
ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Socio-Economic Aspects of Health among Elderly in India

Dr. Ashok Yakkaldevi

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology,
A.R. Burla Mahila Varishtha Mahavidyalaya, Solapur

INTRODUCTION

The present century is often referred to as the age of 'Ageing'. Ageing is becoming a worldwide phenomenon with the growing world population. Ageing is a biological process experienced by mankind at all times. With increase in longevity or life span, there follows an increase in the proportion of the elderly in the total population. This has serious implications for social order, economy and medical science. In India, this phenomena is also becoming significant with a 127 crore population. However, the concern for the ageing population is relatively a new phenomenon.

ELDERLY POPULATION IN INDIA

The older population has been increasing steadily in number and proportion. One in eight among older persons in the world now in India. India is the second most populous country after China in the world. According to the Census, in 1961, 5.6 per cent of India's population was sixty plus, further it has increased to 7.8 per cent in 2001, and it is estimated that it will be 100 crore in 2021. In 1999 figure, according to the United Nations, stood at 75.2 million, which was 8% of the country's total population of 998 million. This is expected to rise to 21% by 2050, which will strain the resources of the society.

There are 28 million aged women in the world and about half of them live in rural areas of developing countries. According to the 1991 census, 78% of elderly people in India resided in rural areas. Women comprise a slightly higher proportion than men, basically due to higher female life expectancy at birth. It has been estimated that elderly women would constitute 14.1% of the total population of India by 2025.

Population ageing has become one of the most significant demographic processes of modern times. The reduction in fertility level, reinforced by steady increase in the life expectancy has produced fundamental changes in the age structure of the population, which in turn leads to the ageing population. Today India is home to one out of every 10 senior citizens of the world. Both the absolute and relative size of the population of the elderly in India will gain in strength in future.

Old age commonly associated with retirement, illness and dependency. Most government jobs have set the retirement age at 60 years. This has forced many urbans installing that working life beyond 60 years is incidental. However the truth speaks to the contrary. About 70 per cent of elderly in India work. They work like the rest of the adults.

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the nature and extent of the socio-economic problems of aged people in India.
2. To know the relations between change in family and problems of aged.
3. To understand the Social welfare schemes for enhancement of aged.

PROBLEMS

The greatest challenge all over Indian society in the present era is the increasing problems of the growing population of the elderly. In India, due to Industrialization, urbanization, Population growth, change in the structure family, occupational mobility, education and growth of individualistic philosophy etc... have caused stress and strain on the elderly in varying degrees which have tended to increase the vulnerability of the elderly. A hundred years back, aged people were treated as social asset. Now they are looked at as burdens on the family. There are so many problems that the aged are facing. Some important problems are as follows: 1. Problem of health and illness. 2. Problem of adjustment with the family and society. 3. Problem of livelihood. 4. Problem of living arrangement, and 5. Problem of emotional support.

A large number of the aged are having one or other chronic diseases. This is much more so where the nutritional levels are low.

1. Problem of adjustment with the family and society.

Old age is the part of lifecycle about which there are numerous myths and stereotypes. That present an overstatement of commonly held beliefs, the old age are portrayed as dependent individuals, characterized by a lack of social autonomy, unloved and neglected by both their immediate family and friends, and

posing a threat to the living standard of younger age groups by being a “burden” that consumes without producing.

In India, at present almost 8 out of 10 older live in rural areas. Due to various factors such as changes in tradition, erosion of social values and the weakening of social institution such as the joint family have led to greatest challenges to elderly people in India. The traditional sense of duty and obligation of the younger generation towards their older generation is being eroded. Work places not always being close to home. The family togetherness is disrupted and family ties loosened due to distance. Differences of economic power create sharper disagreements that causing tensions in the family. Increasing urbanization due to migration and the compulsions of the city have further weakened the family. The older generation is caught between the decline in traditional values on the one hand and the absence of an adequate social security system, on the other. Another development impacting negatively on the status of older people is the increasing occurrence of dual career families, particularly ailing elders, who need constant care and attention. The change in the value system has become responsible for declining authority and status of the aged.

2. Problem of Economic Disabilities.

In this changing economic and social scenario, the younger generation is searching for new identities encompassing economic independence and redefined social roles within, as well as outside the family. The changing economic structure has reduced the dependence of rural families on land, which had provided strength to bonds between generations.

Economic factors definitely play a major role in generating care for elderly people. Economic dependence is one of the major disabilities that very often affect the wellbeing of older persons. Economic disabilities are manifested in two ways: 1. The state of economic dependence may be caused by retirement for a person employed in the formal sector. 2. For a person in the rural or urban informal sectors, it may result from their declining ability to work because of decreasing physical and mental abilities. Sometimes older persons are also faced with economic disabilities when management responsibilities for matters relating to finances, property or business are shifted to children, pushing the older person in to a new status of economic dependence. According to National Sample Survey of 1986-87 gives the degree to which the aged in rural and urban areas are economically dependent on others, usually their children. The table shows that about 57.3% of the elderly were fully economically dependent and 14.5% were partially dependent. Dependency was slightly higher in urban areas and this was true for both males and females.

In terms of gender, older women much more dependent (91.2% for rural and 95.1% for urban) than males (48.9% for rural and 54.3% for urban)

Thus, total dependency is lower and independence higher in rural areas compared with urban areas. This is to be expected since most of the older people in rural areas depend upon agriculture and never really retire from work. It is also important to note that in the population as a whole, almost 40% live below the poverty line. In a study conducted by Dandekar for the state of Maharashtra, interviews of older, both in the villages and old age homes, clearly showed that the problem of poverty among them was more serious than that of ageing. According to Nayar, Studies have found that old people who have control over their income are more independent and better taken care of than those who have no income or who have income that is controlled by their kin. (Nayar: 2000). Group discussion carried out among older persons mainly from rural areas in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Orissa (Rajan et. Al. 1999) reveal some interesting facts. One of the groups indicated that policies relating to distribution of parental properties among the children before the death of parents should be seriously reconsidered to protect elderly people. They were of the opinion that if the property gets divided among the children before the death, there remains no incentive for the children to take care of them in old age.

Since a majority of elder Indians live in rural areas, discussion of ageing in India is essentially a discussion of ageing in rural areas. India is currently going through the initial stages of the ageing of its population, a phenomenon that started decades ago in developed countries. India is expected to continue to age at a constantly increasing rate and will face a serious problem in the next 50 to 100 years, unless steps are taken now to make the transition smooth. Ageing of the population has many profound social and economic implications, affecting every type of social relationships, cost of social security and health care, education, labour force, migration and perhaps even the stability of the family as an institution.

The intensification of competition among the groups for societal resources has adversely affected older people, especially the poor, who are more vulnerable than others to social and economic hardships. Extreme poverty and inequalities of income, coupled with a very inadequate safety net, has meant that a majority of older persons become marginalized or even destitute. The poor among elderly people have lost out even as economic development is taking place in the country as a whole.

The problems of older persons did not seem to be lack of money, but lack of time by the others for them. Elderly people are sent away to old age homes, even while families can take care of them.

The needs and problems of elderly vary significantly according to their age, socio economic status, health, living status and other such background characteristics.

Among the several problems of the elderly in our society, economic problems occupy an important position. Mass poverty is the Indian reality and the vast majority of the families have income far below the level, which would ensure a reasonable standard of living. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India (1999) in its document on the National Policy for Older Persons, has relied on the figure of 33 per cent of the general population below poverty line and has concluded that one third of the population in 60 plus age group is also below that level.

WELFARE MEASURES:

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With proportionate increase in the number of aged, there will be pressure on services of care givers in the family and in the community. In the light of these problems, the Government of India has started many social welfare schemes which include the health facilities for elderly, the pension scheme for aged, and old age home scheme in many cities.

Some Suggestions for Policy:

In looking at options, it is important to keep the Indian context in mind. They are as follows.

1. By introduction of appropriate subsidies or tax and monetary incentives for children who take care of their ageing parents.
2. There is a need for effective legislation for parents' right to be cared for by their children.
3. By support to voluntary agencies that are trying to assist senior citizens at the grassroots level in the form of old age homes, day care centers, mobile health facilities and recreation.
4. Traditional values can also be reinforced through introducing the ideas in school curricula and through the media.

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5. There is need for a decent old age pension scheme for the rural poor, most of them working in the agriculture sector.

The problem to promote the idea of “Active Elderly” amongst society is a challenge. There are misconceptions about elderly that they are weak, have health related problems, and are stubborn and slow. This keeps them away from work. There is a need to develop a bridge between the elderly and society. Society needs to know the problems of the elderly and the elderly should know the expectations of society. There is an urgent need to bridge this gap and build alternative bridges of productive interaction.

The Government of India has provisionally identified older persons as a priority target group for social welfare interventions. In January 1999, it declared a national policy for older persons. It envisages agencies other than government as having an important role to play in promoting government programmes as well as in initiating programmes of their own. There is a need for more coordinated collaborative efforts involving key inter-governmental organization, academic institutions engaged in community outreach and development for ageing population with an integrated approach linking research and development. There is a need to mainstream ageing issues in to a broader development framework that takes account of lifelong individual development, as enhanced productive role for elder persons, multi-generational relations and the close link between ageing and development.

Most of the research is devoted to developed countries because old=age dependency ratios are higher relative to those of developing countries. However, in countries like India, this ratio will rise in the coming decades. Moreover, developing countries do not have a well developed and comprehensive pension system. In addition, the joint family system is coming under strain. In the light of these factors, it is necessary to study the issue of labour force participation (LEP) of older persons.

The idea of Active elderly can only be promoted if the issues of ageing are effectively tackled. A society based on solidarity, has the responsibility to guarantee all generations equal material and social participation opportunities regardless of age, gender and other social characteristic. This requires implementation of effective social security schemes.

The elderly must be considered an important and necessary element in the development process at all levels within a given society. The abilities of older people in taking the lead in the society must be acknowledged and they should be involved in development of the nation. Ageing of the population implies a greater increase in the number of elderly women as compared to elderly men, a phenomenon experienced by most societies of the world. Thus, ageing societies are increasingly becoming disproportionately female.

More possibilities have to be created for integration of older women in the society for their healthy ageing. Ageing raises important gender concerns. Gender issues result on account of social, cultural, locational, educational and temporal differences. Women increasingly become lonely and vulnerable in widowhood or childlessness.

Addressing the issues related to ageing requires multi disciplinary approach. There is a need for a systematic approach to gathering intervention on the situation of older person and a coordinated effort on the part of government, NGO's, academic institutions and private sector in addressing the issues and challenges emerging out of population ageing in the 21st century.

Encouragement to return to work.

The substantial increase in the number of retirees, who return to work at least part time, reflects shifting financial demands. Others, through, choose to return to work for a variety of reasons. For example, they may see work as an opportunity to help others; to meet achievement/productivity needs; to stay engaged cognitively and socially; to share knowledge, skills or experiences; or to gain the intrinsic rewards associated with engagement in work. Any of these objectives can also be met by doing volunteer work as well. The objective is for any work activities to be thoughtfully planned. Retirees returning to work ought to consider both the reasons for assuming work responsibility and their specific expectations regarding the work.

Retirement is an occupational transition and is therefore important in the field of occupational therapy. Life after so-called "retirement" is defined in India as age after 60 years. These elderly are not as helpless as made out. Not at all Retirement is not end. It is the beginning It is a phase where an old chapter is closed and the person moves forward to face another. There are many things people can do after retirement. A person can do new things, learn new skills, and be more active with the community. Many countries have witnessed major changes in the work and retirement patterns of their older citizens during the last three decades.

The twenty first century may be known as the era of lifelong learning and lifelong working. Retirement, the end stage of linear working life, may be replaced with a learning, working, leisure, working, learning, lifecycle. In a cyclical living and working model, participating in the workforce never ceases but interspersed with periods of flexible working arrangements such as part time, seasonal, occasional and project work. The traditional notion of retirement may be replaced with lifelong working in various positions and in varying amounts of time throughout adult life. In the future a declining birthrate may result in a shortage of skilled and knowledgeable employees, making the notion of

retirement for older workers a serious drain on organizational productivity. Increasing demands for workforce productivity, a projected shortage of skilled and experienced workers, and older adults who are healthier and living longer than previous generations are powerful societal forces shaping future employment practices. They need to recognize the strengths of the old and empower them rather than adopt a paternalistic attitude that can have devastating impact on the self esteem of the elderly citizens. According to the study. 'old age' has a much more personal and individualistic definition now: A 60 years old may be 'old' while an 85 years old remains youthful. So people, especially in the west, now see retirement as a time of reinvention and a new chapter in life. People in more affluent societies want to carry on working in retirement.

Conclusion

Ageing in India is predominantly ageing in rural areas. The rapid ageing of the population in India will place great demands on intergenerational relationships and the society's resources. Unless steps are taken now, it will become very difficult to provide of the proper care of elderly people in the coming decades. Families in India are now looking for state sponsored support mechanisms for the problems of the older persons. Unlike developed countries, the state has not been able to step in and take at least part of the responsibility for the care of the aged population through a social security system. Therefore an immediate need to evolve appropriate policies that take account of the culture and traditional of India and at the same time ensure that the policies do not place too heavy a demand on the resources of governments. The Government of India has framed a National Policy on older persons (Government of India 1999) that seems to address many of the problems.

Reference Books

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