

Roots of Happiness: Exploring Happiness Beyond Material Wealth

¹Geetha. R. K, ²Dr. N. Devaki

¹Research Scholar, ²Associate Professor

¹²Department of Education

¹²Gandhigram Rural Institute--(DTBU) INDIA

Abstract—Happiness is increasingly recognized as a significant indicator of individual and community wellbeing, extending beyond conventional measures of economic prosperity. Rural communities often experience unique social and cultural dynamics that shape their perceptions of happiness and life satisfaction. The present study aimed to explore the level of happiness and identify the major sources contributing to happiness among rural residents in Tamil Nadu, India. An exploratory mixed-methods survey research design was adopted. A total of 50 village residents were selected through convenience sampling. Quantitative data were collected using a seven-point happiness scale, while qualitative data were obtained through an open-ended question exploring participants' perceptions of happiness. Descriptive statistics were employed to analyse the quantitative data, whereas thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative responses. The findings revealed that 56% of the participants reported high levels of happiness, 32% reported moderate happiness, and only 12% reported low happiness. The qualitative analysis identified family relationships, good health, mental peace, contentment, and togetherness as the predominant sources of happiness. Despite belonging predominantly to low- and middle-income groups, participants generally perceived themselves as happy, suggesting that social relationships and emotional wellbeing play a central role in their subjective happiness. The study highlights the importance of culturally rooted and community-oriented approaches to promoting wellbeing in rural settings. The findings may inform community development programmes, mental health promotion initiatives, and policies aimed at enhancing the quality of life in rural communities.

Index Terms—Happiness, Subjective Wellbeing, Rural Happiness, Family Relationships, Community Wellbeing, Emotional Wellbeing, Tamil Nadu.

I. Introduction

Happiness has emerged as a significant indicator of human development and quality of life, extending beyond traditional economic measures such as income, employment, and gross domestic product. Contemporary researchers argue that individuals evaluate the quality of their lives not only through material resources but also through their emotional experiences, social relationships, physical health, and overall life satisfaction. Consequently, happiness has become a central concept in psychology, public health, sociology, and development studies, as it reflects both individual wellbeing and societal progress (Diener et al., 2018).

The concept of subjective wellbeing refers to people's cognitive and emotional evaluations of their lives, including life satisfaction, the presence of positive emotions, and the relative absence of negative emotions. Rather than being determined solely by economic conditions, subjective wellbeing is influenced by multiple psychological, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Positive psychology emphasizes that happiness is

a multidimensional construct encompassing positive emotions, engagement, meaningful relationships, purpose in life, and personal accomplishment, all of which contribute to human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Although economic development has improved living standards worldwide, numerous studies have shown that increased income alone does not necessarily guarantee greater happiness. Instead, family relationships, social support, health, community participation, and psychological resilience consistently emerge as stronger predictors of subjective wellbeing.

Within the Indian context, happiness is understood not merely as an individual emotional state but as a socially and culturally embedded experience. Indian perspectives emphasize harmonious relationships, family cohesion, contentment (*Santosha*), inner peace, and collective wellbeing as important contributors to a happy life. Rural communities provide an important setting for understanding happiness because social interactions, family support, and community connectedness often remain stronger than in urban environments. Despite facing economic constraints and limited access to resources, rural residents frequently report satisfactory levels of happiness owing to close interpersonal relationships, shared cultural traditions, and collective social life. Recent studies on subjective wellbeing in India have similarly indicated that happiness should be examined within the broader context of social relationships, cultural values, and everyday lived experiences rather than being viewed exclusively through economic indicators.

The present study was undertaken to explore the level of happiness among rural residents in Tamil Nadu and to identify the major factors contributing to their happiness. By integrating quantitative survey findings with qualitative responses, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of happiness from the perspective of rural communities and contributes to the growing body of literature on subjective wellbeing in the Indian context.

II. Review of Related Studies

Previous research has consistently demonstrated that happiness is a multidimensional construct influenced by psychological, social, cultural, and economic factors. Diener et al. (1999) conceptualized subjective well-being as comprising life satisfaction, positive affect, and the relative absence of negative affect, emphasizing that happiness extends beyond material prosperity. Similarly, Seligman (2011), through the PERMA model, proposed that positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment are fundamental components of human flourishing. In the Indian context, Rao et al. (2017) conducted a community-based study among rural adults in Karnataka and found that the majority of participants reported being happy despite modest socioeconomic conditions. The study identified cordial family relationships, supportive neighbourhoods, and good health as significant determinants of happiness. Furthermore, Singh et al. (2022), using a qualitative approach with Indian participants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, reported that family bonding, health, meaningful social relationships,

spirituality, nature connectedness, and contentment were central to the subjective perception of happiness. Likewise, Linssen et al. (2011) observed that subjective wellbeing among rural households in India was influenced not only by income but also by social relationships and individual perceptions of life circumstances. Although these studies have substantially contributed to the understanding of happiness and wellbeing, empirical evidence focusing on rural communities in Tamil Nadu, remains limited. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by exploring both the level of happiness and the perceived sources of happiness among rural residents using an exploratory mixed-methods survey approach.

III. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the level of happiness among rural residents in Tamil Nadu.
2. To identify the major sources contributing to happiness among rural residents.
3. To understand the cultural and social dimensions of subjective wellbeing in rural communities.

IV. Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted an exploratory mixed-methods survey research design to examine the level of happiness and the factors contributing to happiness among rural residents. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perceptions of happiness. Quantitative data were collected using a structured happiness questionnaire, while qualitative insights were obtained through an open-ended question that explored the respondents' perceived sources of happiness. The integration of both forms of data enabled triangulation and enriched the interpretation of the findings. The study was conducted in a village in Tamil Nadu, India, the study comprised 50 village residents who voluntarily participated in the survey. Participants represented different age groups, genders, and income categories, providing a diverse perspective on happiness within the rural community. The respondents included young adults, middle-aged adults, and elderly individuals from low- and middle-income households. A convenience sampling technique was employed to select the participants based on their availability and willingness. As the study was exploratory in nature and intended to understand community perceptions rather than make population-level generalizations, convenience sampling was considered appropriate.

Data were collected using a structured Happiness Survey Schedule, consisting of two sections.

Section A: Demographic Profile

This section collected background information, including:

- Gender
- Age
- Monthly family income

Section B: Happiness Assessment

The second section consisted of:

- A seven-point happiness rating scale, where respondents rated their overall level of happiness from 1 (Very Unhappy) to 7 (Very Happy).
- An open-ended question inviting respondents to describe the factors that contributed most to their happiness.

The questionnaire was prepared in simple language to ensure that participants could easily understand and respond to the items.

Data Collection Procedure

The survey was administered during the Village Placement Programme. The purpose of the study was explained to all participants before data collection. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed verbal consent was obtained from each respondent. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would be used solely for academic research purposes. Where necessary, assistance was provided to respondents in understanding the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately.

Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative responses were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including:

- Frequency
- Percentage
- Mean (where applicable)
- Standard deviation (where applicable)

Participants were categorised into three levels of happiness based on their happiness scores:

- Low Happiness: Scores ranging from 1 to 3
- Moderate Happiness: Scores ranging from 4 to 5
- High Happiness: Scores ranging from 6 to 7

Qualitative Analysis

The responses to the open-ended question were analysed using thematic analysis. Similar responses were grouped into common themes through repeated reading and coding. Major themes such as family relationships, health, mental peace, contentment, togetherness, and freedom were identified and interpreted in relation to the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were followed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study before providing their consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by ensuring that no personally identifiable information was disclosed in the reporting of the findings. The data collected were used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

V. Data Analysis and Findings

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The study included 50 rural residents representing diverse demographic backgrounds. The respondents comprised both male and female participants, with female respondents constituting the majority of the sample. Participants belonged to different age groups, ranging from 18 years to above 60 years, with comparatively higher representation from the 31–45 years and 46–60 years age categories. The majority of the respondents belonged to low- and middle-income households, with monthly family incomes predominantly below ₹30,000. The demographic diversity of the participants provided a broad understanding of happiness across different sections of the rural community.

Level of Happiness among Rural Residents

The overall happiness scores revealed a generally positive level of subjective happiness among the participants. Of the 50 respondents, 28 (56%) reported high levels of happiness by scoring between 6 and 7 on the seven-point happiness scale. 16 respondents (32%) reported moderate levels of happiness with scores ranging from 4 to 5, while only 6 respondents (12%) reported low levels of happiness with scores between 1 and 3.

The findings indicate that nearly nine out of every ten respondents (88%) experienced moderate to high levels of happiness. This suggests that despite living in predominantly low- and middle-income households, most participants perceived their lives positively and expressed satisfaction with their overall wellbeing.

Age-wise Pattern of Happiness

A descriptive examination of the happiness scores across age groups revealed interesting patterns. Elderly participants generally reported moderate to high levels of happiness, reflecting emotional maturity, acceptance of life circumstances, and satisfaction derived from family relationships. Middle-aged respondents also demonstrated relatively high happiness scores, possibly reflecting stable family responsibilities and social support.

In contrast, responses from younger adults (18–30 years) showed comparatively greater variation in happiness levels. Some participants expressed high levels of happiness, whereas others reported moderate or lower scores. This variation may reflect differences in employment opportunities, financial expectations, educational aspirations, and transitional life experiences. However, as the study employed descriptive analysis with a small sample size, these observations should be interpreted as indicative patterns rather than statistically significant differences.

Qualitative Analysis: Sources of Happiness

The thematic analysis of the open-ended responses identified several recurring factors contributing to happiness among the respondents. Family relationships emerged as the most frequently reported source of happiness. Participants repeatedly mentioned living with family members, spending time together, the wellbeing of children, and harmonious family relationships as central to their happiness.

Good health constituted another major theme. Several respondents associated happiness with freedom from illness, physical wellbeing, and mental peace. Responses such as "living without illness," "mental peace," and the Tamil expression "நோயற்ற வாழ்வு" (disease-free life) highlighted the importance of health as an essential component of a happy life. Contentment and acceptance also emerged as important themes. Participants expressed happiness through statements such as "being happy with what they have," "moving forward in life," and "freedom." These responses indicate that happiness was perceived as a state of emotional satisfaction and positive outlook rather than being exclusively dependent on material possessions. The qualitative findings consistently demonstrate that happiness among the respondents was primarily rooted in interpersonal relationships, health, emotional balance, and contentment.

Cultural Perspective on Happiness

The responses provided in Tamil offered valuable insights into the cultural dimensions of happiness. Expressions such as "குடும்பத்துடன் இருப்பது" (being with family) and "அனைவரும் ஒன்றாக இருப்பது" (everyone living together) reflected the importance of family unity, collective living, and social harmony within the rural community. These findings indicate that participants largely viewed happiness as a shared social experience rather than an individual achievement. The results suggest that cultural values emphasizing togetherness, mutual care, and emotional connectedness continue to shape perceptions of happiness among rural residents. Such findings are consistent with the collectivist orientation commonly observed in Indian society.

Overall Findings

The major findings of the study are summarized as follows:

1. More than half of the respondents (56%) reported high levels of happiness, while only a small proportion (12%) reported low happiness.
2. The majority of participants belonged to low- and middle-income households, yet most perceived themselves as moderately or highly happy.
3. Family relationships emerged as the most prominent source of happiness among the respondents.
4. Good health, mental peace, contentment, and togetherness were identified as additional contributors to happiness.
5. Elderly participants generally demonstrated relatively stable levels of happiness compared to younger respondents.
6. The qualitative findings highlighted the importance of cultural values such as family bonding, collective living, and social harmony in shaping subjective happiness.

VI. Limitations of the Study

- The study was conducted in a single village in Tamil Nadu.
- The sample size was relatively small.
- Convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings.
- Happiness was measured primarily through self-report data.

VII. Discussion

The present study explored the level of happiness and its major sources among rural residents in Tamil Nadu. The findings revealed that most respondents reported moderate to high levels of happiness despite belonging predominantly to low- and middle-income households. This finding supports the view that

subjective wellbeing extends beyond material prosperity and is shaped by social, emotional, and cultural factors (Diener et al., 1999; Seligman, 2011).

Family relationships emerged as the most significant source of happiness. Participants consistently highlighted living with family members, spending time together, and maintaining harmonious relationships as central to their wellbeing. This finding is consistent with previous studies that identified family bonding and social connectedness as important determinants of happiness among Indian populations (Singh et al., 2022; Rao et al., 2017).

Good health and mental peace also emerged as important contributors to happiness. Several respondents associated happiness with living without illness, emotional balance, and peace of mind. These findings support the principles of positive psychology, which emphasize that wellbeing is a multidimensional construct involving positive emotions, meaningful relationships, and psychological flourishing (Seligman, 2011).

Another noteworthy finding is that most participants perceived themselves as happy despite relatively modest incomes. This observation suggests that financial status alone may not adequately explain subjective wellbeing in rural communities. Similar findings have been reported among rural households in India, where social relationships and individual perceptions of life circumstances were found to be stronger predictors of happiness than economic position alone (Linssen et al., 2011).

The qualitative findings further revealed that contentment, togetherness, and acceptance of life circumstances contribute significantly to happiness. These findings reflect the Indian philosophical concept of *Santosha* (contentment), which emphasizes inner satisfaction, gratitude, and harmonious living as important foundations of wellbeing.

Overall, the findings reinforce the growing body of literature suggesting that happiness is a multidimensional construct shaped by family relationships, health, emotional peace, contentment, and cultural values. The study demonstrates that the roots of happiness among rural residents lie not merely in material wealth but in strong social bonds, emotional security, and community connectedness.

VIII. Implications of the Study

The findings of the present study have important implications for community development, mental health promotion, and rural wellbeing initiatives. The study demonstrates that happiness among rural residents is not determined solely by economic conditions but is strongly influenced by social relationships, emotional wellbeing, and cultural values. Therefore, policies and development programmes should adopt a holistic approach to wellbeing that extends beyond economic indicators.

The prominence of family relationships as a source of happiness highlights the need to strengthen family cohesion and social support systems within rural communities. Community programmes that promote family interaction, intergenerational bonding, and social connectedness may contribute significantly to enhancing subjective wellbeing.

The importance of good health and mental peace suggests that rural development initiatives should integrate physical and mental health promotion programmes. Awareness programmes on stress management, emotional wellbeing, healthy lifestyles, and community-based mental health services can play an important role in improving the quality of life of rural residents.

The findings highlight the value of culturally rooted concepts such as contentment, togetherness, and collective living in promoting happiness. Community development programmes and public policies should recognize and preserve these positive cultural strengths while designing interventions aimed at enhancing wellbeing.

Finally, the study contributes to the growing literature on subjective wellbeing in the Indian context by emphasizing that happiness is a multidimensional construct shaped by social, emotional, and cultural factors. The findings may serve as a useful reference for researchers, policymakers, social workers, and mental health professionals in developing community-centred strategies for promoting happiness and overall wellbeing in rural communities.

IX. Conclusion

The present exploratory mixed-methods survey provides valuable insights into the nature of happiness among rural residents in Tamil Nadu. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents experienced moderate to high levels of happiness despite belonging predominantly to low- and middle-income households. This suggests that subjective happiness within the study community is influenced by factors extending beyond economic conditions.

The qualitative findings reveal that family relationships, good health, mental peace, contentment, and togetherness constitute the principal foundations of happiness. Participants consistently emphasized emotional security, harmonious family life, and social connectedness rather than material wealth as essential components of a happy life. These findings underscore the importance of interpersonal relationships and community values in promoting psychological wellbeing within rural settings.

The study also highlights the cultural dimension of happiness. The responses reflected traditional Indian values that emphasize family cohesion, collective responsibility, and emotional harmony. These culturally

embedded perspectives suggest that community wellbeing initiatives should incorporate local social and cultural strengths alongside economic development efforts.

Although the study was exploratory and based on a relatively small sample, it demonstrates the value of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand subjective happiness at the community level. The findings contribute to the growing literature on rural wellbeing by illustrating that happiness is a multidimensional construct shaped by social relationships, health, emotional resilience, and cultural values.

Future studies involving larger and more diverse rural populations may further examine the determinants of happiness using validated measurement scales and inferential statistical analyses. Nevertheless, the present study provides meaningful evidence that strengthening family relationships, promoting community engagement, supporting physical and mental health, and preserving positive cultural values can contribute significantly to enhancing happiness and overall wellbeing among rural communities.

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