

Covering the silent revolution

A flurry of activities of senior citizen associations and related news coverage usually herald the International (and National) Day of Older Persons, annually observed on 1 October since 1990. However, it will take much more to focus serious attention on the world's fastest growing population group, says

The world is experiencing an unprecedented demographic transformation. By 2050 the number of persons aged 60 years and over will increase from 600 million to almost two billion, and the proportion of persons aged 60 years and over is expected to double from 10 to 21 per cent. The increase will be greatest and most rapid in developing countries, where the older population is expected to quadruple during the next 50 years.

Second World Assembly on Ageing, Madrid, Spain, April 2002
(Excerpt from the Political Declaration adopted at the assembly)

1 October 2005 - Revolutions tend to make headlines but here is one that is largely being ignored by the media: the ongoing demographic revolution that is already affecting individuals, families, communities and countries across the world.

This “silent revolution” has to do with the fact that human beings are living longer than ever before. Twenty years were added to the average life expectancy worldwide in the last 50 years of the 20th Century. In the year 2000 there were 606 million persons aged 60 and above across the globe, making up ten per cent of the world population. By 2050 the total number of “older persons” is expected to rise to 1.9 billion and the proportion to 21 per cent. It is estimated that one in every five persons on the earth will be over 60 half way through this first century of the new millennium.

The greying of the human population is no longer the “First World” issue it has long been assumed to be. In fact, the tempo of ageing is even more rapid in developing countries than in the so-called developed ones. Already the majority of the world’s older persons live in the developing world and the number is expected to go up from 375 million in 2000 to 1.5 billion in 2050. It is a sobering thought that this older population is itself ageing, with about 10 per cent of the population over 60 already in the “age 80 and above” category and the proportion likely to rise to 25 per cent before 2050.

Ageing is a development issue

The elderly are not only the world's fastest growing population group, but they are among the poorest. It is also significant that the majority of older persons worldwide are women, constituting 55 per cent of the over-60 age group, and 65 per cent of the over-80 age group. Another interesting fact is that more than half the world’s senior citizens live in urban areas.

No wonder a joint statement issued by the United Nations Development Agency (UNDP) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) at the 2002 World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid argued that issues related to ageing must be at the centre of the global development agenda. According to UNFPA executive director Thoraya Ahmed Obaid and UNDP administrator Mark Malloch-Brown, “Global ageing is occurring at a rate

never seen before and vast differences in quality of life exist between older people living in the wealthy countries and their counterparts in the developing world. The next few decades will test our ability to address health care, retirement and pension benefits, and other issues that affect senior citizens. For while people are living longer than ever before, many face a future without a social safety net. In many places, the forces of modernization are fracturing the sense of community and family care that the elderly have traditionally counted on... We must meet the needs of the older persons who are alive today and plan ahead to meet the needs of the elderly tomorrow.”

Yet, noted a paper on ‘Mainstreaming the concerns of older persons into the social development agenda’ by UN official Robert Venne, “Issues concerning ageing and older persons suffer from a chronic lack of attention and resources which are very much linked to the lack of political visibility as well as a lack of attention in the development agenda.” He suggested that a concerted advocacy campaign based on freshly collected, comprehensive socio-economic data is required to sensitise both the public and policy makers to the conditions and concerns of senior citizens. According to him, the media are among the various sectors of civil society that must be part of such a campaign aiming to combat ignorance and prejudice regarding older persons, including negative stereotypes. A positive view of ageing was an integral aspect of the International Plan of Action on Ageing, 2002 (IPPA) emerging from the World Assembly in Madrid. The IPPA called for changes in attitudes, policies and practices at all levels in all sectors so that the enormous potential of ageing may be fulfilled.

According to the document, “Recognition of the authority, wisdom, dignity and restraint that comes with a lifetime of experience has been a normal feature of the respect accorded to the old throughout history. These values are often neglected in some societies and older persons are disproportionately portrayed as a drain on the economy, with their escalating need for health and support services. Although healthy ageing is naturally an increasingly important issue for older persons, public focus on the scale and cost of health care, pensions and other services have sometimes fostered a negative image of ageing. Images of older persons as attractive, diverse and creative individuals making vital contributions should compete for the public’s attention. Older women are particularly affected by misleading and negative stereotypes: instead of being portrayed in ways that reflect their contributions, strengths, resourcefulness and humanity, they are often depicted as weak and dependent. This reinforces exclusionary practices at the local and national levels.”

A UN report produced during preparations for the International Year of Older Persons (1999) also took note of media representations of senior citizens and their concerns: “In some age-advanced societies, a negative debate has grown up around ageing as some media write about incipient ‘age wars,’ citing age-based competition over resources (particularly for health care and income security). As populations age, some shift of resources in favour of an expanding population group is necessary. This shift can be made in several ways that would not burden the working population, favour one age-group over another, or add to the national debt.”

Silent revolution also invisible

From a perusal of the English press in Bangalore – which is representative of the English language press nationwide since four of the six newspapers with local editions are nationally circulated dailies -- negative image is not the problem for the senior citizens of this country at this point. Invisibility is.

Of course, the fact that gerontocracy prevails in many sectors of Indian society – not least in politics and governance – ensures that older people who wield power in public life are often in the news. However, the interests, concerns and problems of the majority of the elderly, as well as their role in and contribution to society, are barely represented in the media.

For example, media coverage of the proposed legislation to address various issues relating to the rights of the elderly has so far been scanty. There have been only scattered reports in the press on the draft Older Persons (Maintenance, Care and Protection) Bill, 2005, which the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment plans to introduce in parliament during the coming winter session (this is different from the two similar private member's Bills tabled by Santosh Bagrodia of Rajasthan). So far twelve states have agreed in principle to support the model law aiming to ensure that both families and the state respect the economic rights of senior citizens and their need for financial as well as social security. Responses from other states are still awaited.

On 27 August, the day after an official consultation was held in Bangalore to solicit feedback on the draft legislation from the southern region, only two newspapers carried reports on the meeting. Both the brief, single column items in *The New Indian Express* and the *Deccan Herald* were located on page 5 (devoted to news from the state, as differentiated from the city, the region and the nation). The only editorial on the proposed law that could be found (through an Internet search) was in the Madhya Pradesh based *Central Chronicle* dated 9 September.

If magnitude is one of the determinants of media coverage, developments relating to ageing surely qualify: it is estimated that India's population of older persons is now approximately 82 million strong and will grow to 100 million by the end of the decade. Well over half of them -- around 51 million – can apparently be counted as poor, while a quarter – about 22 million -- are widows. In fact, the National Policy for Older Persons, adopted in 1999, takes note of the fact that the needs of women within the elderly population need to be addressed urgently and sensitively to prevent them from becoming “victims of triple neglect and discrimination on account of gender, widowhood and age.” Under the circumstances it is not surprising that 92 per cent of Indian senior citizens have no access to social security. Just 7000 “old age homes” currently cater to the needs of this substantial population of possibly indigent older persons. And if that modest figure leads to any customary back-patting about traditional Indian family values, it must be recalled that the government's proposed Bill has come into being precisely because those values no longer seem to support or protect an increasing number of elderly citizens.

Despite all this, only four items relating to the elderly – other than the two reports mentioned above – turned up in a survey of Bangalore dailies over three days in August and nine days in September, when Meira Kumar, Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, was issuing statements and speaking to journalists about the forthcoming legislation. And they were typical of the kind of coverage sporadically seen in the media on events and issues concerning senior citizens.

One was a report on a study on menopause by two Bangalore-based researchers (*The Hindu*, 27 August). Another was a U.S.-based piece distributed by the *Los Angeles Times* Syndicate in *The Hindu*'s Sunday magazine section (28 August) on changes in the treatment of age-related macular degeneration, a leading cause of blindness. A third was a brief report headlined, "Elderly man missing." And the fourth was a report on a city-based Senior Citizens Club and its plans to launch a movement called 'Voice of Dignity' to unite older persons and create a voice for them that would be heard by the rest of society. Both these were in *The Times of India* dated 19 September. Luckily, during this period at least, there was no report of any crimes against the elderly -- otherwise the most common category of news concerning senior citizens.

Interestingly, the neglect of issues relating to ageing and older persons is not confined to the mainstream media. A quick scrutiny of "alternative" sources of news and views – including e-journals such as *this* one – reveals that this is an under-reported area across the board. Clearly the suggestion that issues related to ageing must be at the centre of the development agenda has yet to be widely accepted.

Paper promises

No wonder, then, that six years after the National Policy for Older Persons was adopted it has yet to be acted upon in a serious manner. The fate of the Plan of Action formulated for the period 2000-05 is no different. There has reportedly been little headway in setting up a separate Bureau of Older Persons or an autonomous National Association of Older Persons, as laid down by the policy. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has also fallen behind in its mandate to make a detailed review, after every three years, of the progress made in the implementation of the policy. Officials in the Ministry, which has traditionally been associated with issues relating to scheduled and backward castes, scheduled tribes, people with disabilities, etc., admit that this new and unfamiliar area has not yet received the attention it deserves.

A flurry of articles and reports featuring the elderly customarily herald the International (and National) Day of Older Persons, annually observed on 1 October since 1990. Many of these are catalysed by the activities of the few organisations working on issues concerning ageing and the elderly, as well as independent associations of senior citizens. Others (if any) relate to various special facilities and/or services periodically extended to the aged by the government or private organisations. For example, the report on the Senior Citizens Club in Bangalore mentioned above indicated that a walkathon and public meeting would mark the occasion in the city. On 30 September, the local press reported the extension of the "Elders Police Hotline" to more places across the city. Today, on D-Day there were photographs and reports related to a sight-seeing trip and

picnic for senior citizens organised by Help Age India, as well as a special health card and medical care facility for elders launched by a private hospital in the city. However, it will take more than such annual rituals, and media coverage of them, to focus serious attention on a major developmental issue that affects not only the growing number of senior citizens and their families and communities, but also involves and should concern society as a whole.

[Ammu Joseph](#), *an independent journalist and author based in Bangalore, and writing primarily on issues relating to gender, human development and the media.*

Source: <http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/oct/ajo-seniors.htm>