THE PROCESS OF AGEING IN INDIA

By Aditya Keshari Mishra

Introduction

The multifarious dimensions of ageing in India can sociologically be thought to be a series of transition from one set of social roles to another and such roles are structured by the social system. According to Bhatia (1983), "age and ageing are equally related to role-taking, value orientations and modes of behaviour of a person the expectation of which varies at different age-stages of members of a society". It may be mentioned that the process of ageing is not uniform for all individuals in the society. Thus, changes in the life of the old age, which is considered to be the *sanyas ashram* of the Hindu a*shram* theory, is influenced by the biological as well as the social and cultural systems. However, in recent times, the status and role of the old age population have been diminished due to the technological developments that have colonized the outlook of the youths. While contemplating on the issue of the 'aged', the ideas that haunt our imagination are quite complex as well as intriguing. Some argue that the elderly individuals are in a state of 'decay'. It implies that their role in society seem to be redundant and obsolescent for our contemporary times. In other words, they rarely have any function/role to contribute to our times. On the other hand, it is also believed that elderly persons are the guardians of our generation, preservers of the joint families, foundation of experience and knowledge, and resource of traditional values, norms and cultural practices. Thus, at this juncture, sociologists should be engaged in this debate in providing sociological perspectives on the transitional state of affairs of the elderly persons and advocate alternative approaches also for their emancipation to mainstream life.

Background

While the phenomenon of 'ageing' has been widely recognized in developed countries in India during the late 1960s, the Indian Gerontological Association (IGA) with a group of young and enthusiastic scientists from different branches of knowledge has brought this issue to the limelight for academic discussion. According to Lawrence Cohen (2003), "since the 1970s, gerontological writing in India has been dominated by a powerful and seldom challenged narrative of the decline of the Indian joint family and the consequent emergence of old age as a time of difficulty". Prior to industrialization, it was observed that the cultural heritage of Indian society was given the leadership roles and powerful positions of decision-makers and advisors in the joint family and community to aged persons, as their knowledge and experience were considered to be of great value in the proper functioning of society (De Souza 1982; Bhatia 1983; and Mishra 1987). Furthermore, according to Mishra (1987), the technological breakthrough due to industrialization, westernization, and urbanization has neglected the ascribed statuses by weakening the unity and integrity of the joint family and caste group that leads to the negligence of the role and status of the elderly persons. Moreover, the emergence of achieved properties like wealth, education etc., in distorted forms, has colonized the state

of mind of the youths by adopting the individualistic value of the West. According to Ambedkar (1990), the issue relating to old age is a result of the conflict between the traditionalism of the old individuals and the uncritical eagerness of youths towards the Western values (Raju 2002). In fact, there has been a diminishing value of the aged population in contemporary Indian society. As a result, it articulates to the emergence of ageism, which believes in inequality, prejudice and discrimination against aged.

It is against this backdrop that the present paper makes an attempt to understand 'ageing' in India exclusively from a sociological perspective. It also undertakes to outline a brief literature on the existing legislative as well as the policy measures and finally, proposes some suggestions towards the future prospect of the elderly individuals of India. The problem of ageing can be seen through the following variables.

A Sociological Turn

It seems the discipline of sociology has been almost insouciant to the category called the aged. The 'aged' is about a vulnerable population, which is usually overlooked in our discipline; it is about a population, which is always at risk. No wonder, sociology has been enriching itself by encompassing and integrating new domains of discourse from time to time. From ecology to the Dalits, youth to feminism, though interrelated, it is constantly renewing itself. That is, perhaps the precise attribute of sociology for which August Comte called it a 'dynamic sociology'. Thus, the central methodological question that still remains unresolved is: should sociology make an attempt to construct a discourse for the aged, which would address all the issues confronting the aged? It goes without saying that the literature available on "ageing" in our discipline is very sparse. Thus, perhaps it becomes a methodological imperative for sociologists to build up a systematic discourse on gerontology for a panoptic understanding: their crisis, contribution as well as problems and possibilities. Of late, Social Gerontology, a branch of Gerontology, has started to focus on ageing from the socio-cultural aspects.

A Social Process

Ageing is a byproduct of physical, psychological and social processes. While contextualizing the process of ageing, the main thrust of the sociology, both as a discipline and a movement, is to reflect on how and to what extent transformations in the society and of the individual life influence each other, as individuals of different age categories pass through social system-institutions, values and norms. Sociologists specify three interrelated processes of ageing: physical, psychological and social. First, the physical ageing refers to the internal and external physiological changes that take place in the individual body. Second, the psychological ageing is understood as the developmental changes in mental functioning – emotional and cognitive capacities. Third, the social ageing focuses on the changes such as: how individuals are viewed, what individuals expect of themselves, and what is expected of them from others that individuals experience over the various age categories. However, sociologists are paying attention to the socio-economic and cultural antecedents of the process of ageing. Furthermore, ageing does not mean what an individual is able to act rather it facilitates what he/she is expected to act, permitted to act or prohibited from acting.

A Socially Determined Category

Every society uses age categories to divide this ongoing process into stages or segments of life. These life stages are socially constructed rather than inevitable. Age, too, is a production of social category. At any point of life span, age simultaneously denotes not only a number and a mixture of physical characteristics but also a set of social constructs, defined by the norms specific to a given society at a specific point in history. Think about childhood, for example. When you were growing up, childhood was a distinct period of life with particular activities designed especially for your age group: television programmes, movies, school, music etc. Thus, a specific period of life, be it infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, middle age or old age is influenced by the structural entities of a given society. Therefore, ageing is not to be considered the mere product of biological function rather a consequence of socio-cultural factors.

Moreover, what is important about ageing, then, is how a society uses it to put people into categories. As a classificatory tool, age is important in three ways. First, like sex, age is an *ascribed* status or characteristic, which is, based on attributes over which we have little or no control. Second, unlike sex, a specific age is always transitional – constantly moving from one age to another, beginning life at zero and ending with a certain number at death that is regulated by societal expectations of age-appropriate behaviour. These transitions also assume that conformity is rewarded whereas deviance is punished. Third, although in every society some age groups are more powerful, rich and respectable than others, the unique aspect of ageing is that everyone can expect to occupy various positions throughout life on the basis of his or her age. The equation is very simple – all of us, at certain time, were powerless infants, and in course of time, the power and influence change as we move from one age category to another. Thus, the definition of ageing is socially caused.

Sociological Perspectives on Ageing

One of the branches of sociology i.e. Sociology of Gerontology or Social Gerontology focuses on what it means to age in society; that is, personal concerns and social issues associated with ageing and the ways in which these themes are influenced and at the same time influence the society in which we live. Thus, according to the sociologists and other social scientists, ageing, looking through the lens of sociological imagination, as devised by C. Wright Mills is not an individual problem rather a widespread issue that is faced by both the developed and underdeveloped nations as a whole. The process of ageing can be approached from four distinct perspectives: functional, symbolic, conflict, and emancipation.

First, the functional perspective argues that the elderly persons having knowledge, wisdom and experience help in the continuation of social norms, values and traditions. Hence, negligence of aged individuals needs to be rectified, according to the social situations. For example, the case of National Agricultural Technology Project (henceforth NATP), which has been initiated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India with the financial assistance from the World Bank and is running with the assistance of the National Institute of Agricultural Extension Management (MANAGE), Hyderabad, in 28 districts covering seven States: Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Punjab. The project aims at mobilization and organization of

different farmers' or women farmers' groups at grassroots levels in order to develop and disseminate various agro-based technologies to the farmers'/women farmers' interest groups (Mishra 2004). It has been observed that although the youths participate in a large number, the aged persons, however, occupy the advisory-cum-central positions at grassroots, block and district levels. The reason is that the youths consider the aged members as more experienced and efficient than them in the concerned field.

Secondly, the conflict perspective assumes that the ageing is problematic for the society. According to this perspective, as the individuals become aged, it leads to the diminishing of power, prestige and privileges, unless these have been maintained by himself or herself. It argues that the wealthy and powerful individuals have blocked efforts to help the aged because they think spending for aged does not serve their personal interest. Moreover, it points out that the aged individuals, in course of time, lose their memory power and physical strength; thus, their role should be minimized. For example, the case of Yuva, one of the Bollywood blockbusters of 2004, directed by Mani Ratnam, lays down the significance of youths in the present day Indian politics. The central crux of the movie portrays that the youths must join politics, if the Nation has to survive and prosper. And, finally, the movie ends with its expected slogan. The youths have started taking the power from the hands of the aged, particularly those who have involved in corruption. But, the sociologically significant question is how the youths perceived politics and students' movements in the contemporary scenario. What I do believe is, that politics and students' movements are positively correlated. Critically examining, the youths want to redefine the knowledge system in relation to the students' movements and politics both at the level of educational institutions and at the level of the State.

Thirdly, the symbolic perspective examines the symbols and definitions that people use to communicate with one another, symbols that provide people with their view of the world. According to this perspective, all individuals with their features and characteristics, which are the reflections of their age, become the symbol of their respective age groups for others. Generally, the youths are considered to be smart, courageous and sportive. On the other hand, as Henslin (1990) mentioned that old persons are seen as weak, indolent, calm etc. Thus, we tend to perceive both others and ourselves according to the symbols our culture provides.

Fourthly, the emancipation perspective is an alternative to above three perspectives for two reasons. First, it abandons the approaches, proposed by the above theoretical perspectives. And, secondly, it gives priority to the liberation of the aged from the exclusion of social, economic and political participation in the society. In fact, the emancipation perspective is defined as creation of a sense of social identity of aged in one extreme, and, as an instigate to social, economic, political welfare of the aged individuals on the other extreme. In essence, the liberation perspective provides relative privilege in socio-economic, political and psychological aspects of aged through the construction of a sense of age consciousness, which leads to the provision of social security.

With these four perspectives, the paper tries to find out the major theoretical standpoints in the study of social aspects of gerontology and to understand, according to the above-mentioned theoretical perspectives. At this juncture, it is pertinent to mention the major theoretical perspectives, which are related to the problems and prospects of the

aged with the appearance of industrial society within the framework of social gerontology. In brief, an attention has been paid in order to understand how far the dominant theoretical underpinnings in the domain of social gerontology have been directly or indirectly attributed to the aforesaid perspectives. The major theoretical perspectives of ageing are: disengagement theory, modernization theory, labeling theory, activity theory and subculture theory (Baum and Baum 1980 and Crandall 1980).

The disengagement theory of aged, proposed by Cumming and Henry (1961), proclaims that the aged individuals must be disposed of from their respective roles in order for the proper functioning of the society. According to the proponents of this theory, disengagement is a gradual and an inevitable process (Crandall 1980). Moreover, this theory confines the area of operation of the aged by restricting their scope for employment and commitments. In essence, though controversial, it is mentioned that the perspective of disengagement of aged is functional in its approach – it gives psychological well-being for the old individuals (Baum and Baum 1980: 20).

Modernization theory of aged, propounded by Cowgill and Holmes (1972), portrays a sense of abandonment of the role of the elderly in the modern society. After engaging in a series of qualitative and quantitative observations on older people in pre-industrial and industrial societies, Cowgill and Holmes advocate that modern societies have a less use of older persons than that in the pre-modern societies. But, I think modern societies have failed to give due recognition to the elderly. According to them, the more you become older, the more you experience a sense of relative deprivation. In the words of Baum and Baum, as promulgated by Cowgill and Holmes, "modern societies abandon their older people economically, socially, and culturally more so than did pre-industrial social orders". Thus, this theory can be attributed to the conflict perspective.

The labeling theory of aged, proposed by Bengston (1973), advocates to elucidate the actions of the elderly individuals in the society. The basic tenets of this theory are based on the assumption that when an individual is given a label of 'old', this label creates a significant impact on the way he/she is being treated and perceived by the society. In fact, this theory demonstrates a similar nature of symbolic perspective. As labeled individuals, the aged individuals are used to associate to new identities, positions and roles. Once labeled, it is difficult for him/her to change the label because all of his/her actions are interpreted in light of the new identity, positions and roles. Moreover, the action that does not confirm to the label will be abandoned and the action that confirms the new identity/positions/roles will be accentuated.

Activity theory of aged, developed by Havighurst, Neugarten and Tobin (1958) has developed a different approach for the elderly in modern society. According to Maddox (1966 and 1968), this theory is regarded as an anti-ageing perspective (Baum and Baum 1980: 23). It believes that if the roles and activities associated to old age are lost, it is important to develop new set of roles and activities in order to replace the existing ones. Thus, replacement of roles and activities is a compulsory fact for the aged because it empowers the degree of life satisfaction at the old age. In fact, the activity theory can best be attributed to the perspective of emancipation.

In arguing for the empowerment of the aged, Arnold Rose (1965) has developed the theory of subculture of the aged, which defines and delineates the environment for the elderly by determining its own organizations and objectives. Broadly speaking, there are three antecedents, which are responsible for the emergence of subculture of aged. These

are: a high density of aged population; exclusion of aged from participation in societal activities, for example due to the case of retirement laws and health factors; and a sense of 'age consciousness'. As a result, the subculture of aged shows an apathetic attitude towards society by maintaining its own value system, life styles, interests and actions. This theory comes under the purview of emancipation perspective.

Ageing in India: Some Reflections

The aged population in India is currently the second largest in the world. In modern times, for all practical purposes the individuals who are above sixty years of old are considered to be aged or 'senior citizens' of the State. In academic research, retirement age is often taken as an index of aged status. Chronological age of fifty-eight or sixty is considered the beginning of old age. However, existence of mass poverty, growing trends towards nuclear family, greater life expectancy and deterioration of cultural values and norms are engendering stumbling blocks on the part of the aged to cope with the changing environment (Bhatia 1983). As a result, the aged population in India is accompanied by a series of problems in their day-to-day life. The major areas of problems, faced by the aged individuals are: income generation, health, use of free time, social security, social participation, dignity and respect and so on. These problems are because of the following reasons namely, geographical and cultural differences, redtapism and disproportionate socio-economic facilities to urban and rural areas in terms of education, sanitation, health and housing. As a result, the Government of India has undertaken some legislative and policy measures for the welfare of the aged.

Existing Programmes on Ageing

Much progress has been made in the quality and quantity of the service of the ageing in India in the last five decades. However, improvements have been uneven in the urban areas that avail the best advantage of modern advanced technological package in contrast to the rural one. While much of the emphasis has been given to care for women and child, the government has played a least role for aged except formulating certain legislative and policy measures. Here, a brief attempt has been made to understand the constitutional and the legislative and the policy measures pertaining to the welfare of the aged population of India.

Constitutional Provisions

The welfare of the aged has been enshrined in the Constitution of India. The item 9 of the State list and items 20, 23 and 24 of the Concurrent List speak of the provisions of age pension, social security, social insurance, economic and social planning, and relief to the disabled and the unemployed. The Article 41 of the Directive Principles of State Policy expresses "the State shall make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disableness, and in other cases undeserved wants, within its limits of economic development and capacity". Fundamental Right, Article 16 (2) emphasizes on equal opportunity in matters of public employment. Article 47 of the Indian Constitution points

out the raising of the level of nutrition and the standard of living of its people and improvement of public health.

Legislative Measures
Coming to the category of legislative measure, the retirement benefits (GPF & PPF) are provided to those who served the Government and the public undertakings.

- The Employees Provident Funds and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, 1952 (amended in 1996) provide for economic security to persons or their families in the event of retirement or even death before retirement.
- The National Social Assistance Programme came into existence on 15th August 1995 and one of its programmes is the National Old Age Pension Scheme that is implemented through the Panchayats and municipalities. Presently, all State Governments and Union Territories are implementing the old age pension scheme under the State sector.

Policy Measures
The emergence of National Policy on Older Persons, 1999, a collaborative pursuit of both public and private agencies along with the 'Third Sector', which aims at the well-being of the aged focuses on the areas of financial security, health care and nutrition, shelter, welfare and other needs of the senior citizens and provides protection against abuse and exploitation. Moreover, the National Council for Older Persons on 18th October 2002 and 7th February 2003 emphasizes on the following areas: uniform age of 60+ for extending facilities/benefits to senior citizens; financial security; health care and nutrition needs; food security and shelter; and highlighting the role of media[1][1].

However, the empirical implications of the measures through legislation and policy measures have not achieved their desired goals. The result is that the rich used to receive more and perhaps better services than the poor, although the poor are deserving and downtrodden (Hess, Markson and Stein 1998). Moreover, owing to the physical, socio-economic, psychological and the influence of uncritical western philosophy like 'individualism', out of their practical experience and research endeavour, an innumerable number of social scientists report that there is degradation in the social status as well as economic conditions of the aged population in India. In fact, the living conditions of the aged individuals in Indian society are influenced by a series of factors such as caste, religion, education, health condition, dependent on the chief earner of the family, living standard of the adult members of the family and the process of migration (Raju 2002 and Mishra 1987). Furthermore, the unconditional power, prestige and privileges that older people used to enjoy in joint families are being gradually eroded in the society. Thus, there is an urgent need for the restructuration of the existing legislative and policy measures.

Reading Future Options
In India, as stated above, the living standards of the aged are influenced by the following factors: physical, social, economic and psychological. Thus, any attempt towards the welfare of the aged community should be taken into consideration the above-mentioned

---

[1][1] Available at: http://socialwelfare.delhigovt.nic.in/nationalpolicy.htm

factors. Moreover, any policy should include the poor, vulnerable and neglected segments of the society. In a concrete sense, as Farah (2004) mentions, **the policy option should recognize the following four objectives:**

    A. A. To bring about every individual to an equal and common platform in order to launch any measures and provide equal opportunities for basic amenities like food, shelter, health care facility etc.

    B. B. To provide equal socio-economic opportunities to everybody by removing all sorts of discriminations that operate at societal level.

    C. C. To ensure the institutional and regulatory mechanism for discrimination.

    D. D. To mainstream the marginalized sections of the society.

Here, an attempt has been made to propose some suggestions for the development of the longstanding issue relating to 'ageing' in India. Moreover, these suggestions will act as critical inputs into the process of developing an appropriate policy measure for the welfare of the aged individuals.

- India lives in her villages. Furthermore, Indian economy is primarily an agrarian-based economy. She is characterized by the existence of longstanding variations, such as, rural-urban dichotomy; rich and poor difference; the unequal distribution of updated technological facilities etc. Hence, any proposed measure undertaken by the government should take into account these factors. In this context, the first and foremost thing is that the government should adopt a provision of social security measure irrespective of rural and urban, caste and class so on and so forth. Here, the social security measure believes that the State should make itself responsible for ensuring a minimum standard of material welfare to all its citizens.

- The aged individuals should be encouraged to form Self-Help Groups (SHGs) so that they can organize themselves and to provide services to their fellow senior citizens. Moreover, it will facilitate a sense of 'age consciousness' among the aged individuals.

- Apart from the improvement of health care system, the effective way of dealing with the elderly is to improve the economic condition of the elderly population. Thus, there is a need to formulate an alternative employment opportunity for the aged; at least those who have efficiency to work after retirement, whereby they can increase their bargaining power in contemporary competitive society.

- In recent times, the process of 'participation' seems to be the buzzword in every sphere of intellectual discourse. Thus, along with the youth, the aged need to participate instead of staying in isolation in all the communitarian or societal or development activities. This participation is expected to bring about the developments of equality, efficiency and effectiveness, which ultimately lead to mainstream life.

- There is also a need to revive our normative structure of the society. Owing to the influence of distorted form of modernity, the philosophy of 'individualism' has colonized the mental state of the youths. Thus, efforts should be promoted in order to tackle this situation.

- There is also a need to introduce the institutional support in order to address the structural problem of ageing. This institutional set up will deliver training programmes, oriental course, and mass campaign against the attitude towards

ageism. On the other hand, it will also conduct various research works pertaining to the problems relating to ageing and will also find out the possible solutions.

- Advocacy, research, involvement of voluntary agencies, training opportunities for gerontological workers, awareness building and a close networking between the old aged population with the national and international agencies should also be developed.
- Finally, the emergence of collaborative effort made by the public and private agencies along with the 'Third Sector' and also the public at large will address effectively the conditions of ageing. This multi-agential strategy is based on interactive-bottom up approach and active participation of stakeholders.

Towards Conclusion

The emergence and the persistence of the issue of 'ageing' in Indian society comprise a series of factors. In brief, the major antecedent to the issue of ageing is the changing aspects of Indian social structure, which includes family pattern, adoption of individualistic values by youths, migration etc. From a sociological point of view, ageing, a social process is not an offshoot of the mere biological aspect rather a byproduct of larger socio-cultural milieu. In this context, agency seldom works whereas structure drives every agency in its own way. Thus, it is indispensable that the policy interventions should take notice of the socio-economic conditions of the aged individuals. Hence, the liberation of ageism does not imply a collaborative effort, undertaken by the public and private institutions along with the involvement of NGOs and community at large but it also depends on the freedom from the shackles of 'individualism' and the 'self', which will retrieve cognitive tradition of Indian civilization.

Source: http://www.geocities.com/husociology/ageing4.htm