

CHANGE IN THE AUTHORITY AND STATUS OF THE AGED: EMERGING CHALLENGES AND ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

In Ladakh, experience of aging is not same today as it was in earlier. The social and economic roles of older persons, their expectations of the community, as well as what society expects of them, are in many ways greatly different today from previous generations. Until recently, only a minority of people lived long enough to be considered old. As the number of older people has grown and as social values and roles have changed, the authority and power of older adults in society have also shifted. There are various methods in Gerontology the present paper is an attempt to study aging in Leh from Disengagement theory.

KEYWORDS: Old-Age, Family, Aging, Joint and Nuclear Family

INTRODUCTION

All societies need orderly ways to transfer power from older to younger generations. Therefore, the social system deals with the problem of aging by institutionalizing mechanisms of disengagement. Accordingly, older people decrease their activity levels, seek more passive roles, interact less frequently with others, and become increasingly pre-occupied with their inner lives. Disengagement is thus viewed as adaptive behavior, allowing older people to maintain a sense of self-worth while adjusting through withdrawal to the loss of prior roles, such as occupational or parenting roles. Disengagement is presumed to have positive consequences for both society and individual¹.

The growing interest in understanding the process of aging has given rise to the multidisciplinary field of Gerontology, the study of the biological, psychological, and social aspects of aging. Gerontologists include researchers and practitioners in such a diverse fields as biology, medicine, nursing, dentistry, physical and occupational therapy, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, economics, political science, and social work. These individuals are concerned with many aspects of aging, from studying and describing the cellular processes involved, to seeking ways to improve the quality of life for older people².

Aging-the last stage of human life cycle-by reason of physical and mental disability, needs special safeguard and care. A large number of aged people around us, irrespective of geographical limits, remain distressed and in turmoil. Every moment at home and out of it, they are neglected, exploited, abused and harassed³. Earlier the values, status and authority

¹ Hooyman Nancy. R. and H. Asuman Kiyak. 1998. *Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective Fifth edition*. United States of America: Allyn and Bacon p 233.

² Hooyman Nancy. R. and H. Asuman Kiyak. 1998. *Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective Fifth edition*. United States of America: Allyn and Bacon p 2.

³Biswas, A iswarya. 2008. 'The Buddhist way to Overcome Jara-Maranam' in Chopra et.al (ed.) *Discourses on Aging and Dying*. New Delhi: Sage Publication p 134.

of the aged are related to their prominence in village organizations and consultation sought by others especially by the younger generations, for people turn to them for guidance and direction owing to their experience and maturity of judgment in almost everyfield. In tradition society of Ladakh old aged people were given the care they need; however in contemporary society many of the elderly parents face neglect and deprivation not outside their home but at the hands of their family members. Neglect towards older persons in the family was a common form of mistreatment. Deprivation in the form of dietary, health, clothing and other needs are simply ignored in many cases. The adult children used the service of the older persons to manage homes, agriculture and take care of their children.

Family is the basic and universal institution of the social structure of human society. It fulfils needs and performs functions which are indispensable for the continuity, integration and change in the social system. The forms and functions of family have undergone adaptive changes with changes in the technological and economic super-structure of society. One way to characterize this change is to associate conjugal or nuclear forms of families with relatively modernized or industrial society and extended or joint types of families with traditional-agrarian and pre-industrial societies. The transition from extended family based society to nuclear family based society is thus, in essence, an example of structural change, since this involves systematic changes in role-structures through processes of differentiation. Compared to an extended family the combinations of role-structure in a nuclear family are fewer, the authority system and networks of kinship relations are also different. A nuclear family is itself an example of structural differentiation from the more composite social structure of an extended family⁴. The role of family as a mode of social organization has been significantly reduced by a combination of economic, social and ideological developments over the past century. In addition, the emergence of new family forms has raised questions over the roles and responsibilities of kin members⁵.

In India the old men live in the 'big family', they have a say in household affairs, they have a role in the socialization of children, in short they have an identity in the home and the wider community. The other institution cannot be a substitute to the family⁶. In traditional societies the number of children in the family was high compared to the aged population. So the aged parents were taken care of by one or the other child especially by the eldest son, who have more responsibility. With the change from joint to nuclear families and migration from rural to urban, there are older people who need care and support now. Naturally, economic and health position may not be sufficient in taking care for themselves. So the problems of aged will be worse now than in the past. The aged parents who strictly follow the traditional values and customs are often unable to adjust with the younger generation.

Among all role transformations in the course of ageing, the shift into the new role of 'old' is one of the most complex and completed. Now, elderly people have to cope not only with the changing family structure but also with changing role relations within the family. In an agriculture-based traditional society, where children followed their parent's occupation, it was natural that the expertise and knowledge of each generation were passed on to the next, thus, affording older persons a useful role in society. However, this is no longer true in modern society, in which improved education, rapid technological change and new forms of organization have often rendered obsolete the knowledge, experience and

⁴ Singh, Yogender. (1996) *Modernization of Indian Tradition*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.

⁵ Harper, Sarah. 2006. *Ageing Societies: Myths, Challenges and Opportunities*. New York: Oxford University Press. p 157.

⁶ Sharma, M.L. and T.M. Dak (1987) *Ageing in India: Challenge for the Society*. Delhi: Ajanta Publication.

wisdom of older persons⁷.

In many cultures, older persons are respected for their years of experience, and the role of “wise elder” is a desired status⁸. In traditional society, older people had a sense of honour and authority. The decision-making in the family and the community were mostly assigned to them. They were revered for their experience and wisdom. The transition to a modern society and the disintegration of the joint family led to the loss of the traditional authority of older people in decision making. Owing to hard work and poor nutrition, the health of older people decline⁹. Like other culture elders in Ladakh are highly revered and expected to be supported by their family members. The younger member of families recognize respect and support for elderly as their duty. The irony is that the number of single and nuclear families is gradually increasing in Ladakh while the three generation extended families at one times was norms is decreasing.

Earlier the main occupation of the people in villages in Leh is agriculture and animal husbandry. In the past agriculture in Leh was self sufficient. Most of the people possessed agriculture land on which farming was done and its produce was stored for their personal consumption round the year. In villages, for agriculture most of the technology was based on traditional knowledge and local resources were used. For instance, the plough was made of local wood, and its iron tip was forged by the village blacksmith and other parts of plough was made by experienced people of the community and pulled with the help of *dzo*¹⁰ (a hybrid between the male yak and the common cow) and in some parts horse are being used for ploughing. It is not only the ploughing but also all the activities related to agriculture are done with the help of traditional knowledge, skills and livestock. Younger people may have any one of this skills, but their integration requires more maturity. This traditional wisdom, knowledge and skills were passed from generation to generation. Thus almost all the skills and materials needed to plough were renewable and readily available if not available they can borrow it from neighbours. Agriculture was done with the help and support from family, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances. All the works related to agriculture was done with the help of man power and livestock now in changed society all the works are done with the help of machines by using waged laborer. With the coming of machines and waged labour there is also a change in the authority and status of the older people.

In the past people were strongly bonded to their neighbourer and the community at large, sharing work such as harvesting, ploughing, threshing, and other such activities by turn on reciprocal relationship. In the past, people worked as equals and friends helping each other by turn with the the help and experience of elders. Elders had enjoyed the authority and respect at that time. The house had a celebration atmosphere whenever friends and neighbours came to work. With the coming of modern technologies and arrivals of tourist in Leh city there is decline in participation of local people in agriculture sector. Now migrant labourers from Bihar, Nepal and Doda are hired for agriculture pursuits and the culture of co-operative farming has diminished. With the change from agriculture to non-agriculture and co-operative to hired labour there is decline in the authority and respect for the old age person.

With the coming of grand children, the grand-parents, along with their unmarried son or daughter or married son,

⁷ Bhat, Anitha Kumari and Raj Dhruvarajan. 2009. ‘Aging in India: Drifting Intergenerational Relations, Challenges and Options’ in *Sociology of Aging: A Reader*. Ajay Kumar Sahoo, Gavin J. Andrews and S. Irudaya Rajan (ed.) New Delhi: Rawat Publication p 339.

⁸ Hooyman, Nancy. R. and H. Asuman Kiyak. 1998. *Social Gerontology: A Multidisciplinary Perspective Fifth edition*. United States of America: Allyn and Bacon p 149.

⁹ Pappathi, K. (2007) *Aging: Scientific Prespective and Social Issues*, New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing corporation.

¹⁰ Italics were used for local terms

with his wife leave the family and start living in a separate house. Thus, any structure, other than the one represented by the ancestral and parental residence, occupied by any person, separated from the main family, is referred as '*Khaou*' in Ladakhi language. Ancestral or parental house is known as '*Khangchen*'. This separation is mainly because of conflicts and sometimes to avoid conflicts within a family. When they stay away from each other chances of conflict and quarrel are minimized. The provision of *khaou* and *khangchen* (*khangchen* is the ancestral house) help to avoid parental interference in the business of the young couple. Earlier, *Khangchen* and *khaou* render all assistance to each other whenever needed.

Families often face difficulties to cope with the welfare work to the elderly and in some cases there is no member in the families to take proper care for elderly. The new generation has thus to deal with the elderly in a different pattern of perspectives¹¹. The nature of the grandparents relationship varies widely across a spectrum from sharing occasional interests and leisure activities to providing regular intimate personal care. Interestingly, despite the increase of residential mobility, most surveys report a relatively high degree of contact between grandparents and grandchildren, with average physical contact occurring at least once a month supplemented by other forms of communication¹². The traditional power within the family is declining and intra-familial clashes are frequent. The husband-wife relationship is becoming closer in nuclear families. The traditional values attached to certain types of occupations are changing. There is also change from inherited or ascribed status to achieved status. The nuclear family appears to be more receptive to new trends in modern education than joint family.

Care for older persons has assumed a different dimension in the modern milieu because of increasing longevity of life, increasing number of older persons, changes in nature and structure of family, and changes in socio-economic backgrounds. More and more people are living longer and would, hence, require care in their old age. Families are getting smaller and moving away from the realm of romanticized communitarian values-to now adopt individualistic values¹³. Modern education, tourism, urban/town influence, migration and above all emergence of materialistic and individualistic value had the tendency to change the traditional kinship and family organisation towards nuclear family norms with declining respect and authority of aged. With the change in family structure from joint family to nuclear family, its size and composition, status and roles of the family members and its guiding ethos have all undergone a change.

The important factor that has affected the family structure and relations is the immigration of adult children for further studies, in search of employment opportunities in government and private institution, as well as in tourism industry or for marriage. As most of the people had migrated to Leh town to earn some money or for further education. For economic reason many sons of agriculturist have entered into non-agricultural livelihoods and established their own nuclear families in the town. Change from agriculture to non-agriculture, manual to non-manual involves significant changes. One of the reasons for this change in family is seen as migration from village to town which lead to the older person to lead a lonely life. All these factors left aged alone at home especially in rural areas and thus change in status and role of aged.

The older person who were brought up in a traditional way and who had very little contact with the outside world

¹¹ Hossain. Md. Ripter. 2001. 'Demography of Aging and Pattern of Old Age Security in Bangladesh' in *Ageing & Human Development: Global Perspectives* (ed.) Ishwar Modi. New Delhi: Rawat Publication p. 74.

¹² Harper, Sarah. 2006. *Aging Societies: Myths, Challenges and Opportunities*. New York: Oxford University Press. Pp 281.

¹³ Datta, Anupama. 2008. 'Socio-Ethical Issues in the Existing Paradigm of care for the Older Persons: emerging challenges and possible responses' in Chopra et.al (ed.) *Discourses on Aging and Dying*. New Delhi: Sage Publication p 151.

feel extremely concerned by the changes that are taking place. One of the problems faced by the parents in Leh is that children who have had opportunity for modern education tend to migrate from their villages and small towns to large urban areas where they can find jobs. The old parents are left alone except of occasional visits by their families and the burden of agriculture are left with the older parents. If the parents are healthy enough they might be able to visit and stay for short periods with their children. This kind of mobility is increasingly evident in villages where they migrated to Leh town. With age, people become more and more dependent on their adult children, whether it is for economic, emotional, physical support. Moreover, with age their medical and health care expenditure increases, even as their own resources reduce in size thereby increasing their financial dependence on their adult children.

With these economic migration of young adult and neglect of the older person there was a need of old age home in Ladakh. Leh district there are three Old-age homes in Leh districts. Old age homes are institutions for the aged established either by the government, voluntary organizations, charitable trusts or missionary institutions for the welfare of the inmates, providing facilities for their stay. The old age homes are either of the paid or the payment-free type.

The concept of old-age home, though not very common in India, is not unknown. HelpAge India estimates that there are 728 institutions at present, perhaps a majority of them in Urban areas. More than 60 per cent of the old age homes in India are of charitable type, meant for destitute or very poor persons. About 20 per cent of them are of the 'pay and stay' type and another 20 per cent are mixed. About 15 per cent of homes were for women exclusively and Kerala state had the maximum number of homes¹⁴. The three old-age homes in Leh District are of charitable type with majority of them are female with two in Choglamsar and one in Nyoma.

Maitri old age home is charitable thrust was founded by Ven. Sanghasena in the year 1995. According to the Maitri Old age home at Choglamsar the foundation of old age home was start with *Abilay* Padma Lhaskit was an old lady who had fallen victim to such changes in family life in Ladakh. She had been abandoned at the government hospital in Leh. She had lived in the hospital for over 7 years due to the sympathetic allowances made by the doctors who realized she was destitute. Ven. Sanghasena Mahanayaka Thera (a Buddhist monk), the founder of Mahabodhi organizations, Leh, Ladakh, heard of *Abi* Lhaskit (*Abi*- Grandmother in Ladakhi language), he immediately brought her to Devachan campus-Centre for various social and humanitarian activities started by Ven. Sanghasena. After seeing *Abi* Lhaskit and many other elderly people needing a secure home to lead rest of lives in dignity, and in peace, he determined to start a facility for them at Devachan.

In July 1995, finally the day came and the Maitri Old Age Home was established with 3 women, including *Abi* Lhaskit. The old age home grew as a response to people like *Abi* Lhaskit. Over the years in addition to induction of aged people, the home had to offer the facility to quite a number of physically challenged and mentally handicapped people of Ladakh. This program indeed translates the Buddha's teaching of loving kindness and compassion into action. Under the loving guidance of Sangasena the mahabodhi has been successfully operating the Maitri Old Age Home for the past 18-19 years. Though *abhi* Lhaskit is now no more, but there are many like her who are spending dignified and secure at the home. The purpose and objectives of the home has now become more accommodative and are to provide the aged, destitute and handicapped people with a homely, peaceful, secured, healthy and spiritual-worshipping environment.

At present there are 35 older person at Matri Old-age home and most of the inmates have their individual

¹⁴ HelpAge India. 2000. Senior Citizens' Guide. New Delhi: HelpAge India.

sponsors. The facility is one of the best for the needy elderly. Open space, glass verandah/corridor, dinning and prayer hall, in company with the school children, in proximity of the hospital and of the provision of other necessary amenities, ensures the residents a happy and peaceful life at the home. In addition to providing the residents a safe physical and emotional environment, the Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre (MIMC) also hopes to create greater social awareness by educating the younger generation, family members and others, who are concerned with the welfare of the elderly, on the problems faced by the aged. Physiotherapy centre is also being established at the Home with the help of Help Age India.

Help Age India is a national-level voluntary organization working for the cause and care of disadvantaged, older persons in the country for the last 27 years. Help Age India undertakes projects that ensure economic, health and emotional security of the older persons. Its projects and programmes are based on the UN principles for Older Persons-Independence, Participation, Care, Self-Fulfilment and Dignity¹⁵.

Like Ladakh, Tibet also traditionally had a strong joint family system, which ensured the older persons of security, company of family member and necessary care when needed. In most families the elderly still live in the loving care of their family members. There are some factors which are responsible for the establishment of Old Age homes in Tibetan settlements at Choglamsar and Nyoma. After migration, many Tibetans refugees families were separated from their own family members, which forced these elders to stay in Old Age Homes. In addition, low economic conditions, and children's migration to urban area within Ladakh and outside have weakened the family support system. An Severe cold of the winter in Ladakh is one of the main enemies of the elderly, particularly the nomad families of Changthang region who live in tent when the temperature drops to below freezing point,unfortunate result is that elderly now are deprive of care and love of their own family.

Old-age home for the Tibetans at Choglamsar was established in the year 1976 at Choglamsar. Now presently there are 37 old people who reside at this old age home at Choglamsar. According to the director of the TCV it came to know that 95% of them didn't have their children to look after. Start by His Holiness the Dalai Lama to take care the destitute and senior citizen. Senior citizens are staying one person in a room. There are more than 60- 70 person capacity at the old age home. One *Chotkhang* (small temple) and one common room for prayer are there for them for their daily prayers. They also recite the prayer of death rituals for others. Old age people receive 300 rupees for their pocket money per month. Old age home comes under the supervision of Director of Tibetan Children Village (TCV) School. Staff members of TCV also participate as volunteers during death rituals and for the welfare of old age. It is not only the senior citizen at old age home they also help more than 300-400 old people scattered in various camps. Two staffs, two nurses and one cook are always available to take care of the old age people. Food clothes and shelter are given by TCV School. There are also about 250 sheep and goat of *Tse-tar* (the one which cannot be killed) at old age home which are taken care by Tibetans refugees of Leh. Apart from this Tibetan refugees in Ladakh have also established Old age home at Nyoma village which is 176 kilometer from Leh city. There are 17 Tibetan older person at Nyoma old-age Homes. It has been established for the Tibetan nomads who are scattered in nine villages of Changthang area.

To concludes, Ladakh and Tibet traditionally had a strong joint family system, which ensured the older persons of security, company of family member and necessary care. In most of the families the elderly still live in the loving care of their family. In addition, improved economic conditions, and migration to urban area within Ladakh and outside have

¹⁵Datta, Anupama. 2008. 'Socio-Ethical Issues in the Existing Paradigm of care for the Older Persons: emerging challenges and possible responses' in Chopra et.al (ed.) *Discourses on Aging and Dying*. New Delhi: Sage Publication p 167.

weakened the family support system. An unfortunate result is that elderly now witness unprecedented vulnerability and insecurity. Household and family networks are becoming smaller, adult union are migrating to cities which reduce the opportunities for caregiving of old-age person. The roles and status of family members may changes, but the foundation of family should remain the same. In other words, family members should nurture and cherish with love and affection. Research is necessary on the living conditions of elderly, their problems and needs. Efforts should be made by the government, voluntary agencies, non governmental organization society and individuals to give them more respect, love and care. More efforts are need to strengthen the family ties so that the elders may not only live in their own family but also get proper love, care, respect and protection particularly from their own family members and from society in general.

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