new generations. With occupational change the value of land for new generation does not remain the same as that of older generation and parental control over this resource may not motivate new generation to provide care and support to them. In other words, when the new generation is no more dependent upon his/her parental resources they feel autonomy and no more obliged to care their elderly parents.

Second, the change of occupation from agriculture especially to service and salaried job means separation of home space and activity space. This means lack of special care and support at time when there is urgency (sick etc.). When old people get older living in close contact is important. Caring older people means understanding that older people need support not only from purse and heart but also from closer living arrangement.

The Empty Nest Syndrome

Over the last decade not only rural urban migration has increased but external migration has also increased significantly. While *ghumphir* i.e., short- term migration, is integral part of Nepalese life-style established as a mechanism to keeping pace with external world (see, Subedi 1993), with deteriorating security situation in the village more migrants are extending their stay outside home in recent years than ever before. Data on the extent of out-migration and external migration are grossly underestimated in the available sources. The underestimation applies to both the census data on absentee population and labour migration through Foreign Employment Promotion Program of Ministry of Labour and Transport.

⁵ This proportion is based on the assumption that majority of those aged 60 and over who reported "no work" during census enumeration in 2001 were dependent on agriculture while they were active.

Table 7. Major Economic Activity in the Last 12 Months

Major Economic Activity	Proportion engaged in various activities among					
	60 years of age & over		Aged 45-59 years		Aged 30-45 years	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Agriculture/own farm	512005	56.6	1102150	51.3	1586347	42.0
Salary/wage	71775	7.9	344701	16.0	839686	22.2
Own economic enterprises	60219	6.6	182018	8.5	389754	10.3
Others*	261157	28.9	519121	24.2	963607	25.5
Total who work	905,156	100	2147990	100	3779394	100
No work	572,223	38.7	143530	6.3	108806	2.8

Source: Population Census 2001.

Note: * Others include job seeking, household chores, student and extended economic activity.

Population Census 2001 recorded 762,181 people absent from home for more than six months, which constituted 3.4 percent of total enumerated population. About 44 percent were from Western region. It is Western region that has highest proportion of aged population. In this region when district is taken as the unit of analysis 13.2 percent of native-born population is migrant. This figure does not take into account of rural urban migration within the same district. More importantly, an earlier study e.g., Survey of Migration, 1996 reported that 22 percent of total population as internal migrants (KC, Subedi, Gurung, Acharya and Suwal, 1997).

An example of increased tempo of migration in recent years is the case of labour migration outside India. The actual figures are assumed to be several times greater than the records from the Labour Ministry but these figures are enough to give a picture of the emerging trend of migration that has implications for the care of aged people. Figure 5 shows the growth of labour migration over the last 10 years. Between these years annual outflow has increased more than 54 times. Up until 1996/97 no clear sign of increase or decrease is apparent. It is after 1996/97 that the increase has been almost consistent. It is believed that this increase has been associated with both an increase in demand of workers in West Asia, S. Korea and lately in Malaysia and an increase in the number of agencies together with increase of semi-skilled workers looking for work outside the country. The recent entry to Malaysia was because Malaysian government replaced Bangladesh and listed Nepal as labour recipient country in the late 1990s (Kanapathy 2001).

Over these 10 years the annual rate of increase of labour migration appears to be 55.9 percent. Country-wise data of workers sent for foreign employment through agencies between 1992/93-2001/02 suggests that the number going abroad for employment has been increasing

in general and the increase is very rapid in the last few years (Figure 5). This rapid increase especially over the last few years is indicative of a situation of *migration hump*. Change in size of labour migrants in the coming years will clarify this situation and further research is necessary. However, a recent study suggested that given the deteriorating economic and security situation in the country with *janayuddha* (people's war) of the last seven years, further exodus from rural areas was not unlikely for some years to come (Subedi 2003).

The contemporary rural context and out-migration of youths from there has further marginalized the older people. Migration theories elsewhere have established that migration is selective and it is the young adults who migrate (Lee, 1966). Nepal is no exception. Almost all those participating in the foreign labour market are young adults primarily the males. In addition, young adults also dominate the stream of internal migrants. The political instability created by Maoist insurgency over the last seven years and the state's action to counter the insurgency through mobilization of armed forces has created a situation where rural youths are trapped between these two forces. Whereas insurgents force them to join their cause, the state security personnel suspect them either of joining hands with the insurgents or of not cooperating them to quell the insurgency. This has further reinforced rural exodus of young adults. A study of news reported in any national daily newspapers (e.g., *Kantipur*, *Nepal Samachhar Patra*, *Rajdhani*, *Space time*) is sufficient to justify the rural exodus. For the older people this large-scale rural exodus and extension of stay in the destination denotes the development of empty nest syndrome in the villages. To the extreme one headline reads as *sunsan bandaichhan purvi pahadka bastiharu*, which translates as "settlements in Eastern Hills are emptying" (*Kantipur*, January 31, 2003).

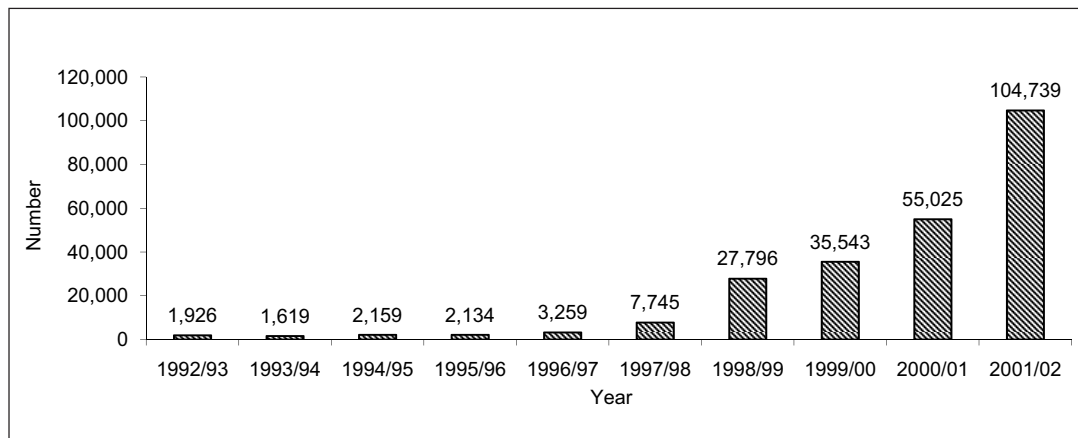


Figure 5. Growth of Foreign Labour Migration, (1992/93-2001/02)

More importantly it is the regions with higher proportion of aged that have high prevalence of out-migration. For example, in Western region the proportion of aged population was 7.7 percent (national average equals 6.5 percent) according to Population Census 2001 and it is

the same region where migrant as percent of total population constitute 7.3 percent i.e., highest in the country. At the national level migrant as percent of total population comprise 3.4 percent.

Women as Further Marginalized

While aged population in general are facing syndrome of marginalization there are indications that women are being further marginalized. The two indicators namely marital status and literacy status clearly demonstrate this. Table 8 presents the marital status of older people. Demographically married people (and living together) not only live longer they also spent better part of their old age as healthy ageing. Data suggests older women's poor position in terms of marital status. While one out of four older women is a widow the corresponding figure for male is one out of ten. Similarly more elderly women than men fall in divorce/separated and in 'not stated' category. Men are primarily the head of the households and they mainly control resources. The status of women is generally lower compared with men. Although elderly widows assume headship after the death of their husband there is a question mark on how real would be their control over household resources.

Table 8. Marital Status of Aged Population

Marital status	Both sexes		Male		Female	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Married	1183550	80.1	657919	88.3	532986	72.8
Single	19235	1.3	10558	1.4	8677	1.2
Widow/widower	250512	17.0	67821	9.1	182692	24.9
Divorced/separated	6065	0.4	2389	0.3	3676	0.5
Not stated	18017	1.2	6153	0.9	11860	1.6
Total	147,7379	100	744840	100	732539	100

Source : Population Census 2001.

Note : Figures in this table are based on total enumerated population only. Population Census 2001 provides detail characteristics of 22,736,934 enumerated populations and not of 23,151,423. Detail characteristics of census disturbed VDCs and wards are not available.

The literacy status is also not encouraging for aged population in general and for female in particular. Nine out of ten aged women cannot read and write whereas this figure is only six out of ten for men (Table 9). Higher literacy correlates with long and healthy ageing. Women elderly are disadvantaged in this respect as well.

Table 9. Literacy Status of Aged Population, 2001

Description	Literate	Illiterate/partial literate		Not stated
		Can't read & write	Can read only	
Male	28.7	61.5	8.1	1.7
Female	4.6	89.4	3.8	2.2
Total	16.8	75.3	6.0	1.9

Source: Population Census 2001.

Competing Demands with Limited Resources and Aged as Low Priority

The state support is virtually non-existent to overwhelming majority of older people. A few civil and army retirees get pension but whose proportion is nominal. The old—old i.e., aged 75 and above, get NRs. 150 (US \$ 2.00) per month as elderly allowance while widows aged 60 and above are entitled NRs. 100 (US\$ 1.33) per month. There a few elderly homes primarily for disabled elderly the number getting such services can be counted in hardly over three digits. All this means the support provision to older people is negligible even for those who are entitled. An overwhelming majority of elderly has to support oneself and/or from the household members they live in.

In a rapidly growing population with stagnant economy, the competition for limited resources is very high. Amidst competing demands created by poverty (38 %), considerable mortality (infant, child and maternal), massive illiteracy (46 %) and high underemployment (nearly 50 percent as per NLFS 1998/99) in the country as a whole, the programs for aged persons whose maintenance needs are high but have very low or no productivity, are on the bottom of national priorities. Aged have very little or no political influence and thus programs related to their welfare are among the first vulnerable items for cutbacks at times of budget crisis. The contemporary situation in Nepal is such that issues related to aged persons are overshadowed by current budget crisis to spend or reallocate more and more on security problem in the country. Once economic considerations and human capital concerns form the guiding principle of resource allocation the aged population are further marginalized. It is only when there is consideration of their previous contribution, humanitarian ground and entitlement of citizenship that the aged populations prevail in the public funds (Treas and Logue 1986).

The proportion of child population is an important factor for allocation of funds for aged population. As noted earlier about 40 percent of the total population in Nepal consists of children below 15 years of age. In the demographic literature this proportion is suggestive of progressive age structure. Literature elsewhere clearly states, “support of a large child population is an important limiting factor in the availability of funds for programs benefiting elderly” (Siegel and Hoover 1984: 30). This large proportion means that budget on health sector has to be allocated in the immunization and preventive health measures rather than curative measures meant for aged population. Nepal’s health sector budget clearly shows this. Moreover, health care program and supplies for elderly care are expensive. In the colloquial

language while children and youth are equated as “the rising sun (*karnadhar*)” meaning those having potential, the older people are equated with “the setting sun (*dandaka joon*)” and that the rising sun obviously gets the priority in the health care matters. In the declining economy such as contemporary Nepal even for a middle class household when the head is caught between tough choices of spending his/her limited resource on children or on parents the children get priority over parents.

Conclusion

In recent years a sizeable number of older people i.e., aged 60 years and over has emerged making population ageing in Nepal as an evolving issue. The trend of growth of older people suggests this problem as a social and demographic challenge of this century. The growth of elderly population in Nepal has taken place in a situation where neither the household nor the nation is in a position to genuinely support them for their comfortable living. Thus, many of them are being caught into a syndrome of marginalization. The distribution of aged population is uneven and the Hill is overburdened with the proportion of older people in general and of older women in particular. Similarly, the proportion of aged population is higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

The proportion is not very high yet compared with countries that have been facing ‘the second demographic transition’ (see, van de Kaa 1987) but the overall changes taking place in the socio-economic landscape of the country are not conducive for even the small proportion and let alone current growth. Faced with hardships a large section of older people have to remain active as demonstrated by National Labour Force Survey 1998/99. Occupational changes are evident among new generation. When occupational change takes place to non-agricultural activities the older people’s command of power over new generation through control of traditional resource e.g., land dwindles. The new generation in this situation may not be motivated to provide care and support to older generation since they feel more autonomy.

Increasing out-migration of youths associated with economic survival and with security reasons together with increasing family nucleation has developed empty nest syndrome, which has marginalized older people more than people of any other age groups. Overall taking into consideration of contemporary socio-economic situation especially the activity status, occupational change, large scale migration, emerging family nucleation, presence of large proportion of children and resource limitations of the household clearly suggest that Nepalese elderly are trapped into the syndrome of marginalization. This paper is a preliminary attempt and more in-depth studies are warranted in this direction.

The policy issue emerging from this situation is how to support older people and the households in which they live through social provisions. Aged people are not only drain on resources and passive consumers they are also valuable resource having full of knowledge, wisdom and experience. Taken positively the implications of social geography of older people in Nepal

whose size is little over 1.5 million also suggests that despite being trapped in the syndrome of marginalization we now have the demographic window which means an opportunity to learn from experiences of other countries in formulating programs to support productive and healthy ageing. The possibility exists and this window must be utilized to develop and implement social policies and programs supporting aged population in the country.

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