

WOMEN'S PERCEPTION OF TIME IN RURAL INDIA: POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY WELFARE PROGRAMMES

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INTRODUCTION

The recording of time-related data is an important part of any management information system for family welfare. The correct age in years, the age at menarche, the date of the last menstrual period, the expected date of delivery, and the date of birth of children are some of the important events about which women are often questioned. But a basic question which arises is: are our illiterate, simple women in rural areas conscious of time in terms of dates and months on the modern calendar? How many women would be able to say, "Today is 23rd July, 1990"?

Of course, all men and women are conscious of the continuous flow of time, although its physical nature may be a profound mystery. Following the widespread availability of the calendar and the watch, time has acquired a new meaning for the sophisticated city dweller. It is precisely measurable and seems to move ahead relentlessly like a shooting arrow. A particular time on a particular date will never return again and is, therefore, absolutely unique. On the other hand, for the common villager, time is essentially a cycle of events which is repeated each year - the change of seasons, the sowing and harvesting of crops, and the festivals recurring at regular intervals.

OBJECTIVES

In the rural context then, in an apparently endless repetitive cycle, how important are dates and years, particularly to the women folk? How do they recollect time-related events in their own personal life? This preliminary study was conducted to see how time is viewed by our village women and how good is their calendar-sense since this can have considerable implications in the management of their reproductive functions.

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SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in three different Primary Health Centre (PHC) areas in Rajasthan state, namely, Phagi (Jaipur), Badgaon (Jalore) and Bhaisroadgarh (Chittorgarh). A structured questionnaire was prepared in Hindi which had only four simple and straight-forward questions:

1. Can you tell what day is today ?
Day, Date, Month and Year
2. What is your age ? When were you born ?
3. When was your youngest child born ? Do you remember his/her date of birth ?
4. On which date does our Republic Day fall ?

A total of 300 women from the three PHC areas were randomly selected and interviewed. Care was taken to record the spontaneous verbal responses to the questions in the respondents's own words, as far as possible.

RESULTS

More than 90 per cent of the respondents were totally illiterate, while the remaining seemed to have gone to a school but only upto Standard 2 or 3. The sample, therefore, was fairly uniform as far as literacy and education are concerned.

Day and Date 'Today'

All the women were pointedly asked to tell the day, date, month and year when the interview was being taken. The response was somewhat complex because of two different calendars (Indian and Gregorian or modern) as well as two different languages (Hindi and English) being used. For example, the year was indicated according to the modern calendar but the numerals were in Hindi. The distribution of women according to their calendar sense after sorting out these complexities is shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Percentage distribution of respondents by their knowledge regarding day, date, month and year

	Indian calendar	Modern calendar	No knowledge
Day	76.6	—	23.4
Date	60.8	10.0	29.2
Month	74.1	10.5	19.4
Year	0	28.0	72.0

Obviously, more than 75 per cent of the respondents could correctly tell the day in Hindi (Somwar, Mangalwar and so on). The date was largely men-

tioned according to the Indian calender (Akadeshi, Chauth, Poonam etc.). The months were correctly identified according to the Indian calender by about 74 per cent of the respondents (Bhadwa, Ashodh etc.) and 10 per cent of these could even name the month according to the modern calendar, i.e. July, August etc. However, no one could give the year according to the Indian Calender. Only a third were aware of the year at all; they indicated it according to the modern calender using Hindi numerals (Unnees Sau Navasi).

Age

Although none of the respondents was able to specifically state her age in years, some could compute it within a range of five years after some probing. Age at marriage and age of eldest child were the most commonly used reference points. Women who were fairly precise about their present age constituted only 5.7 per cent of the total respondents. On the other hand, 145 or 48.3 per cent of the respondents were unable to specify their age in years, their vagueness and uncertainty extending over ten years or more. None could give their date of birth as we expect it i.e. date, month and year. On the basis of their own assessment the age distribution of the 300 respondents is shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Age-wise distribution of respondents

Age as stated by the women in years	% of respondents
15-19	4.0
20-24	11.2
25-29	9.0
30-34	11.2
35+	16.3
Uncertain	48.3
Total	100.0

No attempt was made to verify the age of the women nor was it the purpose of the present study. In any case, it is not easy to establish the age of adults with any precision. What we were concerned about was the importance that rural women attached to this age reckoning and if they at all cared to remember their date of birth.

Date of birth of youngest child

We also tested the ability of rural women to recall the date of birth of the youngest child (Table 3).

TABLE 3

Percentage distribution of respondents by their ability to recall the date of birth of the youngest child

	Indian calender	Modern calender	No knowledge
Day	53.8	4.5	41.8
Date	41.9	1.8	56.3
Month	54.5	0.9	34.6
Year	0	29.4	70.6

It was really surprising that even when the last born child was himself/herself an adult, the mother could not indicate specifically the day and month on which he/she was born. This was all according to the Indian calender; those who could recall the event according to the modern calender formed a negligible proportion. However, when it came to the year of birth of the last child, 70 per cent were unable to identify it at all. The 30 per cent who did recollect the year of birth all used the modern calender with Hindi numerals.

National Day

The importance which rural women attach to the calender was also tested for a non-personal event i.e. our Republic Day. Interestingly, the respondents were able to comprehend this national occasion only as the day when the flag is hoisted in the village school. Only 38.2 per cent of the respondents could approximately tell the month by the Indian calender during which the flag hoisting takes place. The remaining had no idea.

Incidentally, all the respondents were also asked who was the Chief Minister of Rajasthan. Only two of the 300 could correctly name the Chief Minister; many thought it was Rajiv Gandhi and the others had no idea.

DISCUSSION

This study has to be viewed against the background of female literacy in Rajasthan which is one of the lowest in the country. The 1981 census showed that only 5.46 per cent of the rural women could be counted as literate. Careful interaction with 300 of these rural women regarding their perception of time has brought out the following facts :

1. Calender-sense, or remembering dates and years, is considered by these women to be essentially a concern of the menfolk. They view their own lives as simply repetitive and bound down to a daily domestic routine.
2. It appears that rural women are only concerned about remembering the day and month of events which are important in their personal life but they

have no count of the years. That is why they may correctly recall the day and month on which a child was born, or a festival is celebrated, but they cannot recall the time in years that has elapsed after the event.

3. Some complexity and confusion arises because we have two calendars in use. Days are counted only by their Hindi names; months are remembered sometimes according to the Indian calendar and sometimes according to the modern Gregorian calendar. The recollection of the year is very vague and a confusing use is made of both (there is a difference of 58 years in the Vikram Samvat and Christian era). Women are unconcerned about the year and look up to their menfolk to do whatever computation they will to fix any event in relation to the year of occurrence.

4. Interestingly enough, calendars are still a rarity in rural homes, at least in Rajasthan. None of the 300 women could present one before the study team. (They, however, knew that the village priest has the Indian "Panchang" and Government establishments, like schools and health centres do display the English calendar). Men, however, have started using wristwatches and many of these show the day and date. The marked proliferation of cheap electronic watches is, therefore, indirectly contributing to a better calendar-sense, at least amongst the men.

5. Obviously, a large variation in the recollection of the year of occurrence of any particular event is unavoidable in a rural setting. A management information system based on the year of marriage, age of children, date of last menstrual period, date of birth etc. must take this into account. The basic fact is that the rural women see no use in remembering the years. Any event important to them - the birth of a child or a religious ritual to be observed - is identified by the day and month; the rest appears to them as a cyclic repetition of the same.

6. The fact that none of the 300 respondents could correctly name the Chief Minister should be a sobering thought for all politicians

In conclusion, educating the rural women for a better reckoning of dates and years can greatly help in a more efficient management of their fertility. Calendars can be a very simple and useful tool for demarcating the period of maximum fertility, safe period, early conception amenorrhoea, abnormalities related to delayed or early menarche and menopause, proper birth spacing etc. At the same time it would also be interesting to see if there are any gender-based differences in time perception.

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