

SENIOR CITIZENS AND FAMILY¹

Introduction

The demographic changes that have taken place over the last few years, increased life expectancy and a reduced birth rate have led to a very significant increase in the ratio and impact of the elderly in our society. This increase has been accompanied by a greater diversity within the community of senior citizens, in terms of their age, health and social conditions, and by a new discourse; that of the active elderly person. While becoming old is a natural phenomenon, the problems associated with it are also inevitable. It is at this stage of life that one needs housing, healthcare and financial care more than ever.

Every day thousands of people around the world hit the age of 65 and start the road of living as a senior citizen. The Registrar General of India forecasts the share of older persons (age 60 years and above) in the total population to rise from 6.9% in 2001 to 12.4% in 2026. The United Nations projections put the estimated number of elderly in India in 2000 at 77 million. The projection for the year 2025 is 168 million and for 2050 it is 326 million². These are frightening numbers: an elderly population of 20 million in 1951 increasing to 326 million in 2050. Census data 2001 about the elderly population showed that as many as 75% of elderly persons were living in rural areas. About 48.2% of elderly persons were women, out of whom 55% were widows. A total of 73% of elderly persons were illiterate and dependent on physical labor. One-third was reported to be living below the poverty line, i.e., 66% of older persons were in a vulnerable situation without adequate food, clothing, or shelter. About 90% of the elderly were from the unorganized sector, i.e., they have no regular source of income³. It also shows that over 78% of the elderly work force is engaged in agricultural activities. In the case of female workers, the figure is over 84%⁴.

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² Ashish Bose (2000) Demographic transition, *Seminar*, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2000/488.htm>

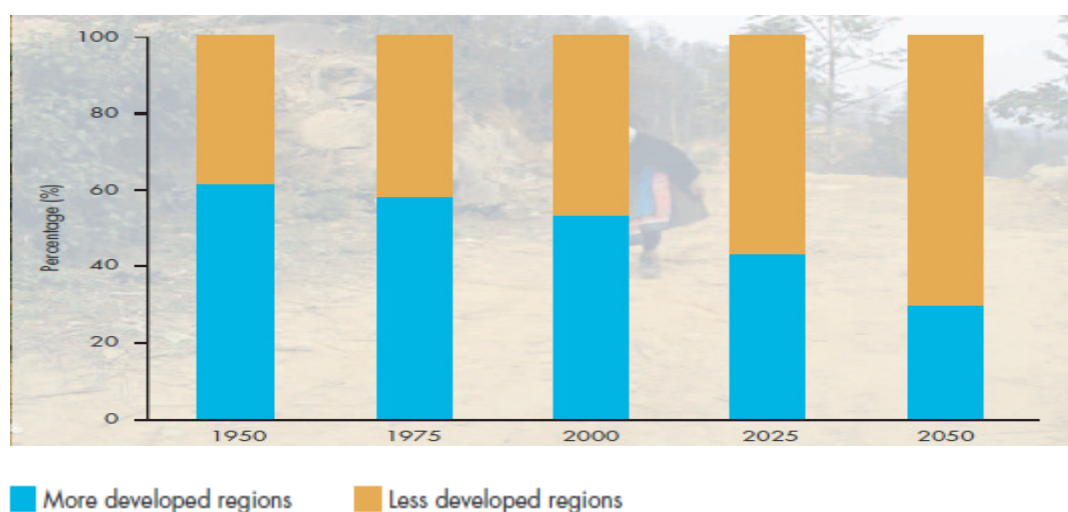
³ Jhilam Rudra De (2009) Management of Old Age--- A Critical Problem in Indian Perspective Across Culture & Time, online *esocial science*, <http://www.esocialsciences.org/Search/AdvancedSearch.aspx?key=Jhilam+Rudra+De>

⁴ Ashish Bose (2000) Demographic transition, *Seminar*, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2000/488.htm>

This important group of people has unique concerns when it comes to family. Although the age of considering senior citizens varies countries to counties but the issue of old age and the problem of senior citizens are remain there. The percentage of the population above 65 will be highest in developed countries, but the absolute number will be higher in developing countries. Developing countries such as China and India have the largest total population, and will continue to have the largest absolute number of elderly people. With a comparatively young population, India is still poised to become home to the second largest number of older persons in the world.

Figure-1

**Distribution of the World Population Aged 80 and Over by Development Region 1950-2050
(UN, 2001)**



Today we have a generation of people who after having lived in a joint family system have taken the initiative to break out and start a nuclear family. The generation that broke out of the old joint family system did so when individualistic thinking began to gain predominance in the society. It was exciting to explore experiment and establish a living set up on one's own. The nuclear family gave immense freedom from the traditions and ways of life that the old system was ridden with. Hence whenever and wherever the parents and the grown up adult children could not get along well and when the adult children could afford to build a house to call their own, nuclear families began to be formed. As it happens with most changes in the society, initially the people from the old system did not take this change very well. They were saddened to see the disintegration of family values and system and emergence of individualistic nuclear families. However, gradually when nuclear families became the order of the day, the old generation slowly began to accept the

realities and became comfortable with it. The other factor that gave rise to nuclear families was industrialization. Industrial revolution brought with it increase in job opportunities in and around major industrialized and commercial cities and towns. This forced men and women to move out of their family home and away from the parents⁵.

At present elderly population is more than 8% of total population of India. In fact the number of elderly in India is currently larger than the total population of many countries. The process of population aging is faster in India than in other developing countries because India is expected to experience a faster decline in fertility in the immediate future compared to mortality. In addition, improvement in life expectancy will allow older persons to survive longer.

Problems of senior citizens

The problems of the aging process has to be understood in the back drop of far reaching social, economic and value based changes in India. Indian society has witnessed an erosion of traditional values which has undermined the traditional position and status of the elderly. The family has undergone a sea change like the decline in the joint family system, fewer children due to acceptance of small family norms, increasingly participation of women in economic activities and migration of younger members from rural areas to cities for employment. Added to these is paucity of adequate housing facilities arising out of urbanization.

It has been observed that the elderlies feel increasingly neglected and are often cast away as burden. Consequently, physical hardships and psychological stress, Security in general and financial security, better health maintenance facilities etc. are the areas which ask for special attention in the case of elderlies. Indian Government's concern for the aged and elderlies has remained confined to pension schemes, travel concessions in railway and road transport to the senior citizens and to some medical facilities only. Hence senior citizens are in urgent need of attention from family, state and civil society organizations⁶. Cities are no longer safe or friendly for senior citizens as we can see several instances of murder and robbery cases with the senior citizens. For instance in Delhi, 500 murders of senior citizens were committed in Delhi in 2005,

⁵ To see more on the disintegration of joint family and benefits of joint family refer to "A Social Study of the Benefits of the Joint Family System", <http://www.salagram.net/jointfamily.htm>.

⁶ To see more on visit <http://www.mgmtonline.org/modules/cms/concept.php>

511 in 2004, and 547 in 2002. Although these are very old data but it the number is increasing day by day. We can awake up with our new paper everyday and see this kind of news average alternative a day of the whole year.

The fading joint family system in India and other innumerable factors have given rise to west-inspired phenomena of old age homes. But this old age home is not the total solution for the problem. Old age homes are neither a popular nor a feasible option in India and people are more disturbed and depressed in old age home than any other place. Because some children dump their old parents or grandparents in old-age homes and don't even come to visit them anymore. Another aspect of old age home associated with the availability of space, facilities and maintenance fee. For example Delhi has nearly 11 lakh senior citizens but there are only 4 governments' run homes for them and 31 by Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), private agencies and charitable trusts⁷. The facilities are lacking in government run homes. Surprising cost of living and scanty return on savings have almost pushed these senior citizens on roads. Such an act has triggered the security net of the helpless, which has almost vanished in many states in India with Kerala is in the top of the list.

Insecurity, loneliness and lack of companionship — some of life's hard-to-swallow problems — become a daily reality for these elderly persons whose children either settle abroad, or in some other state, for better career opportunities. The concept of retirement resorts or complexes is gradually emerging as the most viable option among the senior members of society who are financially independent. They want to live with dignity and, above all, want to be secure. Today's 'post-retirement complexes' have a whole range of built-in facilities like 24 hour medical service, a book-shop, bank and post office facilities etc. Some of the high-end complexes also offer open theatres, trips to places of common interest etc for their inmates. But these are only for the elite section of the aged who have the resources to enjoy such facilities. In developing countries like India, pension and social security is restricted to those who have worked in the public sector or the organized sectors. Surveys have shown that retired elderly people are confronted with the problems of financial insecurity and loneliness. The 60th National Sample

⁷ The problem of old age in India, www.azadindia.org/social.../problem-of-old-age-in-india.html

Survey collected data on the old age dependency ratio. It was found to be higher in rural areas than in urban areas. With regard to the state of economic development, a higher number of males in rural areas, 313 per 1000, were fully dependent as compared with 297 per 1000 males in urban areas. For the aged female, an opposite trend was observed (706 per 1000 for females in rural areas compared with 757 for females in urban areas). On an average 30% male and 73% females in geriatric group are economically dependent, usually on their children⁸.

Old age homes are a necessity in the present day scenario as the younger generation do not have the time or in many cases the resources to meet their needs (like medical expenses, special food etc). But old age homes should be considered only as a secondary option. Elders in the family are definitely an asset. It is they who can impart the much needed ethical values and code of conduct in the younger generation. Old age homes as an option should be considered only for the betterment of the senior citizens by way of better physical and mental status, greater possibility for social bonding etc. Under no pretext should the aged be made to feel that they are a burden and hence turned away.

Legal instruments to protection of senior citizens

Our culture recognizes the status of the parents as that of God. So it is moral duty or obligation of children to maintain their parents. Maintenance of Parents is included in section 125 of Criminal Procedure Code, 1973. Also the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act 1956 and National Policy for Older Persons Year 1999 provide the outlines for the protection of senior citizens. Under these sections and acts, parents can claim maintenance from their children. But some speedy, inexpensive process is needed and hence the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and senior Citizen Act, 2007 was enacted. The Act provides for

- a) Appropriate mechanism to be set-up to provide need-based maintenance to the parents and senior citizens;
- b) Providing medical facilities to them;

⁸ Jhilam Rudra De (2009) Management of Old Age---- A Critical Problem in Indian Perspective Across Culture & Time, online *esocial science*, <http://www.esocialsciences.org/Search/AdvancedSearch.aspx?key=Jhilam+Rudra+De> and Ashish Bose (2000) Demographic transition, *Seminar*, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2000/488.htm>

- c) For institutionalization of a suitable, mechanism for protection of life and property of older persons;
- d) Setting-up of old age homes in every district.

But the question is “is there a need for the legislation” where culture stated status of parents as that of God through sayings like “Matrudeo Bhava”, “Pitrudeo Bhava” etc. The famous “Shravankumar’s” story which was stated in “Ramayana” establishes this fact. Our culture considers them as first teachers. The foundation of our life is built up by them. So children should take care of them, respect them. It should be the moral duty of children to maintain their parents. Our traditional values and norms lay stress on showing respect and providing care for the aged.

But rapid urbanization and societal modernization has brought in a breakdown in family and community values and the new generation is now more individualistic than before. Because of this it is necessary to put some legal and moral obligation for the protection of senior citizens. It is the duty of the state to ensure right to live of every citizen of the country. This right can be well protected by enacting some laws. For these not only we need laws and punishments for the protection of the senior citizens but also soft and firm strategy for responding to the complaints about the maintenance, failures and negligence by their children. Family life is very necessary for senior citizens and for parents to lead a life of security, care and dignity. The population of the older persons in India is continuously increasing.

Policies

Over the years, the government has launched various schemes and policies for older persons. These schemes and policies are meant to promote the health, well-being and independence of senior citizens around the country. Some of these programmes have been enumerated below.

The central government came out with the National Policy for Older Persons in 1999 to promote the health and welfare of senior citizens in India. This policy aims to encourage individuals to make provision for their own as well as their spouse’s old age. It also strives to encourage families to take care of their older family members. The policy enables and supports voluntary

and non-governmental organizations to supplement the care provided by the family and provide care and protection to vulnerable elderly people. Health care, research, creation of awareness and training facilities to geriatric caregivers have also been enumerated under this policy. The main objective of this policy is to make older people fully independent citizens. This policy has resulted in the launch of new schemes such as-

- Strengthening of primary health care system to enable it to meet the health care needs of older persons
- Training and orientation to medical and paramedical personnel in health care of the elderly.
- Promotion of the concept of healthy ageing.
- Assistance to societies for production and distribution of material on geriatric care.
- Provision of separate queues and reservation of beds for elderly patients in hospitals.
- Extended coverage under the Antyodaya Scheme with emphasis on provision of food at subsidized rates for the benefit of older persons especially the destitute and marginalized sections.

Other than this policy there are very few miscellaneous beneficial schemes for the elderly population.

Family as a major support system

Family was a good situation within which to grow old. Family was a very important source of help for senior citizens in times of need. Family support is one of very important factors in helping senior citizens feel less stressed and worried about things. On the other hand, independence and a perceived lack of importance to their friends contributed more towards a stress-free ageing process. It has been proved by studies that people are, for the most part, helpful and loving which contribute to the socio-psychological health of the elderly people. It is good place to be very old and very young. As we have discussed above, India will be having the highest aged population in the elderly by 2025. There is a vast body of literature that points out that in spite of the growing numbers of the aged in the country; institutional social safety nets for the elderly are extremely inadequate. In a social milieu where family networks continue to be the

major source of psycho-social support and deep-rooted cultural norms and perception regarding the family, although apparently dwindling in near past, the role of family as the crucial source of support for the elderly assumes greater significance. Thus effective family support is a key component of the overall well-being of the elderly. Following the traditional living arrangement prevalent in rural India, co-residence of the aged members of the family with their children is common. Studies present that the overall well-being of the elderly is greater when they co-residing with children. It also important to note that, it is not only staying with children but also quality of interaction matter in the family. Studies have also revealed that in rural India, a majority of the elderly stay either with their spouse only, with spouse and others, mostly counting the children or without spouse but with children. Thus, living arrangement of the aged suggest significant co-residence with children, apart from spouse. Further, co-residence with children is also found to increase along with the age of elderly, among females, for the lesser educated, and to a certain extent among the poorer economic status quintiles. Incidence of illness is comparatively lower among the aged who live with children, and they also report themselves to be 'currently' in good/fair state of health. This suggests better state of well-being among the elderly residing with their children, indicating stronger familial support⁹.

It also reveals that co-residing with children leads to greater familial support for the elderly. However, the effect is much stronger when, such co-residence patterns also involve the spouse, vis-à-vis where co-residence is with children alone. In fact, degree of family support is found to increase as compared to the base group of elderly residing alone or with other relatives. Taken along with the earlier finding that better perception about self-assessed health as well as lower self-reported morbidity prevalence are among the aged members co-residing with their children or both children and spouses, it is more likely that wellbeing among these group of elderly is comparatively better¹⁰. Other than this it is not only improves the general well-being of the elderly but also has an effect on a composite index of familial support that such form of living arrangements, empower the elderly with increased familial support, which, in turn is more likely to lead to improved well-being. From the above discussion it seems that in a family interaction

⁹ Papiya G. Mazumdar & Sumit Mazumdar, Dynamics of Family Support for the Elderly in Rural India: The Influence of Co-Residence with Children, <http://iussp2009.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=91597>

¹⁰ Ibid

with the children and grand children, interaction with friends a major support system in their life world.

Conclusion

When a senior citizen needs either minor or extensive care from his or her family, it's important that all family members be alerted of the situation and become involved in the process. The care of an aging family member shouldn't rest on the shoulders of one family member. This leads to stress, not only for the family, but the caregiver as well. Healthy ageing is not only related to the advances in medical technology but also to a wide range of other factors like enabling the aged to lead a stimulating life, being fully involved in society and having meaningful social relationships. As the role of families as a social safety net for the elderly is fast eroding, the poor among the elderly have become the most vulnerable sections of society in India.

We have discussed about the need of family support for the elderly people but the policy issues remain there which only meet the needs of parents and senior citizens belonging to educated families, propertied classes and big city population. We have to broaden our approach so that the parents and senior citizens belonging to the poor classes, smaller towns and illiterate and semi-literate background may also be helped. This need to done because most of the elderly people live in rural areas and worked in unorganized sector.

There are few things can be done for the better benefit of the senior citizens like a situation can be created by the provision of not only old age homes in each districts (which should be called Senior Citizens Homes) but (a) day care centres and (b) multi service centres (c) help line services in each block and each towns of the districts of our country. They may not be very costly for our government if we encourage public-private partnership by engaging NGOs, Community Organizations and corporate sectors for this programme.

Secondly, there should be soft but firm strategy for responding to the complaints about the maintenance, failures and negligence by their children. We have to be careful in defining the duties of the maintenance officer, as the welfare of parents must be predicated upon principles of compassion and compilation and not litigation and conflict. The policy issue should limit the

household centric approach which seems to ignore the ground realities where increasing cost of health care of older people, lack of meaningful engagements in the larger society and increasing loneliness cannot be addressed without a more comprehensive approach. The future policy should include families and the organs of local governance in fulfilling the needs of the elderly citizens in every village and wards.

Thirdly, as we know more than half of our population is suffering with poverty. Nearly or quarters of our households are found to be below poverty line and many are victims of chronic poverty. Among this section of population we need special provision for women as they are more vulnerable section of the society. The present acts and policies cannot help the senior citizens of the poorer India. Therefore there is need to provide (a) free health care (b) sufficient old age pension (c) provision of additional shelter within the, household and (d) old age insurance with help of the government agencies, NGOs, religious trusts and the corporate sectors.

Furthermore, we need short term (5years), mid-term (up to 15 years) and long term (40 years) strategies for the welfare of parents and senior citizens as the numbers of such citizens and nature of needs of this section of the society is going to change dramatically in the mid and long term.

We need awareness building about the need of promoting humane orientation towards the ageing parents and senior citizens in our society. This has to be done through judicious engagement of schools, media, cultural organizations and health care agencies. A national task force for this purpose is the much-needed first step in this direction.

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