

Challenges among the Elderly in Later Life

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Abstract

India is the second largest aged population country in the world. Today, India is home to one out of every ten elderly of the world. With an ever changing socio-economic and demographic scenario across the country, living conditions of elderly have also changed remarkably. These socio-economic and demographic changes have brought many problems such as social, economic and health care, before the elderly in their later life.

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Introduction

The population of India has approximately tripled during last 50 years, but the number of elderly people has increased more than fourfold. As per census 2011, the population of older persons in India has crossed the unique mark of 100 million which accounts for 8% of India's total population. Notwithstanding, their population is expected to increase to 315 million by 2050¹⁻³. With an ever changing socio-economic and demographic scenario across the country, the rate and intensity of their problems such as social, economic and health care is also rapidly increasing in the country. The aim of this article is to understand the challenges which are faced by the elderly people in later life.

Changes in social conditions

India is a country with an ancient culture and hoary traditions, where elderly people always enjoyed a respectable place in the family and society. The traditional agrarian Indian culture has recognized old age and wisdom as synonymous, hence elder care has never been seen as a problem. However, during last few decades; the fast pace of

industrialization, modernization and urbanization have altered Indian socio-cultural paradigm which was rooted in our traditional institutions like family and society and affected the status of the elderly which was enjoyed earlier by them.⁴ The dynamics of relations in the family are undergoing unprecedented changes. This is being seen as weakening due to the breaking of the joint family system and, migration of children in search of jobs leading to the deterioration of the higher socio-cultural values of Indian society and moreover, rapid transition in the structure and functioning of the family. The emotional bondage, which keeps the family intact, united and functional is changing, not only in joint families but also in nuclear families. Following these changes, the social and cultural heritage of family as an institution of care of elders has moved into a threatening phase.

The rapid transition in the familial dynamics (structure and functioning of the family) in Indian social system has also weakened the social bonding. The familial dynamics signifies the dynamics of interaction, interpersonal relation and communication. These three dimensions are the distinctive feature of strong social bonding. The healthy social bonding amongst the family members grows only when healthy interactions, interpersonal relations and communication amongst them are deliberately created and reinforced. But the changes in the familial dynamics in all the three components are the serious threat for the strong social bonding. These changes have been brought by the fast pace

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of industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation in Indian family structure and function.^{5,6}

The concept of family self refers to the social bonding in the Indian context which is traditionally conceptualised bigger than the individual self. But during last few decades, the fast pace of industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation have reduced the interactional profile of the family members and hence, individual self has become stronger than family self. Further, if family self-become affected, it weakened the attachment, involvement, commitment and belief which form the social bonding. Most of the individuals want to have their own choice of living by ignoring the social bonding nowadays. Consequently, the people have started asserting strongly for individual self and they are in a great hurry to have every source of pleasure regardless of its legitimacy in changing socio-economic scenario.⁶

In such changing socio-economic circumstances, the majority of the elderly, who have passed maximum part of their life with their joint families earlier, are on the verge of isolation in old age. When they need utmost family and social support they are forced to live alone hence they feel neglected. The changes affect their way of life and sense of well-being to a large extent and rupture their social bonds. Besides, these changes also lead to indignity, embarrassment, dishonour, disregard, indifference, lack of care and psychological torture in the elderly.⁶

Changes in economic conditions

Generally, elderly have some common expectations from their family members like the living arrangement, economic security and well-being, which are largely contingent on the economic capacity of the family unit. They are dependent on their family for these basic needs, when they are not physically more capable. In such situation, they are seen as a burden on the family members as they are not able to contribute to family income. Inadequate income is a major problem of the elderly in India.⁷ Particularly in rural areas; families suffer from economic crises, as their occupations do not produce income throughout the year. Nearly 90% of the total workforce is employed in the unorganized sector and stop working from their service without any financial security like pension and other post-retirement benefits.⁵ Additionally, it has been revealed that elderly women face more economic problems as compared to elderly male, the reasons being that women are more likely to depend on others, given lower literacy and a higher incidence of widowhood among them.^{8,9}

Additionally, the impact of globalisation has increased the economic burden on elderly. It may be because of the young people are expected to fend for the elderly; the economic burden on the youth and the old is equally increasing. The cost of living is gaining new height every year in the country which has raised health care cost. Following the situation, it becomes challenging for these elderly to obtain a better health care with the help of their family members. As old age dependency ratios are increasing, the private savings are tumbling and the workforce is declining further. Since capital and labour is required for the economic stability and also the viability of pension schemes, the picture can become serious in the years to come. Traditionally, Indian population never used to save enough for the future as the children were expected to take care of the elders in the family. Now with these structures breaking up, the Indian workforce comprising mainly of the service class started saving for the years to come. However, the decreasing interest rates on the fixed deposits, investments and provident fund, which formed the core of the savings has put an additional burden on the elderly. Inflating prices and decreasing interest on investments have impacted the living standards of the aged population.¹⁰

Changes in health conditions

Old age is the natural phenomenon of the later life of the individuals. As age advances, the body becomes more prone to illness due to deteriorating physiological conditions. Hence, in this stage, individuals are more susceptible to the health problems like physical trauma, physical disabilities and mental incapacities. The illnesses of the elderly may be multiple and chronic in nature. Due to the changing lifestyle, diabetes, arthritis, rheumatism, heart problems and high blood pressure are the most prevalent chronic diseases among elderly. Some of the health problems of the elderly can be attributed to social values also. The idea that old age is an age of ailments and physical infirmities is deeply rooted in the Indian mind and many of the sufferings and physical troubles which are curable are accepted as natural and inevitable by the elderly. Most of the health problems of elderly are caused because of socio-economic conditions. It has been found in the studies that poor elderly largely talk about their health problems on the basis of easily identifiable symptoms, like chest pain, shortness of breath, prolonged cough, asthma, eye problems, and difficulty in movements, tiredness and teeth problems. While the upper class elderly, in view of

their greater knowledge of illnesses, mention blood pressure, heart attacks, and diabetes which are largely diagnosed through clinical examination.^{7,8}

Moreover, type of lifestyle which is adopted by the elderly affects the health conditions. Changing lifestyle habits such as alcohol consumption, regular smoking and tobacco chewing puts adverse effects on their ability to control diseases.¹¹ The elderly who consume these substances are more prone to health risks. The main area of concern among the elderly is their health which can in turn have a significant impact on their economic security, level of independence and social interaction. From the preceding discussion, it is apparent that elderly are facing many problems in later life in contemporary Indian society. Therefore, there is a need of enquiry to analyse this issue from multiple perspectives and explore the measurements for improving the quality of life of elderly.

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