



Challenges for the Elderly in the Changing Family system: A Preliminary Study

Dr. Sohini

Ph. D Research Scholar

267, Sector N, Aasiana, Lucknow- 226012, Uttar Pradesh, (India)

Abstract

India is going through a process of radical demographic change and ageing of the population is one of the leading aspects of this demographic transition. The overall health improvement has resulted in longer life expectancy which in turn has led to the rise in the number of persons above 60 years (thesis). Therefore in context of the changing demographic scene and family system, the challenges for the elderly are increasing at an unprecedented scale, affecting their overall social and health status. The current study discusses the challenges that elderly facing in today's changing family system. This study used an interview schedule, case study and observation method to collect the basic data from the elderly in the age group of 60 years and above. The findings of the study revealed that most of the elderly were experiencing health and economic challenges.

Key words: elderly, changing family system and challenges for the elderly

Introduction:

The increased population of the elderly along with changing social processes such as changes in the Indian family system and shifts in intergenerational relations has affected the elderly severely (Rao 2009). Traditionally in India the family provides the basis of care in old age. In the extended families, the views of the elderly in the religious, economic and social matters were appreciated and within the village their opinions and suggestions were sought after. They played a key role in upbringing of the children, teaching them etiquettes and cultural tradition through care and nurture. In return they were taken care of by the family and community in their old age (Gurumurthy 1998; Mahapatra 2010).



But now days the intergenerational relationships within the family and community are going through a change. The joint family system and community care is collapsing under the weight of the fast changing social life, increase in elderly population, poverty, westernization and secularization. The change in tradition is increasingly forcing the elderly to look after themselves in the absence of sons and daughters as social careers (Jha 2009). However in India, as in many other parts of the world there is growing evidence that the care and respect which was provided to the elderly by the residential institutions or by the family members is increasingly lacking or is inadequate and inappropriate (Shankardas 2008). These changes at the family level forced the elderly to move from centre to periphery, making their situation more problematic and challenging in the society (Nair 2014). Also encourage them to reallocate themselves alone which creates number of problems to them such as physical, psychological, economic, etc.

Rao (2009) also asserts that elderly are immensely affected by the decline of traditional joint family system, changes in social structure, value system, the decrease in number of children and their dispersion owing to migration. The migration of the children is increasingly leaving the elderly isolated and lonely. The elderly are missing the important social relationship which is the key to their social and psychological health.

In India 40% of the elderly live below poverty line and another 33% are only marginally above (Hanspal and Chadha 2006) and the majority of them are not covered under any pension scheme. With rise in aged population as documented above the number of aged laborers experiencing financial insecurities is going up. Such financial vulnerability further increases the challenges for the elderly.

Objectives of the Study:

- To examine the social and economic condition of the elderly.
- To explore the challenges experienced by the elderly respondents.
- To explore the main reasons behind these challenges.

Research Methods:

Qualitative research method has been used to understand the different kinds of challenges that the elderly experienced due to changing family system. The study is based on a number of case



studies conducted with the representation of the elderly, to capture their real life events. The case studies have been analyzed on the basis of details given by the elderly respondents during the fieldwork. These details have been used as a technique to tab the subjective viewpoint of the respondents involved with a view to arrive at conclusion. For the study five cases of sample aged 60 and above were selected from the five wards of Jhansi district in Uttar Pradesh.

Cases Presentation: The following case studies presented in the following paragraphs are illustration of the challenges that the elderly experienced in changing family system.

Case 1.

Mrs Ram Kishori (name changed) is a 61 years old widow women staying alone in a separate room at the outdoor of her main house, for the last eight years, recalled her earlier life time and remarked that:

My husband was a doctor of homeopathic. I had a very happy and prosperous life with my husband, parent in-laws, two sister in law, one brother in law and two sons who were very obedient and intelligent in their childhood. With the passage of time both my sister-in-law and bother-in-law get married. After the marriage my brother-in-law and her wife also use to stay with my family. We all were staying in a joint family and use to respect and take care of each other. After some time my bother- in-law's family migrated to their old village as they had no children. Due to hard work and blessings of me and my husband both of my sons get success. My elder son is a dental surgeon and married with a girl of same profession. They both are busy in their private clinic and stay somewhere far from the house built by their own so they refuse to support and take care of me and my husband.

My younger son is a school teacher and younger daughter in-law runs an NGO at home. This son is very obedient but could not stand against her wife's decision that he could take care of his parents but we was still staying with her younger son's family in the house which was built by them in their olden days. My daughter-in-law always uses to quarrel from me and asked to leave the home. Daughter in law remarked that *tum buddho ki baje se hamari koi privacy nahi hai, hame time nahi melta. Hamare bachoo par aapka galat asar par raha hai*'. Beside all this the sudden death of my husband due to asthma attack changed my entire life. I feel that my status was altogether reduced and my son's family was displeased with my



presence. The children ever use to spend some time with me neither they care for emotional or economic support for her. One day my son had a strong argument with me. I was asked to leave the house or stay alone in a separate room. My daughter-in-law also refused to serve meals to me. Then one next morning I was shifted to the room which is at the outdoor of the main house. Since then I am a independent old women having separate living arrangement from my family and also have no economic support. Now there is no one to take care of me. Still I am physically well and do all my household chores by myself but I had to work very hard to earn for my daily livelihood. Usually when I get ill I feel very lonely and depressed.

Case 2.

Mr and Mrs Mishra (name changed) is a 66 and 62 years old husband and wife living in their own house built by themselves. They stated that:

We have two sons and two daughters; all were married, settled and have their own families but we do not have any close interaction with our sons families. We both were working and when we get retired we have transferred our house to both of our son's name. My elder son work in a reliance company as a manager and daughter-in-law is a primary school teacher. Younger son works in central government and her wife is a house wife. But both of my sons and daughter-in-law did not care for us. Neither they gave any financial support, nor do they ask for food or any other help. We both husband and wife live in the same house in a one room set, cook our food by our self. Mr Mishra mentioned that my wife have a backache problem so she unable do any work but still then she looks after herself and most of the time use to keep silent. Many times she uses to cry on phone when her daughters talk to her. Both of my daughters have their own families and settled far away from here. One is settled in Bangalore and other in Ahmadabad. It's not easy for them to have a regular visit and take care of us. My daughters sometimes help me financially and also suggest staying with them. But I think that it's not good to stay with daughters as they have their own parents-in-law and did not want to become a burden on them. I and my wife were very much disheartened with behavior of my son's families. Since few days my elder daughter-in-law is keep on quarrelling and shouting on us. She is also demanding for the one room set in which we are staying now. She make excuses that now my children are big enough and I need more



space to live in, so it's better if you get away from here. She restricts us to come out from a common gallery.

Further Mr and Mrs Mishra remarked that old age is very challenging full in now days. With the changing family dynamics the young generation is also having a changing life style, thinking and attitude which are very much problematic for old people. My children not even help me when my wife requires to visit the hospital, I hired a private ambulance or rickshaw and reach to hospital. Now my wife is very much depressed and always uses to say that what will happen if one of us will die.

Case 3.

Mr Bhoopendra Arya (name changed) is a 67 years old staying with her wife and old mother in his own house. He stated that:

I a retired head clerk and have two sons. Both of them were well settled and married but migrated to different places due to their jobs. My elder son is in Public Service Commission and younger son is an Assistant professor in Patna. I and my wife worked very hard to bring up my children at this stage. Both of son are sincere and respect me but unable to look after me as they did not have so much time due to their own families. My wife use to do the entire house hold task and I manage to do all the other work like bringing vegetables and ration for us, taking care of my old mother, wife and myself. Earlier till 64 years of age I manage to do all the work but now I am a heart patient and suffering from many other patty health problems. Now I unable to manage the house hold work and look after myself. I need someone to take care of me and my wife. I never think of that due to the migration of my children and because of this modern outlook I had to face so many challenges. Now even if I suffered from fever, nobody is there to bring medicines for me. Few days back I had gone through my prostrate operation, both of my sons had come to see me but they unable to give much time and went away. I had a doctor appointment in every fifteen days because I am not completely recovered. I have to visit alone with my wife from one place to another from a private or a public convince. This is a great torched for me in this age; I get so much tired and feel like leaving all things. One day I talk to my elder son and narrated my all problems but my daughter-in-law refused to keep me with her family. She argued from my son that 'I will hire a man to take care of your parents but will not allow them to stay with my family. They



will have a bad impact on my little kids' your parents will try to socialize my children in their own old way. I want my children not to adopt a old tradition way of living. I want them to grow up in a modern environment, learning all the modern life styles and culture'. However Mr Bhoopendra further mentioned that it's better if I had taught my children till tenth or twelve classes, at least they stay with me in a joint family and take care of my woes.

Case 4.

Kangna Devi (name changed) is a 69 years old widow living alone. She recalled her earlier days and remarked that:

I belong to a middle class family and my husband was a railway employee who passed away long ago leaving behind me, two daughters and a baby sons. I brought my children up by simultaneously taking the roles of father and mother so that they may not feel the absence of their father. When my younger daughter was 19 years old she died in an accident. My son passed a railway exam and got a job of fitter in railway. After some time I select a bride for him and marry him. He raised no voice against me. I had a joint family and I acted as the head of my family. Three back I had a vegetable shop and I use to do economic contribution in my family, also help my daughter-in-law in cooking, washing, cleaning and handling my grand children. But now I had grown too old and unable to sit properly due to my weak bones so I close the shop and doing nothing at home. Now I had no personal money and I am dependent on my son. Due to all this my affectionate interpersonal relations with my family get strained. My daughter-in-law had frequent conflicts with me. She denied her children to keep any contact with me. This entire situation has impugned me by the feeling of neglect, emptiness and isolation. The range of challenges occurs in front of me in this age, varies from social to psychological problems.

Case 5.

Mrs Roshan Ara (name changed) is a 71 years old widow lady recalled her history and narrated that:

She had three sons and one daughter, all married and well settled. My husband was a primary teacher and due to prolonged illness of stomach pain he died nine years back. Few years back I stay with my middle son's family. Though the family members did not keep



much contact with me but my middle son and the elder son who was staying in a near-by house meet me in their weekends and ask for my health well being. But since I handed my entire property in the hands of my three sons the family members forced me to live in a separate room, outside of their house. Since then I am staying in this room and they have kept a maid for my support. Two years back my maid had a sudden death and now there is no one to care and help me. My sons did not even arrange a new maid for me because of higher cost. Now I cook my own food and clean my room once in a week. I am also weak enough and not well, somehow I keep on going. My family does not care me in any way and I feel very lonely and rejected. I am very much upset and curse myself for always supporting my sons who have rejected me. She further narrated that the main reason behind the worse attitude of the children regarding their old parents is due to breakdown of joint family system and growing individualism. In joint family system there was social cohesiveness not only between parents and children but also between other relations. In earlier days the burden and challenges of the elder people were taken by the young children of the family but now these children produce challenges for the elder people.

Conclusion:

From the above case studies it can be concluded that the dignity and the prosperity of the elderly are decreasing day by day. Their role and status has started shrinking at a remarkable scale with the changing family system. Respect and care is also no longer the consistently adhered norm. Now with the changing life style and attitude of the coming generation, particularly the women mobility from house hold task to office task had affected the care and support for the elderly, as the women have no time to look after the elderly. They did not want to keep in constant touch with them. Most of the elderly had to forcefully work in this age to earn their livelihood, evidently due to less or no support from their family. However this is one of the great challenges where the elderly did not want to work but still they had to engage in different kinds of work for their survival.

The elderly from all socio- economic strata are facing different kinds of challenges. The rich and prosperous elderly often suffers from psychological challenges. Despite the fact that their basic needs are fulfilled and also get best medical facilities to cope with the challenge of physical illness but still



they had to face challenge like rejection, loneliness and isolation. Hence get alienated from the family members. Moreover the elderly from the middle and lower class section facing number of challenges ranging from psychological to social. It is difficult for them to arrange medical facilities and basic necessities of survival like food, clothing and living arrangements.

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