



The Problems of the Elderly in India

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Abstract:

With the advent of technology and modernization the mortality rate has gradually declined. The telecommunication revolution, urbanization, economic liberalization and globalization has resulted in increase in awareness, nutrition, advancement in health care facilities and an increase in life expectancy. The age at which one's productive contribution declines and one tends to be economically dependent can probably be treated as the onset of the aged stage of life. When individuals reach old age, they have to face various problems which are social, psychological, decline in health conditions, financial, loneliness and dependence upon others. The main purpose of this paper is to acquire an understanding of the problems of the aged people in India and the reasons behind them. The problems that have been taken into account in this research paper include, social, economic, psychological, health, crime, abuse and other miscellaneous problems. It also tries to suggest measures and policies by not only government but individuals and society at large to alleviate the problems of the elderly which will go a long way to provide them security and protection and focus upon their well-being.

Over the past several decades a massive change has taken place in a key demographic area of the planet's human population. The game changer is age. Our current body of scientific knowledge tells us that the history of humankind has always been marked by high birth rates that are accompanied by correspondingly high death rates. However, due to the trend of lower birth rates and lower death rates, according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, one out of every ten people on the planet is now 60 years of age or older. If the current trend of lowering birth rates and lowering death rates continues, by the year 2050 one out of five people will be aged 60 years or older and by 2150, one out of every three people will be aged 60 years or older. Additionally, the oldest old are the most rapidly expanding segment of the elderly population. Currently, the oldest old make up 11 percent of the 60+ age group and will grow to 19 percent by 2050'. (HREA)

Keywords: *Problem, Older age, Technology, Modernization*

1. Meaning of Elderly

Ageing is a continuous, irreversible, universal process, which starts from conception till the death of an individual. However, the age at which one's productive contribution declines and one tends to be economically dependent can probably be treated as the onset of the aged stage of life. Old age is the last phase of human life cycle, which is again universally true. The use of the words 'elderly', 'older persons', and 'senior citizens', in both popular and scholarly work gives the impression that they are a homogenous group, but in fact there is considerable variation between and among various categories of older people and also between societies. As such it is difficult to provide a clear definition. Different writers have viewed ageing in different contexts as the outcome of biological, demographic, sociological, psychological or other processes. The WHO defines those aged 60 -74 years as elderly. In 1980 the UN recommended 60 years as the age of transition for the elderly segment of the population, and has been categorized as follows:

1. Young Old- between the ages of 60-75 years.
2. Old-Old- between the ages of 75-85 years.

3. Very Old- 85 years and above
-(Shetter S,2013)

The change in demographic trends has created unique challenges for all people, particularly for the governments of nation-states around the globe. Elderly individuals are often subject to discrimination and abuse because they are perceived as easily taken advantage of. There is also a prevalent belief among many that those elderly persons are worthless in today's fast-paced, globalized and increasingly industrialized world. Obviously, with the number of elderly people on earth at any one time rising rapidly, there is an increased urgency to address the rights and roles of elder. The rights of aged persons can be broken down into three main categories: protection, participation and image. Protection refers to securing the physical, psychological and emotional safety of elderly persons with regard to their unique vulnerability to abuse and ill treatment. Participation refers to the need to establish a greater and more active role for older persons in society. Image refers to the need to define a more positive, less degrading and discriminatory idea of who elderly persons are and what they are capable of doing. (HREA)

India is a country of paradoxes. Whilst on the one hand it boasts of being a country with a comparatively young population on the other it is poised to become home to the second largest number of older persons in the world. As per the 2001 census the 60+ population is 7% of India's total population qualifying it as an ageing country. According to WHO projection the ageing population which comprises 76 m at present is projected to increase to 100 m in 2013 and 198 m in 2030. India, the world's second most populous country, has experienced a dramatic demographic transition in the past 50 years, entailing almost a tripling of the population over the age of 60 years (i.e., the elderly) (Government of India, 2011). This pattern is poised to continue. It is projected that the proportion of Indians aged 60 and older will rise from 7.5% in 2010 to 11.1% in 2025 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA], 2008). This is a small percentage point increase, but a remarkable figure in absolute terms. According to UNDESA data on projected age structure of the population (2008), India had more than 91.6 million elderly in 2010 with an annual addition of 2.5 million elderly between 2005 and 2010. The number of elderly in India is projected to reach 158.7 million in 2025 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2008), and is expected, by 2050, to surpass the population of children below 14 years. (Smith J.P and Majumdar M,2012)

Thus, overlooking this "greying population" will not result in a vibrant India. Although the situation in India is not as bad as the western countries where the elders are considered a liability as we have a tradition of treating our elders with respect and love. However, breakdown of the joint family system and trend of nuclear families, the geographical dispersion of families coupled with greater life expectancy of the elderly and increase in working women has resulted in the present grim scenario for the elders.

2. Problems of the Elderly

The primary problems that the elderly people grapple with are loneliness, alienation and plenty of spare time with nothing to do. Financial aspect is crucial for the aged as incomes invariably fall after retirement while the cost of living keeps on rising. With increasing age, health takes a plunge while the graph of medical expenses for maintenance of the same shows an upward swing. The depleting finances affects not only their physical health but has an adverse impact socially as well as psychologically. According to Helpage India data 30% of the aged live below poverty line, 80% belong to rural areas and 73% of them are illiterate. This complicates the situation further because they are unable to fend for themselves even if they want to or are physically fit to do so. It is for this reason that the Helpage India was formed in 1966 with the motto of "Fighting Isolation, Poverty, Neglect". (ITGO) The change in the social and family structure and unpopularity of Institutional care in India makes living condition for the elderly quite dismal. From the medical point of view the elderly are susceptible to falls and Alzheimer.

Hip fracture is a common problem of the aged. According to Charlotte Potter senior policy officer of Helpage India, "One person dies every five hours as a result of falls." (Helpage India).

The rapid change in culture, living conditions and value systems has undermined the social position and status of the elderly people. In search of better avenues children migrate to other states, from rural to urban set up and often foreign lands. Taking care of the elderly becomes difficult for them. They are either left behind or have to accompany their children. Adjusting in the new environment becomes difficult for them. The complexities of modern life and living conditions undermine the traditional values and beliefs of the aged people. In case they are left behind they have to use technology to communicate with people in distant places by sending messages, pictures and videos. The growing use of technology by people of all categories and backgrounds in carrying out their day-to-day tasks has hampered the socialization process of the elderly as most of them are unaware of its usage. (Kapur,2018)

The elderly people have to financial problems also as they are not in a position to earn their livelihoods. Their entire adulthood is spent in taking care of their families and providing for their offspring due to which they are incapable of saving for the future. When their savings are low, they are unable to meet the medical expenses and other household responsibilities. When they possess finances and wealth, then usually they are exploited by their family members. In India, more than 65 percent of the aged people are dependent upon others for their daily life activities and responsibilities. The aged women, who are independent accounted for less than 20 percent, whereas men were independent to a major extent (Financial Status of Older People in India,2011. With the disintegration of the joint family system and the emergence of nuclear family system, the aged people prefer to live by themselves and manage all their finances. The younger individuals are having increasing academic and professional pursuits and due to this, the elderly are connected with them to a lesser extent. The economic problems among the aged people have taken place due to fast changing socio-economic conditions, ongoing open market policies, and liberalization of economy (Financial Status of Older People in India, 2011). Health issues and ageing generally go hand in hand. The elderly need regular medical check-ups and medicines which burns a hole in their finances as medical and health care are expensive propositions which require a lot of money. Besides daily household management and supervision becomes difficult for them. They often need to take help of caregivers to assist them in these tasks which further puts them in financial constraints. (Kapur.R)

Ageing is predominantly a women's problem. Not only do women live longer but most of them are widows. They face serious discrimination with respect to their rights and are over burdened with familial responsibilities. This adversely affects their health, nutrition and mental well-being. Irrespective of economic, marital or educational status, elderly women face an emotional void in their life. A women explanation for distress among elderly female is the 'empty nest syndrome'. The empty nest' period may indeed bring in depression in the course of their diminishing role in the family. Extra provisions of care and support are required to redeem them from their miserable plight (Shettar, S)

The elderly people have to face psychological problems also. Loneliness, sense of meaninglessness, isolation and feeling powerless adversely affect their mental health. Dementia, depression, anxiety, fears and phobias are common psychological ailments of the elderly. Quite a few of them show the symptoms of short-term memory loss, word finding difficulty, difficulty in handling complex daily routine tasks, apathy, irritability, loss of ability to walk and so on. This further results in lack of communication leading to social exclusion. (Kapur)

The aged are victims of all sorts of abuses be it verbal, physical, social, psychological, medical, financial, spousal, systemic, and criminal offences. Often, they are victims of domestic violence, desertion and scapegoating. Physical assault, theft, robbery, rape, murder, vandalism, delinquency,

drug-related violence and gang warfare are the criminal and violent acts that can influence households and the community in a negative manner. During disasters and calamities, they are the most vulnerable lot 30% of the tsunami victims were the aged people. They are undoubtedly the victims of abuse even in India. The World Elder Abuse Month was celebrated in India from Jun 1 to Jun 30, 2008.

3. Measures to Overcome the Challenges

The requirements of the elderly are assisted living, adult day-care, long-term care, nursing homes, hospice care and Alzheimer's care. Speaking realistically, in order to improve their living conditions, we need more old age homes & day care centres. Due to lower cost of living in India, more and more Indians in Britain are opting to return to their roots after their retirement. According to an article in Hindustan Times, "The cost of taking care of one aged person in Britain would be 1600 pounds per months while in India it comes to a were 700 pounds per months". (HT,2007) From the social point of view policies and plans should be made by the Government and people to enable participation of older people in the mainstream of the society. Schemes like, "Adopt a grandparent" would definitely be a fillip in improving the condition of the aged. October 1 is celebrated as the day of the aged and the year 1999 was celebrated as the year of the elderly. This itself goes to show that we need to give proper attention and nurturance to them. What is most important is a sea change in public attitude which will begin to make up for their suffering. It is criminal to talk of development when those who were an inherent cog in its wheel are left to rust and wither away in their hey days.

The National Policy for Older Persons (NPOP) was announced in January, 1999, with the primary objectives to: encourage individuals to make provision for their own as well as their spouse's old age; encourage families to take care of their older family members, enable and support voluntary and non-governmental organizations to supplement the care provided by the family; provide care and protection to the vulnerable elderly people; provide health care facility to the elderly; promote research and training facilities, train geriatric care givers and organizers of services for the elderly; and create awareness regarding elderly persons to develop themselves into fully independent citizens. The budget allocation during 2003-2004 was INR 178 million which was revised and the allocation was INR158 million, against which the expenditure was INR 165 million. As regards the implementation of the Scheme of Integrated Programme for Older Persons, financial assistance has been given for 323 Old Age Homes, 281 Day Care Centers and 42 Mobile Medicare Units in different parts of the country during the year 2003-04. (Gangadharan,2007). In order to cope with the problems faced by the aged, it is necessary that the care givers be made aware of the physical and mental conditions and problems of the elderly people so as to meet their needs as far as possible in the home setting. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 provides legal sanctions to the rights of the elderly. In addition, constitutional provisions for old age security, old age pension, establishing old age homes, expanding geriatric services, liberalizing housing policy for elders have also been implemented. (Shetter)

Thus, the problems of elderly are multifarious. Some problems are enduring and have no solutions but most of them can be mitigated with the active support of family, friends, society, government and community at large. These include, improving the economic and social welfare, improving the health conditions, improving their participation in activities and functions, implementation of national policies and programs, residential aspects, family and community, education, non-government organizations, extra-curricular activities and living separately.

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