

IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY IN THE CARE OF ELDERLY MEMBERS

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Abstract

In India, the proportion of the elderly population is rising at an accelerated pace. According to National Statistical Office (NSO) Report, India's elderly population (aged 60 and above) will rise 41 percent over the next decade and it will be around 194 million by 2031. In terms of percentage, the share of the elderly population has gone up from 8.6 percent in 2011 to 10.1 percent in 2021. The report, therefore, draws a serious concern from all stakeholders. Increased availability and easy access to medical facilities, new medical research in controlling the chronic diseases and increased health awareness, are some of the important factors which have enormously contributed to this phenomenon. Although care of the elderly is the responsibility of several institutions including government and non-government and social institutions, however, the role of the family has been unanimously accepted as the most crucial and rewarding. In the present endeavor, an attempt has been made to understand the importance of the family support in the care of the elderly members, to analyze the changes and role adjustments occurring in the network of family relationships.

Keywords

Elderly family members, Role of family members

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A substantial increase in the proportion of the elderly in the total population is a global phenomenon. The elderly population, therefore, globally attracted the attention of government, planners, and researchers. United Nations declared the year 1999 as the 'International Day for the Aged'. The care of the elderly is a very burning and complex problem of the twenty-first century. Aging in India has been projected to continue increasing, in both share and size, in the coming times. According to the report of the Technical Group on Population Projections for India 2011-2036, there are about 138 million elderly persons in the country in 2021 (67 million males and 71 million females)(<https://theprint.in>). According to the Longitudinal Aging Study of India (LASI), there will be about 319 million elderly persons by 2050, threefold the number identified by the census in 2011 (<https://www.thehindu.com>). The government of India adopted a National Policy on Older Persons (NPOP) in 1999, as a tribute to the aged. Census of India has extended the upper limit for presentation of age-wise data up to the age of 80 years and even more. The data of the elderly will be classified into three categories i.e., the young-old (60 to 69 years), old-old (70 to 79) and oldest-old (80+ years) (M. Vijayanunni: 1999). It was observed that, the age-group-wise classified data will be helpful in analyzing the vastly different problems of the different categories of the aged.

Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens' Act 2007

Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens' Act 2007, aims to provide the financial security to the elderly members of the family. The Act is an important initiative of the Ministry of Social Justice, Government of India, to ensure the welfare of old parents in the family. The Act has made it a legal obligation for children and heirs, to provide maintenance and monthly allowance to elderly family members. The Act ensures the protection of life and property of the older persons. Despite the enforcement of this Act, the awareness and implementation of the provisions of the Act are not satisfactory. The Act has ensured financial security, however, what elderly members in the family, need most is the socio-psychological security. Government and Non-government Organizations, Senior Citizens Associations have made positive contributions in taking care of the elderly population in the society. Old Age Homes, Old Age Pension Schemes of the Government, Medical Insurance, and several other efforts to safeguard the old persons in the society have been initiated.

Aging is a Biophysical and Neural Phenomenon

Aging is a biophysical and neural phenomenon. Several factors influence the process of aging viz., age, sex, marital status, financial status, educational status, and condition of health. Besides these factors, it is undoubtedly influenced by the

environment of the family and society. Individual background characteristics and attitudes provide distinctive character to the problems of the elderly in each case; however, there are certain issues that can be generalized. The phenomenon of aging has both universal and specific aspects. The problems generally faced by the aged can be broadly classified into three categories i.e., pertaining to physical and mental health, economic needs, and socio-psychological concerns.

Elderly care has been defined in Wikipedia as “It encompasses assisted living, adult day care, long-term care..... Elderly care emphasizes the social and personal requirements of senior citizens who wish to age with dignity while needing assistance with daily activities and with healthcare” (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). While giving tips to family members for caring old members at home, William. A. Haseltine (2020) in his article entitled, ‘Top 10 Tips for Caring for Older Adults’, writes, “The creeping prevalence of aging societies is not just a challenge for national governments, policymakers, and healthcare providers to solve. It affects everyone who has, or will have, an elderly family member or loved one in their lives-and everyone lucky enough to grow old themselves” (<https://www.forbes.com>). The need for caring for elderly members in the society, therefore, must be addressed with serious concern.

R. Schulz (2016) in his book entitled, ‘Family Caregiving Roles and Impacts’ submits “Family caregiving is more intensive, complex, and long-lasting than in the past and caregivers rarely receive adequate preparation for their role” (www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). From the above, it may be summed up that the care of the elderly members in the family is crucial and it requires a formal or informal training of the caregivers also, which is almost absent.

Sociological Perspective

Elaborating the sociological perspective towards the problems of the aged population, Prof. M.S. Gore observed that, “From this perspective, therefore, the sociology of aging not only studies how age may affect or impede the social functioning of individuals but also raises questions on how social factors affect the process of physical and social aging in a society. One would need to consider not only what the aged would need to learn or unlearn to fit into the ‘aged- role’, but also what society would need to do to prevent early aging or what it can do to postpone the setting in of the process of aging of its members” (1997: 43).

Several scholars have studied the problems of the aged from different perspectives. Studies have revealed that despite the commitments and various welfare efforts of the Government at the national and international level the aged population is still facing the problems of financial and physical dependence and poor health

(Alma: 2004, 2005). Economic security of the aged population has been the major concern for scholars because due to general poverty in India this has been the most crucial issue (Rajan, Mishra, and Sharma: 2002, Parikh: 2002). It has been alleged that the efforts made by the Government of India have failed in delivering the desired results due to mismanagement at the administrative level (V. S. Kumar: 1998; Help Age India: 2000; J. Dreze: 2003; Bose, Shankardas and Kapoor: 2004). World Bank favored a policy of multi-pillar social security system; however, still, there are no traces of its implementation (World Bank: 1994).

Family Comes First in the Care of Elderly Members

There are several care systems for the aged which include both, Government and Non-Government Organizations, Old Age Homes, Day Care Centers, Senior Citizens' Associations, and other Charitable Organizations. The informal care systems include families, Caste Organizations and Village Panchayats, etc. However, undoubtedly it has been accepted that, it is the family which plays the most significant and long-lasting role in affecting the process of aging and in taking care of the elderly members. Among all the formal and informal systems, the primary institution of the family is the most important system because the root causes of most of the problems of elderly members and as well as their solutions can be found within the family.

Daniel. B. Kaplan and Barbara. J. Berkman (2021), in their article entitled, 'Family Caregiving for Older Adults' submit that, family caregivers play a key role in caring for older people, however, "The amount and type of care provided by family members depend on economic resources, family structure, quality of relationships and other demands on the family members' time and energy." "Although society tends to view family members as having a responsibility to care for one another, the limits of such obligations vary among cultures, families, and individual family members" (<https://msdmanuals.com>). Rosemary A. Ziemba (2002) in the article entitled. 'Family & Caring for Elderly Parents', describing the importance of cultural values in the family caring, submits, "Family roles and expectations are shaped by cultural values, with varying degrees of perspective custom" (<https://quod.lib.unmich.edu>).

From the above views, it may be concluded that the culture and values of the society greatly influence the family members' perception and concern about the elderly members of the family. The cultural diversity, of different societies of the world, therefore, provides uniqueness to elderly issues, besides the general issues of the elderly population all over the world. Reverence to the elderly members is the foundation of Indian society and culture. The joint family system in traditional Indian society and culture is more conducive for caring for the elderly. In the traditional

Indian value system, old members always enjoyed the most respectable and supreme positions. Grandfathers and grandmothers always enjoyed high respect and regard from their children and grandchildren. However, the different processes of change occurring in the value system of Indian society viz., westernization, modernization, industrialization, globalization and increasing materialism have resulted in the various role-adjustments in the social structure of the family and society at large, influencing the approach towards the elderly members. J. P. Singh submitted that the aging parents generally prefer to live in a stem family, preferably with the youngest son, rather in a joint family. The educated younger generation prefers to live in a nuclear family and does not expect much help from their children in their old age (Singh, J.P: 2001, 2003).

One of the most important and crucial changes which have influenced the elderly members in the family structure, is the disintegration of the joint family system. This change may be attributed to many developments particularly urbanization, industrialization, and the resultant occupational mobility. Careerism, job opportunities and increased stress on individual autonomy, drive the young generation away from their families and hometown. Parents have no choice but to accept this reality in view of the welfare of their children. They, however, are left alone at home. Traditionally the care of the old parents has been the utmost responsibility of the children. Now one may find broadly two different family situations regarding elderly members i.e., firstly, the families where the elderly members are living with their children, secondly, the situation where the elderly members are living alone and away from their children. However, both the situations have led to one common issue i.e., how children are taking care of their old parents? This is a very crucial issue because the caring of the aged by children is the most satisfying, socially, and psychologically. The biological and other materialistic needs of the elderly can be taken care of, to some extent, by other Government and Non-Government Organizations also, but the emotional and psychological security will always remain lacking. The care provided by the children and grandchildren in the family, cannot be equaled by any other institution.

Leslie Kernisan (2018), in her article entitled, 'Better Health While Aging', has discussed several issues related to the care of older family members. She submits, "When an old person does start to need help, it tends to be close family members- assuming the person has family- that step in, spouses, adult children, siblings, nephews or nieces, grandchildren and so forth. In fact, family members are by far the number one source of 'long-term care supports and services for older adults'" (<https://betterhealthwhileaging.net>). Robert Myer (2017) in his article entitled, 'Aging Care:

The Importance of Family', highlighting the importance of family in care for the aged, mentions, "Many seniors and aging care providers agree that nothing can replace family support. While aging care providers are better trained and have more knowledge regarding senior health concerns, they do not generate the same level of trust and affection as family members, and that makes all the difference" (<https://www.comfortkeepers.com>). P.P Chiello and Sara Hutchison (2010) in their research paper entitled, 'Family Caregivers of Elderly Persons', acknowledge the fact that, "family care constitutes the majority of all care given to elderly people" (<https://www.researchgate.net>).

From the above views, it may be concluded that the family, therefore, comes first and stays for the longest time span for caring for the elder members than any other institution. In those situations where old parents are living with their children and grandchildren in the family, it is important to note that the presence of the elderly members in the family, can be observed from multiple dimensions. There are several factors which give distinctiveness to this issue viz. in the families where women members go out for job, the presence of old parents become very useful in many ways. The grandfathers and grandmothers look after the home and take care of their grandchildren who have not yet started going to school. Sometimes it becomes very strenuous for their age and proves as a hurdle in their mobility. In the business families the elderly work and control the business for a long time i.e., till they are physically and mentally fit. It has been observed that if the elderly members have their utility in the family, they are cared for, but at a later stage, they are being neglected and considered as a liability. The situation differs from family to family and no generalization is possible.

The elderly members are to be integrated well into the mainstream of the daily family routine. Intra-familial and inter-generational aspects of the elderly in the family are the most important of all other issues. The issues of the elderly in the family need to be examined from the perspective of both the generations, i.e., the old and the young. The presence of an old member affects the lives of other young members of the family. The roles of the elderly members and of the younger generation towards them in the family, are in the process of reconstruction and, therefore, need to be examined. Besides the fulfillment of their basic needs, the elderly members require their integration into the social fabric. When the guidance and advice of the elderly parents are sought on important family matters, they feel a sense of respect and utility. The young generation can learn many things from their rich past experiences. They should not be left to live in isolation. A feeling of alienation negatively affects the elderly members.

Generation Gap in the Family

The generation gap in the value system and culture of the old and young generation plays a very crucial role in the family relationships. The young generation is more materialistic, self-oriented, pleasure-seeking and does have a different viewpoint on various issues and priorities of life. The old parents' views contradict with their thinking and lead to stress in relationships. In the changing value system, a balance is to be developed in the viewpoints of both the old and the young. Within the family, a change leading towards harmonious relationships can be achieved with the co-operation of both the generations. The Indian culture and value system promotes the caring of the aged by their children. The nature and number of adjustments and changes occurring in the network of family relationships, need to be explored.

Fulfillment of Basic Necessities of Elderly Members in the Family

A nutritious diet is a basic requirement of elderly members. Several medical studies have shown that the problem of undernutrition is prevalent among the elderly in Indian Society. Various reasons may be attributed to this viz., lack of knowledge, bad food habits, besides the general poverty among the masses. Besides this, excess calories consumption in old age also leads to various health problems like obesity, arthritis, hypertension, etc. The elderly members require a proper and balanced diet full of several vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Since the appetite at the old age is generally a weak, their food should be prepared to keep this in mind. The family must serve a healthy diet to the elderly members and any neglect in it may lead to serious health problems.

Emotional Security of Elderly Members in the Family

Emotional insecurity is another glaring problem felt by the elderly members of the family. Emotional insecurity has been expressed by various phrases viz. loneliness, sense of insecurity, feeling of alienation, and uselessness in the family. Particularly after the demise of one life partner, the problem becomes very acute for the 'single old person'. In Indian society, elderly widows outnumber the single males. The family members can make them feel 'wanted'. A personalized touch, sympathetic discussion of their problems and sharing of their feelings by the young members of the family may provide them emotional security.

Economic Security of Elderly Members in the Family

Economic insecurity is another important problem of the aged in the family. The situation is reverse where aged are economically dependent and particularly in the case of aged women. Economically, the aged are perceived as non-productive and, therefore, a liability to some extent. The urge for self-reliance in the current

value system has led even parents to ensure their economic and other life security arrangements while they are young. Several pension plans and medical insurances are now available to ensure security at the old age. Money alone may not purchase the happiness in life but can surely help in satisfying the necessities of life like food, shelter, medical aid, recreation, gifts to children and grandchildren and socio-religious donations, etc. Economic independence enhances self-confidence.

Medical Security of Elderly Members in the Family

Another notable aspect in the care for the elderly members is their health. The health of the elderly has several issues viz., health awareness, physical illness and chronic diseases, availability of proper medication and treatments, nutritious diet, etc. Health education generates awareness among both the aged and the other family members about the common illness of the elderly viz. disorders of blood pressure, loss of appetite and memory, etc. The traditional Hindu philosophy has always taught the importance of caring for the old. The young family members can motivate and co-operate with the elderly members in developing healthy habits and leaving unhealthy ones. In case of illness of the elderly member, the family should have complete knowledge and record of the medical treatment. All medical prescriptions are to be strictly followed for early recovery. Philosophy and style of life have a direct bearing on the health of an individual. It is the primary responsibility of the young family members to maintain a conducive and healthy atmosphere in the family where elderly members may find themselves well-protected.

Involvement of Elderly Members in the Family Activities

Active involvement of the elderly members in the daily routine activities of the family, also contributes to their good health. In the traditional joint family, grandfathers and grandmothers were always busy with the rearing of their grandchildren, doing small helping jobs, and socio-religious activities. Light physical activities contribute to the muscular fitness of the elderly. Medical studies have proved that the physically active routine of the elderly members in the family has always contributed to their physical and psychological health and quality of life. The family members therefore should assure the involvement of the elderly in light physical activities, morning, and evening walk. Contrary to it, the overburden of the physical activities over the elderly members in the family leads to serious complications. Moreover, no involvement of the elderly members in the family activities is also harmful as it will develop a feeling of alienation among them. In view of this, a balanced and proper involvement of the elderly members in the family affairs involving physical activities will lead to their good health.

Parents in Indian society do socialization and rearing of their children in such a manner that they would take care of them in their old age. In the Indian patriarchal system, the son is looked at as '*Bhurape Ki Lathi*'. It is believed in the Hindu religion that son will help old parents in crossing over the '*Pung Naamak Narak*' by properly performing the prescribed religious rituals of after the death. However, with changing value system of the society, sometimes they are left alone by their children, at an old age. Parents sometimes feel 'unwanted' by their children. Elderly members are sometimes looked upon by the young generation as burdens and obstacles in their upward mobility.

Conclusion

The issue of the care of the elderly members of the society is very complex and multidimensional and therefore, needs elaborate studies. Changes in the demographic and social values have reduced the number of family members available to care for older members. While taking the care of the old family members, adult members need to take care of their children, job, and other family responsibilities also and this creates a complex situation for adult caretakers. Reduced family size also has added challenges in the care of the elderly in the family, as joint families have been replaced by small nuclear families. Some of the important changes in society which have influenced the caring of elderly members in the family include, delayed marriages, delayed procreation, low fertility, increased life span, increased divorce rates, small family size, increasing participation of women in jobs, global mobility in terms of job opportunities, materialistic values etc. Both types of situations may be perceived i.e., firstly, the families where elderly members of the family are cared for and regarded as an 'asset' and secondly, the families where they are neglected and looked upon as a 'liability'. The caring for the elderly members and their adjustment in the family is a two-way process. Healthy interaction among the members of different generations can solve many problems of the elderly. Both old and the young generations need to live together, taking care of each other's interests in the family. It is only within the family that the care of the elderly members can be best done.

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