

## Elderly in India: An Issue of Importance

**Dr Arundhati Bhattacharyya**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science

B.G. College, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

### Abstract

The elderly population in the world is increasing. The elderly in all societies need special care and attention. The United Nations General Assembly endorsed the International Plan of Action on Ageing in 1982. The United Nations and the World Assembly on Ageing have generalized the boundary for defining old age to be 60 years. The paper is based on secondary sources and mentions some of the studies on the ageing population. Traditionally, India is a country which had special position for the aged in the family. But, the situation is slowly changing. Transition is taking place from joint to nuclear families, with the changing lifestyle of the people. Double-income nuclear families are slowly making the presence of the elderly redundant in their homes. The rising generation gap is creating havoc in the family relations. They are facing several forms of problems, which need to be addressed. The paper tries to provide an overview of the condition of the elderly.

**Keywords:** Elderly, India, Abuse, Neglect

### INTRODUCTION

International community first debated the question of ageing at the United Nations, at the initiative of Argentina in 1948. The issue was next raised by Malta only in 1969. In recognising that longevity was becoming one of the major challenges of the 20th century, the United Nations convened World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna in 1982. In the same year, the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the International Plan of Action on Ageing. In 1990, the General Assembly designated October 1 as the International Day for the Elderly. It was later renamed as the International Day of the Older Persons. The United Nations General Assembly decided in 1992 to observe the International Year of Older Persons in 1999 to raise awareness of the fast changing demographic picture of older persons. The World Health Organisation dedicated its World Health Day in 2012 to ageing. The United Nations and the World Assembly on Ageing have generalized the boundary for defining old age to be 60 years.

### Some Studies On The Elderly

Population of the world is ageing. The needs of the elderly population should be given adequate priority by the State, the community and the family. The vulnerabilities of the elderly population need to be addressed by the greater community, in the changing times. Several researches are being carried out throughout the world on the elderly in order to understand their status in today's world and to suggest means to improve their condition. An international survey on the problems of the elderly carried out by the Sandoz Institute in consultation with the United Nations in 1982 found that the elderly have grave financial, health, psychological problems. Pew Research survey focused on the global level and it tried to find out the public opinion on whether the growing number of older people is a problem. The time-frame of the surveys were conducted from March 3 to April 21, 2013. The sample size was 22,425. Nearly ninety percent Japanese, eighty percent South Koreans and seventy Chinese describe aging as a major problem in their country. More than fifty percent the public in Germany and Spain state that it is a major problem. In America, one-in-four express that ageing is a serious problem.

A study on Elderly Abuse in the Health Care Services in Kenya was conducted by HelpAge International, Africa Regional Development Centre and HelpAge Kenya with support from the World Health Organization and the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. Type, causes and consequences of elder abuse that were vividly described in focus group discussions clearly reveal that older persons are denied a range of rights. Recommendations on improving the condition include establishment of specialist facilities for the elderly and other patients, special and additional training for health workers in the area of geriatrics, possibility of the government of Kenya providing free or highly subsidized health care scheme for the needy elderly, support for the care of the elderly in institutions and at home and collaboration, integration and partnerships beyond the health sector. The scope of the study was limited due to financial difficulties.

A research study conducted by University of Exeter studied the impact of social media on the elderly. It has found that training older people in the use of social media improves cognitive capacity, increases a sense of self-competence and could have a beneficial overall impact on mental health and well-being. State of the Elderly in India: 2014 by HelpAge India highlights the dichotomy between an apparently happy picture of increased longevity and the reality of long years of hopelessness without family, society or state support, which the elderly in India face today. It also focusses on the oft-overlooked area of abuse of the elderly.

Maithreyi Krishnaraj in her paper on the 'Ageing Women in a Welfare State' studied the social security systems existing for the benefit of the elderly women in Europe. It is a matter of prioritization of the resource pool, which needs focus. To women it is a question of unequal gender relations where 'caring' functions are left to women but without corresponding compensations. This paper provides insights into the social security measures of the European States and the debate between home care and institutional care of the elderly. Throughout the word, the share of the burden of household chores, care for the elderly and toddlers etc fall on the women. Gender parity is lacking in the private space.

Meena Gopal in her article on 'Gender, Ageing and Social Security' held that the review of state and national initiatives for providing social security to older women points to the serious lack of will to address the concerns of a silent yet vulnerable section. In the context of state restructuring of the economy with a neo-liberal agenda, it is the deprived and vulnerable sections that bear the brunt of the resource crunch. The elderly, especially, the women, need secure safety nets. The paper touches upon some problems in implementing social security legislation, locating elderly women. Welfare measures of the State need to be targetted to the needy.

Psychological Autopsy Study of Suicides among Elderly states that since the proportion of older people in population is rising worldwide, there is need in increase in developing countries like India to focus on the elderly. This prospective and descriptive study by Nadaf et al among elder people has been carried out in the Department of Forensic Medicine, Victoria Hospital, Bangalore Medical College and Research Institute, Bangalore during the period November 2005 to April 2007. The sample of the study was 70. It has been observed in this study that the elderly suicide is multi-causal in nature. Among them family conflicts (57%), chronic physical pain (51%), chronic illness (51%), psychiatric disorders (46%), financial problems (33%) and addiction to the substance of abuse (34%) were the common factors that are leading to suicides among the elderly.

Leela Gulati and S Irudaya Rajan in 'The Added Years', have analysed data on ageing, gender differentials in ageing and widowhood with special focus on the condition of elderly women in the state of Kerala.

Tulika Tripathi in 'Unhealthy, Insecure, and Dependent Elders' stated that though India faces a growth in the proportion of its elderly, but there is no specific policy of substance to deal with this issue, especially for the elderly who have no resources to bank on. The paper emphasizes that the State should acknowledge its responsibility to the elderly, without hoping that the market will come to its aid. Another concern regarding the issue is the lack of proper data on the elderly and their situation. This could turn into a very grave situation in the future. It says the rise in old age population has increased the support burden on working age people (15-59). The socially backward communities such as the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes face a heavier burden.

### **Elderly In India**

Independent India was a young country with life expectancy just 36 years in 1947. So during the initial years, the issue of managing an ageing population was not a serious challenge for the leaders of the day. Even the Indian official delegation to the World Assembly at Vienna stated that the country did not have much of a problem of the aged since the traditional family took care of the older members and the government health services took care of their health needs. The situation is different today. India now has over 100 million citizens over the age of 60. This is five times the number which was in 1950. Senior citizens today make up about 8.6 percent of the population. It is predicted that by 2020, India will be the youngest country in the world with a median age of 29 years. But, the 2014 State of Elderly in India report by HelpAge India state that the number of elderly people is likely to increase significantly after that.

According to the projections of Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, the projections are that there will be nearly 300 million seniors and make up about a fifth of the population. Compared globally, the number of Indian elderly population is quite small, but, they really require proper attention. In Japan, one-third of Japan's population is already above 60 years. One-third of Brazil's and one-third of China's population will soon cross 60 years. India's old age dependency ratio-the number of seniors for every 100 working age persons-is under 10, and even by 2050, it is predicted that it will not cross 20.

### **India**

According to 2001 and 2011 census of India, there are 30, 68,797 and 49, 76,133 seniors living alone, respectively. In 2001, there were 2, 56, 58,706 widowed, separated or divorced seniors. In 2011, this number has increased to 3, 31, 95, 176. In 2001, seniors were 7.43 percent of the population. In 2011; they are 8.55 percent of the Indian population. India has a population of 5, 26, 28,399 million older women, according to 2011 census. In 2001, the total number of senior women was 3, 87, 52, 804. As women are outliving men, nearly half of all senior women were widowed. The problem of widows is indeed serious in India. According to a sample survey conducted by the Mahila Jagriti Mandal, 5 per cent of the widows in Uttar Pradesh take to begging. Another 1 percent is either divorced or separated. They are in a vicious cycle of alienation, emotional insecurity, healthcare problems, financial insecurity, social ostracisation etc. Most of the elderly women have neglected their health throughout their lives, which lead to dire consequences. There is transition in the structure of the family. Joint families are slowly giving way to nuclear families where elderly women find themselves lonely. The 'empty nest' syndrome affects them dearly. Children are migrating to other cities or countries for work.

Older women have to face age-related discrimination, mistreatment, harassment, violence and elder abuse in their life due to lack of awareness about their rights and support system available for them in old age. There is core poverty due to deprivation of nutritional food, clean potable water, shelter and sanitation. There is relative poverty due to deprivation of literacy, equal livelihood, leisure, access to rights, savings and dignity. Due to fast growing elderly population, increased life expectancy and higher percentage of elderly women in Indian elderly population, specific issues concerning elderly women should not be ignored any longer. Though Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007 have been passed, but many among the elderly population are not aware of this right. If they are aware of this right, parents are not ready to use this act against their own children. This Act makes it obligatory for an adult child or grandchild to maintain elderly parents and enable them to lead a normal life. The Act also provides for a maintenance amount of a maximum of Rs 10,000 per month that children are liable to pay in case they neglect their parents.

Elderly abuse and neglect are shameful acts which bring disgrace to the human civilization. Neglecting the elderly has risen in most societies of the world. Globalization and the rising consumerism have led to heightened abuse of the elderly. They are considered as redundant in the family. Many of them are not taken care of in their homes or they are isolated from their relatives. Many family members forcefully extort money from the elders, even by emotionally blackmailing them. Many elders are left on the roads to fend for themselves. Homelessness can lead to further problems. Elderly abuse and neglect by the close ones are also increasing. But, they are mostly under-reported or totally unreported as the elders do not want to take their sons/daughters/grandchildren to police or courts. Security of the elderly needs to be given primary importance as crimes against the elderly are increasing in today's world.

### **India Needs To Be Serious About Care Of The Elderly**

Art. 41 of the Indian Constitution has directed that the State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right of public assistance in cases of old age. But, this is a non-justiciable right. Social security is a matter looked after both by the Centre and the States as it is in the Concurrent List. The State also provides foodgrains at a subsidized rate to the elderly in below poverty line category of the population. The Government of India provides a paltry amount of Rs 200 to the elderly from the poor background, which is very less compared to the daily expenses. However, Goa, a state in India, provides Rs 2000 as universal pension under Dayanand Social Security Scheme. Elderly who have served the government have pensions, but the cost for health care becomes so high that the elderly needs real support from the State. There is provision for Central Government pensioners to avail Central Government Health Service (CGHS). But, the treatment meted out to the pensioners by the government staff is not dignified enough. The duty hours of the staff are also limited, not the usual hours of government servants. Specialists are not available in all centres. They may be available for twice a week. Even very sick people have to wait for hours to meet the doctor. The doctors are also heavily burdened. Government hospitals need to open specialized geriatric centres to cater to the health needs of the elderly.

The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizen Act, 2007 has been specifically passed in order to improve the condition of the elderly. Parents can claim maintenance from their children or for childless couple; maintenance can be demanded from a relative who would be the legal heir. This law had to be passed as there were many occasions where the elderly faced ill or inhuman treatment from their children. This law is a form of protection provided by the State to support the elderly rights. But, a miniscule of the elderly population would be ready to complain against their own children in the police station or

courts. Children's wrong doing are pardoned by parents as they do not want their children to suffer at any cost.

There are certain sections in Indian society who still believe that the issue of care of the elderly is that of the family. Only a very small size of the Indian elderly needs support. They believe that the media is just sensationalizing the issue of abuse or neglect of the elderly. It is high time that the rights of the Indian elderly are given importance. The elderly themselves should be aware of their rights. All concerned stakeholders need to work together towards bringing perceptual change towards old age in society, sensitising younger generations towards elderly women, empowering younger women to develop them as strong older women, spreading awareness older women about their rights and powers, bringing attitudinal changes in girls towards their life and finally, initiating the process of strengthening human rights of older women.

Old age homes are coming up in the Indian cities and towns in order to suffice the needs of the elderly. Many elderly couples with children settled abroad or in different cities are switching over to old age homes so that they do not need to take care of electricity bills, telephone bills, the maintenance of their homes etc. Moreover, some of them feel that they can communicate and interact with like-minded people in these homes. Many of them have wonderful emotional connection with others in the homes. They celebrate birthdays, marriage anniversaries, new year etc. They are happy to spend their life with joy.

### **CONCLUSION**

Traditional Indian society held elderly people with esteem. Gerontocracy was common. Caring of the elderly was never an issue as the elders in the joint family were never thought to be a burden. Their advice was always precious. But, with the transition in the Indian society and mindset, it is necessary that the needs of the elderly need to be introspected and analyzed. There is enough evidence to indicate that the quality of life of the elderly goes down with advancing years. Even the elderly who have high income level does not guarantee a secured life. It is very difficult for the elderly to face neglect from the family and the society as they feel that they are becoming redundant in society. A feeling of worthlessness seeps into them. Due to the fast moving world and the fast pace of life of everyone around, the elderly loses the zest for life. Loneliness and depression also lead to suicides. Absence of face-to-face contact deepens the level of isolation. This needs to be changed as the dusk of life should be a time-phase where each one should be happy and feel loved and respected by the people around. The bond of the grandparents with their children is always strong. Socialization and internalization of important values and morals are easily transmitted by the grandparents to the younger generation in the Indian family set-up. The vacuum of the position of grandparents in the Indian families are creating a gap in the family system. This vacuum cannot be filled up by any materialistic goods. The technology-savvy consumeristic society may be advanced, but humanistic values are lacking in the younger generation, which may be detrimental for the whole society, in the long run.

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