

POSITIVE AGEING IN INDIAN PANORAMA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: *The unprecedented demographic transition known as population ageing has shaken the world due to the challenges like social protection coverage and care-giving burden. Positive and active ageing is increasingly seen as the answer. The present research paper highlights the need and relevance of positive ageing in the Indian context. Using the empirical evidences, the paper covers the challenges in making positive ageing framework a reality. It appraises attitudes and practices, contributions and vulnerabilities related to positive ageing among elderly males and females in rural and urban areas of Delhi. Findings of media representation of elderly in India are also analyzed through the lens of positive ageing. Culture, gender, health, education, and other variables are discussed as facilitators or inhibitors in ensuring positive ageing. Lastly, suggestive interventions for healthy, active, productive and positive ageing are delineated.*

Key words: Elderly, Positive ageing, Active ageing, Geriatric, Media

Positive Ageing: Conceptualization and Relevance

Though old age is a universal and natural phenomenon in human life cycle, ageing of substantial proportion of population is relatively a recent demographic transition. Population ageing, an unprecedented phenomenon, is considered as one of the greatest triumphs of human civilization achieved through the medical advancement and expansion of public health systems. In the world, 617 million (8.5 percent) people are 65 years and above and by 2050 this proportion of older people would be nearly 17 percent or 1.6 billion (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). Every year about nine million elderly people are added to the world's population (United Nations, 1999). India is a home to around 104 million elderly people constituting 8.6 percent of the total population. Across the world, the proportion of people aged 60 years and above is growing faster than any other age groups. Statistical projections indicate that due to ever increasing population of elderly people the families, communities and societies would encounter

considerable challenges related to social security and care giving issues related to older persons. For nations with scarce resources, the cost of social assistance or social safety net for the senior citizens can be quite taxing.

This has led to increase in ageism, that is, stereotypes against the elderly and they are largely considered vulnerable, dependent, unproductive and spent force. Negative images and stereotypes often have deleterious effects on the elderly. In any country, if a huge section of population (more than 8 percent in our country and up to 40 percent in several European and Scandinavian countries) is viewed negatively and considered dependent, unproductive, it would be a gross loss to a nation's progress and development. It would reinforce ageism and negative stereotypes, perceptions and prejudices against senior citizens. This implies glaring wastage of a human resource potential, having deleterious implications on the economic and social development of the country.

The answer to the challenges discussed above lies in the 'positive ageing' or 'active ageing'. The World Health Organization (2002) has argued that countries can afford to get old if governments, international organizations and civil society enact "active ageing" policies and programmes that enhance the health, participation and security of older citizens, and it is a necessity, not luxury. The term positive ageing is defined as the process of developing and maintaining positive attitudes, beliefs towards old age and thereby keeping oneself fit, healthy, and fully engaged in life. When ageing is taken as a positive experience, longer life is enriched by continued opportunities for health, productivity, security, participation, meaningful engagement and such other aspects. This positive ageing is defined in terms of 'active ageing' by the WHO (2002) as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (p.13). This positive notion of ageing allows individuals to continue participating in socio-cultural and civic activities thereby realizing their potential for their well-being throughout their life course according to their needs, willingness, capabilities and capacities. It also entails societal response to provide them with care, security, protection and assistance. It ensures enhanced quality of life for the elderly people.

Indian Context

Elderly in India are at the cross-roads. Since ancient times they have enjoyed utmost respect, reverence and care. Invariably, they would head the family, enjoyed control over family property and decision-making power. Agricultural economy, joint family system, patriarchal social structure and several socio-cultural practices reinforced and sustained importance of the elderly in the family, community and society.

However, due to forces of social change like industrialization, urbanization, change in political economy and now globalization, the socio-cultural milieu has changed and at present the situation of the elderly has become adverse and precarious. There is a transformation seen in the households in India as traditional joint family system is giving way to nuclear families. In addition, the trend of migration of the youth from rural to urban areas is leaving numerous rural elderly without the support and care of the family. Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation [MSPI] (2016) brings out that 73.3 million elderly are in rural areas and 30.6 million in urban setting. Migration is a critical concern for urban as well as rural areas.

Poverty is another exigency faced by majority of the Indian elderly as National Policy on Older Persons (1999) observes that one-thirds of the aged in India are below poverty line and another one-third just above it, making two-thirds of them in need of financial assistance. This is further validated by the estimate of the World Bank (2008) that nearly 455 million people are below poverty line (with earning \$1.25/day or below) in 2005. Studies (Kaushik, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2005) have shown that poverty accelerates ageing.

Further, the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation report (2004) shows that almost two-thirds of the aged are financially dependent on others for their daily upkeep that include 86% rural elderly women and 83% aged women in urban areas. Elderly females experience unique set of vulnerabilities due to patriarchal social milieu of the country. Chronic malnutrition, repeated pregnancies in their prime time, learnt helplessness, illiteracy, lack of skills for economic autonomy are some of the factors that accentuate multi-layered vulnerabilities among women in India implications of which are gross in their old age. Moreover, incidence of widowhood is significantly higher among aged women

than their male counterparts and after the age of 70 years, more than 60% women are widowed as per the Census (2011).

Old age dependency ratio is 14.2, which is going to increase sharply in the coming years with increase in number and proportion of the elderly to the general population. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MSPI) in 2016 reveals that 41.6% of the aged people at present have to work for their subsistence, despite failing health and ailing body. In rural India, there are 66% aged men and 28% elderly women who have to work for their survival. Currently, Indian government is not able to provide social security measures to all the needy elderly even when the proportion of the elderly is only about 8.6%. What would be the scenario when there would be a steep rise in the elderly population in the country?

Moreover, 5177 per hundred thousand elderly are physically disabled and most common disability is locomotion followed by vision impairment. Old age brings deteriorative changes in the body and ageing individuals lose autonomy in their daily functioning. Increased susceptibility of disability increases with age and so is the vulnerability. Helpage India, a well-known Non-government organization in 2017 notes that nearly one-thirds of the elderly are abused by their family members and significant others. Consequently, of these above-mentioned factors, the elderly persons are increasingly becoming marginalized and socially excluded.

Another view of neglect of elderly is this notion that the end is near, death is taken in a very negative perspective. The planning and dialogue of death among the family members and the elderly in a positive way could help the families to understand the elderly and their wishes better. The whole concept of advance care planning is required for the elderly but is unheard of in India (Reji, 2020).

The present research paper examines the situation of the elderly in India with regard to challenges and prospects through the framework of positive and active ageing and highlights the results of two research studies conducted on the themes mentioned below.

Positive Ageing Study

As discussed above factors of social change in modern societies have put a brake on the traditional status, respect and well-being of the elderly. Gerontologists and geriatric professionals have maintained that active ageing is the antidote to most of the challenges encountered by the elderly. Positive ageing ensures that longer life is accompanied by continuing opportunities for health, security and participation.

The study was conducted with the aim to examine factors influencing positive and active ageing among elderly men and women in the rural and urban locales of Delhi, India. Using descriptive research design, with a sample of 200 drawn from the KakrolaGaon (Is a rural, village set up in West Delhi) and Dwarka (Is an urban higher middle-class township in West Delhi).A three-point Likert positive ageing scale was constructed and used to note facilitating and inhibiting variables with regard to positive ageing. Reliability coefficient using Split-half method is 0.71 and Spearman Brown formula is 0.78.

Interestingly, KakrolaGaon and Dwarka are hardly one kilometer apart but drastic difference was observed in the life-style and attitudes of the elderly inhabitants in the two locales. From Dwarka, a middle-class residential colony, most of the elderly males were retirees from government or public sector undertakings. Nuclear families (either elderly couples living alone or with their unmarried children) are more frequent. While aged from KakrolaGaon were invariably involved in agriculture and allied activities. In 1992-93 agricultural lands were bought by the state government and 'heavy' compensation was paid to the inhabitants of KakrolaGaon. The money was utilized in construction of multi-storey buildings and rents became main source of livelihood for the people there.

Findings show that elderly from Dwarka got three times higher scores on positive ageing scale than rural elderly. Coming to age distribution, Dwarka inhabits almost double the number of young old (60-69 years) in contrast to KakrolaGaon that has major share of older persons, middle-old and old-old. Widowed elderly have ranked lower on positive ageing scale than the married ones. Elderly persons in Dwarka were found more active, productive and have had positive outlook towards life and ageing. In the parks of Dwarka, groups of elderly are often found exercising, doing yoga, cycling, taking up walks with friends, chatting, laughing, thereby

depicting healthy, happy, positive notion of ageing. In KakrolaGaon, elderly males, akin to traditional cultural norms, have highly restricted interactions with daughters-in-law and only engage in casual talks with their wives, sons and grandchildren in the family and with neighbors.

Elderly males scored higher on positive ageing scale than their female counterparts especially those living in Dwarka. More than two-thirds of the elderly from Dwarka have studied up to graduation and above while 80 percent of the elderly from KakrolaGaon have acquired education up to tenth standard. Educated elderly were ranked higher than illiterate and semi-literate ones on domains of positive ageing. There is a strong correlation between positive ageing and educational qualification as educated elderly were seen more proactive in taking up newer roles, maintaining healthy life-style and show active social engagement.

Coming to the roles and contributions of the elderly, which is a crucial determinant of positive ageing. The elderly from Dwarka were found performing several roles for which they are valued- grandfather or grandmothers escort little ones to school bus, bring them back, provide care and nurturance, help them in studies, feed them, play with them indoor as well as outdoors. They act as mentors, friends, companions and also perform parental roles as their children are the young parents who want to focus on their career. Elderly females in KakrolaGaon do help in household chores and childcare but since their daughters-in-law are homebound, their role is limited.

Media portrayal of elderly

In today's world, mass media have an all-encompassing presence than ever before. Various modes of mass media such as print media, television, cinema and the Internet are some of the most powerful agencies of socialization. Mass media have played a critical role in shaping our attitudes and perceptions with regard to the elderly. In view of the theory of agenda setting function, the image of elderly portrayed by the mass media provide guidance and direction to the public (readers and viewers), setting priorities for them as how to perceive old age and the elderly and what to feel for them. Negative image of the elderly by the media can have deleterious and far-reaching consequences on the family relationships, role and resource allocations, and overall well-being of older persons leading to their marginalization and social

exclusion. In this backdrop, a research study was conducted on media representation of the elderly in India.

Findings show that there is gross under-representation of elderly in print media as for about eight percent of the elderly the proportion of newspaper articles covering their issues was only 0.84% and 95% of the articles reinforce vulnerability of the older people by highlighting crimes against them, financial and care-giving burden because of them. Print media largely omit and ignore positive dimensions of old age.

In data set two, ten tele-soaps on entertainment channels and 304 advertisements were analyzed for portrayal of older people. There is an over-representation (16.7%) of elderly in commercials; only one-third of the elderly women appeared in the advertisements among the overall elderly portrayed. In advertisements, highly positive image of the senior citizens is depicted as they are seen as witty, humorous, crazy, jubilant, physically powerful, caring, elegant and smart. This portrayal of the positive aspects of elderly has the potential to break the popular myths of equating old age with health, social and economic vulnerabilities and reinforce amicable and cohesive intergenerational bonding. Further, tele-soaps have shown elderly in traditional attire and roles (as heading households and decision-makers), who are largely authoritarian, dominant, aggressive, highly conformists with regard to family values, prestige, pride and, at times, manipulative. A small proportion of the elderly are shown as cordial and friendly especially with their grandchildren. Television is a ubiquitous and powerful mode of mass media with probably maximum coverage and potential influence. Based on the depicted images, younger people as well as older ones develop their perceptions and beliefs about old age. Negative shades of elderly characters may have harmful implications on intergenerational relationships.

In data set three, fifteen Bollywood movies in the last ten years were analyzed for the image of the elderly. Single dominant image is not present, rather senior citizens are shown in diverse characters, initially as vulnerable but resilient and mentally tough. Experiments are done with the characters of elderly males (shown as romantic hero breaking age stereotypes) while female elderly were in supporting roles conforming to the traditional image. From the power equation

perspective, the elderly persons are shown as losers on social roles and relationships. Several times, health vulnerability in old age is highlighted.

In data set four, 200 blogs posted were analyzed. Findings show that most blogs were 'prescriptive' in nature, giving advice, suggestions on active, healthy, positive and productive ageing. Much of material is stressing on self-care by the elderly and taking onus of their well-being in their own hands. Only two percent of the blogs were specific to elderly women and rest were either gender neutral or over-generalizing male model of ageing.

Mass media have great potential to influence decipher positive portrayal of old age and the elderly people. They can be used as powerful advocacy tools to dispel the myths of vulnerabilities and helplessness that surround aged people and highlight images of happy, contented, empowered, self-reliant older people.

Challenges to positive ageing

Gender and culture are the cross-cutting variables in positive ageing framework. As seen in the study above, women in India, invariably, have been socialized to be docile, dependent, homebound, devoid of developmental opportunities and employability skills during their childhood and prime time. Their youth-hood is characterized by repeated, multiple pregnancies, chronic malnutrition and ignorant of their health complications. These factors take a heavy toll of their health and well-being in old age. Quite interestingly, their traditional care-giving and home management roles pay good dividends as these roles make elderly women well-adjusted in the family. This is especially true where both husband and wife are working. Contrary to this, males who have enjoyed ascribed power and status throughout life and derived their identity through their economic role, seem to have less of adaptability in taking up newer roles in old age. Cultural values, norms and practices related to gender and age determine the allocation of roles and resources in a society that have profound implications on the well-being of the elderly.

Culture is a vital determinant of active and positive ageing. As seen in Dwarka, elderly are pro-active in maintaining healthy habits and life-style. They engage in various activities in the household and neighborhood, contribute meaningfully in myriad of ways. They depict positive,

productive, active and healthy ageing. In contrasting social environment, elderly in KakrolaGaon behave in a culturally approved way as males' resort to 'limited and restrictive' interactions with family members, do not engage in healthy life-style, fitness maintenance and in social engagements in the neighborhood. This impedes their health well-being.

Mass media too represent, reflect and shape images, attitudes and perceptions of elderly and old age. If elderly are portrayed as vulnerable, prone to crime and abuse, marginalized, alienated (as seen in the print media) people learn to fear old age and stereotypes against elderly perpetuate. Impact of the images of elderly highlighted in tele-serials is profound. When older people are shown in negative shades (as authoritarian, manipulative, conformist) ageism and subtly hatred against the aged are reinforced. Elder abuse, neglect shown in cinema and electronic media give impression that elder mistreatment is the accepted if not recommended behavior. On the other hand, happy, cheerful, friendly elderly (as depicted in advertisements) help in creating a conducive environment for positive, happy and active ageing.

Socio-demographic variables like education, socio-economic status, occupation influence positive ageing. Economic and social security also play crucial role in this regard. Adjustment abilities have bearing on interpersonal relations. Elderly willing to take up newer roles have better adjustments that ensures positive and active ageing.

Conclusions and Suggestions

There is a dire need to perceive ageing in a positive stride and consider older people as a valued human resource having knowledge, wisdom and experience. Cultural values and norms have great potential to influence image, attitudes and perceptions towards old age and elderly and also positive and active ageing. Awareness generation and censorship are required to curb contents portraying elderly in negative images and highlighting healthy happy and productive notions of getting older.

Positive and active ageing is a lifelong approach and preparation for happy and enriched ageing should start in youth-hood itself. Healthy habits and disciplined life-style adopted in prime time goes a long way in ensuring healthy and productive ageing. Amicable relations with family

members, frequent interactions with friends and neighbors, role initiatives and contributions, are important ingredients of positive ageing. Multi-stakeholder approach is needed, involving elderly themselves, their families, community, civil society organizations, and the State, to create an environment where our senior citizens live the twilight years with health, well-being, dignity, fulfillment, independence, remain active and productive and contribute to the national development with their experience and wisdom.

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