



CHANGING SOCIAL STATUS OF ELDERLY – AN INDIAN SCENARIO

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Abstract:

As population ageing is much faster in developing countries than the developed countries in which India too is experiencing this changing trend as a major demographic phenomenon. This changing proportion of population from young to an older age structure though reflects a positive picture in the health sector of the country. But at the same time the unprecedented number of older people and decreasing proportion of children with varying degree of needs and resources is likely to pose a major challenge in the future indicating higher levels of old age dependency. This changing status is very much experienced by elderly women residing in rural areas, women with lower literacy levels, and among dependent women. As right to life and right to live with dignity is a basic human right therefore elderly rights and obligations has to be fulfilled not only by the family members but also by the nation. Though there are various social welfare schemes, policies and programmes both at state level and national level the life of majority of the elderly are at risk for their basic livelihood. Therefore, this paper attempts to highlight the social life of elderly and the means through which the life of the elderly can be enhanced through a human rights perspective.

Key Words: Social Ageing, Social Status, Joint Family, Right to Life

Introduction:

Ageing is a natural and biological process inevitable for each and every individual. Population ageing emerges as a global phenomenon in the present day as older individuals form large share of the total population. The increasing size of senior citizens poses a major demographic issue with wide implications for economy and society in general. The rapid decline in both birth rate and mortality rate and consequent increase in the life expectancy at birth and older ages in which India will move from being a young country to an old country over the next few decades. According to Census of India 2011, India has around 90 million elderly and by 2050, the number is expected to increase to 315 million, constituting 20 per cent of the total population (1). As data's highlight that the dependency rate to be high among women compared to men in which women tend to live longer than men. By 2050, women over 60 years would exceed the number of elderly men by 18.4 million, which would result in a unique characteristic of 'feminisation' of the elderly population in India. Due to longevity and widowhood status being high among elderly women who are more prone to an increased level of neglect, abuse, exploitation, gender-based violence, lack of access to basic services and prevention of ownership of assets.

Social Ageing:

Elderly or old age consists of ages nearing or surpassing the average life span of human being. The boundary of old age cannot be defined exactly because it does not have the same meaning in all societies. In India in view of the increasing need for intervention in area for Old Age Welfare, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India adopted “National Policy on Older Persons” in January 1999. This policy defines “senior citizen” as a person who is 60 years old or above. (2)

Social aging refers to an individual's changing roles and relationships in the social structure -with family and friends, and within organizations such as religious and political groups. As people age chronologically, biologically, and psychologically, their social roles and relationships also alter. In the social context, the concept of aging vary considerably for different people, determining the meaning of aging for an individual and whether the aging experience will be primarily negative or positive.

Social Status of the Elderly:

In India the growth of individualism and desire for independence and autonomy of the younger generation affects the status of the elderly. Older people are more vulnerable and are deprived due to poverty, social inferiority, social isolation, physical weakness, powerlessness and humiliation. Studies show that socio - economic conditions of older women are more vulnerable in the context of the demographic and socio cultural change. According, to the Census of India, 2011 Survey depicts that around three-fourths of the elderly live in rural areas, of which 48 per cent are women and 55 per cent of them are widows. Nearly 70 per cent of rural elderly are dependent on others, and their health problems increase with age. Data's captured in the National Sample Survey on condition of the aged and their day- to -day maintenance reveal about 65% of the aged had to

depend on others for their survival and livelihood. The situation was worse among elderly females with about only 14 % to 17 % being economically independent in rural and urban areas respectively while the remaining is dependent on others either partially or fully. The elderly males were off as majority of them 51 to 56 % among them in rural and urban did not depend on others for their livelihood (3).

The traditional norms and values of Indian society laid stress on showing respect and providing care for the elderly. With fast changing socio-economic developments like industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, higher aspirations among the youth and the increasing participation of women in the workforce the roots of joint family system has been eroded. And disintegration of the joint family system has weakened the traditional values of elderly being the head and holding authority of the family. These have led to defiance and decline of respect for elders among members of younger generation. Although family support and care of the elderly are unlikely to disappear in the near future, family care of the elderly seems likely to decrease as the nation develop economically and modernize in other respects.

The needs and problems of the 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. These problems range from absence of ensured and sufficient income to support themselves and their dependents to ill health, absence of social security, loss of social role and recognition and to the non-availability of opportunities for creative use of free time. According to World Bank, report elderly in rural areas suffer from economic crisis, as their occupations do not produce regular income throughout the year. Nearly 90 percent of the total workforces are employed in the unorganised sector belong to rural areas. They retire from their gainful employment without any financial security like pension and other post retirement benefits (4) more elderly men participate in such economic activities compared to women. Women are more likely to dependent on others, given lower literacy and higher incidence of widowhood among them.

For a developing country like India, the rapid growth in the number of older population presents issues, barely perceived as yet, that must be addressed if social and economic development is to proceed effectively. Unlike in the western countries, where there is dominant negative effect of modernization and urbanization of family, the situation in the developing countries like India is in favour of continuing the family as a unit for performing various activities.

National Policy for Older Persons:

The National Policy on Older Persons was announced by the Government of India in the year 1999. It was a step in the right direction in pursuance of the UN General Assembly Resolution 47/5 to observe 1999 as International Year of Older Persons and in keeping with the assurances to older persons contained in the Constitution. The well-being of senior citizens is mandated in the Constitution of India under Article 41. "The state shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to public assistance in cases of old age" (5)

The subsequent international efforts made an impact on the implementation of the National Policy on Older Persons. The Madrid Plan of Action and the United Nations Principles for Senior Citizens adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2002, the Proclamation on Ageing and the global targets on ageing for the Year 2001 adopted by the General Assembly in 1992, the Shanghai Plan of Action 2002 and the Macau Outcome document 2007 adopted by UNESCAP form the basis for the global policy guidelines to encourage governments to design and implement their own policies from time to time. (6) The Government of India is a signatory to all these documents demonstrating its commitment to address the concerns of the elderly. 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 percent 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. (7)

National Policy for Senior Citizens:

The foundation of the new policy, known as the "National Policy for Senior Citizens 2011" is based on several factors. These include the demographic explosion among the elderly, the changing economy and social milieu, advancement in medical research, science and technology and high levels of destitution among the elderly rural poor (51 million elderly live below the poverty line). A higher proportion of elderly women than men experience loneliness and are dependent on children. Social deprivations and exclusion, privatization of health services and changing pattern of morbidity affect the elderly. All those of 60 years and above are senior citizens. This policy addresses issues concerning senior citizens living in urban and rural areas, special needs of the "oldest old" and "older women" (8)

The focus of the new policy:

- Mainstream senior citizens, especially older women, and bring their concerns into the national development debate with priority to implement mechanisms already set by governments and supported by civil society and senior citizens' associations. Support promotion and establishment of senior citizens' associations, especially amongst women.

- Promote the concept of “Ageing in Place” or ageing in own home, housing, income security and homecare services, old age pension and access to healthcare insurance schemes and other programmes and services to facilitate and sustain dignity in old age. The thrust of the policy would be preventive rather than cure.
- The policy will consider institutional care as the last resort. It recognises that care of senior citizens has to remain vested in the family which would partner the community, government and the private sector.
- Being a signatory to the Madrid Plan of Action and Barrier Free Framework it will work towards an inclusive, barrier-free and age-friendly society.
- Recognise that senior citizens are a valuable resource for the country and create an environment that provides them with equal opportunities, protects their rights and enables their full participation in society. Towards achievement of this directive, the policy visualises that the states will extend their support for senior citizens living below the poverty line in urban and rural areas and ensure their social security, healthcare, shelter and welfare. It will protect them from abuse and exploitation so that the quality of their lives improves.
- Long term savings instruments and credit activities will be promoted to reach both rural and urban areas. It will be necessary for the contributors to feel assured that the payments at the end of the stipulated period are attractive enough to take care of the likely erosion in purchasing power.
- Employment in income generating activities after superannuation will be encouraged.
- Support and assist organisations that provide counselling, career guidance and training services.
- States will be advised to implement the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 and set up Tribunals so that elderly parents unable to maintain themselves are not abandoned and neglected.
- States will set up homes with assisted living facilities for abandoned senior citizens in every district of the country and there will be adequate budgetary support.

Areas of Intervention:

The concerned ministries at central and state level would implement the policy and take necessary steps for senior citizens as under:

- Income Security in Old Age
- Healthcare
- Safety and Security
- Housing
- Productive Ageing
- Welfare
- Multigenerational bonding
- Media

Human Right’s Perspective:

Human rights are universal. They apply to all human beings everywhere, regardless of their sex, age, religious affiliation, disability, sexual orientation and other distinctions. The first time states agreed on a comprehensive statement of human rights was when the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Article 1 set out the core idea of human rights: ‘All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights’ (10). Other rights in the declaration include, but are not limited to, the right to life, liberty, non-discrimination, due process, ownership of property, education, political participation, work and leisure. Thus, the human rights of all people, including older persons are tacitly protected in the Bill of Rights. Although, it is technically a declaration, the UDHR (part of the Bill of Rights) is generally considered customary law, and thus legally binding. As, old age in particular significance to Article 25(1) of the UDHR states that everyone has the right to security and a ‘standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family’. The two Conventions, the ICESCR and the ICCPR, offer generic protection of cultural, economic, social, civil and political rights. For older persons, important specific rights in the ICESCR are the work-related rights (Articles 6–7) and the rights to social security (Article 9), to an adequate standard of living (Article 11), to education (Article 13) and to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (Article 12).

The adoption of a human-rights-based approach to analysing and interpreting age-related issues represents a paradigm shift, to which the United Nations has made an enormous contribution through the establishment of principles in favour of older persons, the celebration of the International Year of Older Persons and the holding of two world assemblies on ageing. The human rights approach offers great advantages for ageing issues, by affording fairer treatment of the problems and needs of older persons. Basically, it places the accepted conceptual framework within international law, which offers a coherent system of principles and rules for public policies. It can underpin the creation of accountability mechanisms, for the promotion of equality and non-discrimination, the participation and empowerment of excluded groups and the progressive realization of

their rights. As right to life and right to live with dignity is a basic human right guaranteed by the Indian Constitution therefore rights and obligations of elderly has to be fulfilled not only by the family members but also by the nation. Though, old age has traditionally been viewed as a stage of life marked by lacks of all kinds: economic, physical and social. Older persons have rarely been seen as individuals capable of contributing to society and to their families. Therefore, providing social security in old age is the concurrent responsibility of both the central and the state governments.

Conclusion:

In India, where the incidence of the public provision of the old age care is less, the family system played a key role in the protection of the old. The beneficiaries among the older persons for various schemes and programmes initiated by the government are very insignificant when compared to the very high size of their population and the growth rate among them. Further, given the level of urbanization and industrialization of India, economic factors and diminishing value system are likely to make welfare of the elderly as the most critical area for intervention. There is need to protect and strengthen the institution of the family and provide such support services as would enable the family to cope with its responsibilities of taking care of the elderly.

Along with proper and effective professional welfare services that need to be evolved to provide counselling services both to the elderly and their family members, it is also important to provide financial support to low income family groups having one or more elderly persons. In view of this, a holistic approach to population ageing taking social, economic and cultural changes into consideration is needed to effectively solve the emerging problems of the elderly.

As India is a signatory to Madrid Plan of Action, it has the responsibility to formulate and implement public policy on population ageing. Issues of poverty, migration, urbanisation, ruralisation and feminisation compound the complexity of this emerging phenomenon. Public policy must respond to this burgeoning need and mainstream action into developmental planning. Gender and social concerns of elderly, particularly elderly women, must be integrated at the policy level. The elderly, especially women, should be represented in decision making. Benefits of social schemes must percolate to the grassroots. Increasing social/widow pension and its universalisation is critical for expanding the extent and reach of benefits. Renewed efforts should be made for raising widespread awareness and access to social security schemes such as National Old Age Pension and Widow Pension Scheme in terms of special incentives for elderly women, disabled, widowed should be given due consideration. Based on the existing diversities in the ageing process, it may be stated that there is a need to pay greater attention to the increasing awareness on the ageing issues and its socio-economic effects and to promote the development of policies and programmes by undergoing various research by scholars, government and non-governmental organisation for dealing with an ageing society.

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