

Living Arrangements and Family Support of Elderly in the Contemporary Society - A Review

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Abstract

India has been experiencing changes in its family system. A system that had provided not only support and care to the elderly for their wellbeing but also had acknowledged their status of authority and decision making is virtually unable to extend the same support and respect to them today because of various reasons. Thus, for voluntary or involuntary reasons, many a time elderly may either left alone or maybe alienated from their children and family despite living with them. This may have a direct bearing on their decision making role, adjustment, and/or life satisfaction. With the declining capacities, increasing age-related debility, anxiety about economic and physical support, fear of death, and bereavement they may pose a challenge to the society which is practically growing apathetic to the elderly. The present paper has attempted to review the available research studies on this aspect of the living arrangements and family support of the elderly. The author has tried to highlight the reasons for their living with or without their children/relatives or the near and dear ones and the consequences there off. Further, it is also attempted to examine the gaps in this area of research and suggest the likely issues which need to be focused on in future research.

Keywords: Living Arrangement, Housing, Nuclear, Modernisation, Industrialisation, Mobility, Family Support, Elderly.

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Introduction

The problem of ageing among the senior citizens has a special significance in contemporary societies. In the traditional society of the past in India, old age was no problem at all. The place of honour traditionally assigned to the elderly in India has been spelt out by religion, social values, norms and socio-economic organizations of the society. However, the Indian family system has been considered as a chief source of support and sustenance for the

elderly. But it is seen to be changing in structure and functions because of industrialisation, urbanisation and occupational mobility. In the new scenario have risen many forms of institutional support but too inadequate to meet the demand. So the basic hurdles and problems of the elderly are various. Although the elderly have traditionally respected, however, in the Indian social structure and value system undergoing changes, social institutions like joint family, caste and village community shedding some roles, economic pressure and high

cost of living confronting the traditional caregivers and weak physical condition of the aged are adversely affecting the aged, ageing possess serious challenges.

Moreover, it is predicted that in the future era the elderly population will subsequently increase. But the bad news is that they are likely to be more vulnerable due to socio-cultural reasons. Therefore, without the safety, security and dignity of status in the family, the elderly are finding themselves vulnerable. Welfare of the elderly has been a low priority with the state. Most hospitals do not have a special geriatric facility. At present most elderly patients are still being treated in general medical wards.

It is of concern that the weakening of traditional informal support systems, both communities and families and the marginalization and elimination of the elderly' social roles is dangerous (Eldermine, 1997). Some researchers have proposed 'Filial Piety' and 'Cultural Script' as appropriate cultural phenomena influencing the support extended to the old parents (Gene-Woong, 2001). Cumming and Henry (1961) in the 'disengagement theory' have held decline in commitment to norms and values as one of the three components accounting for decline in support. Such kind of holistic study about elderly will definitely encourage policy makers to make special support policies to tackle the elderly problems.

The Meaning of Home

Home has been characterized as an essentially private place, which is the centre of domesticity, a place of intimacy and sometimes a place of solitude. Sixsmith and Sixsmith (1991) identifies three themes, which underlie the meanings that older people generally associate with home and which are central to an understanding of home and residential experience in later life.

The first theme is one of homes providing the major focus in life. As people age they become more oriented towards home; it is seen as a refuge and becomes increasingly important as other social roles in later life are relinquished. The second theme highlights the need of elderly people to remain independent of other; they appear more concerned with the instrumental aspects of home. The third theme reflects the attachment that older people have for their homes. The importance of 'memories' is significant, with past associations affective the present experience of home.

Of course, how older individuals perceive home will be influenced by their life careers and how others in society have allowed men and women, and people from different social minorities to relate it to 'home'. There will exist a diversity of such experiences and, therefore, a diversity of perceptions of home.

Change in living arrangements are likely to be associated with changes in the level of care and assistance received by the elderly. Living together with other family members' eases situations of illness while alone makes coping with illness harder. In addition, feeling isolated or left alone may induce illnesses (Borsch-Supan, 1995).

The multifarious dimensions of ageing in India can sociologically be thought to be series of transition from one set of social roles to another and such roles are structured by the social system. Changes in life during old age, which is considered to be sanyas ashram of the Hindu ashram theory, are influenced by the biological as well as the social and cultural systems. However, in recent times, the status and role of the elderly population have been diminished due to the technological development that have colonized the outlook of the youth.

Indian Family System

The Indian family system is thus supportive of age, provides a formal location, a role and a status for the aged in which they are respected, are expected to guide and counsel the young. While no elder individual can escape the physical consequences of ageing in terms of failing health and decreasing physical capacities, he/she is well supported in his/her social, familial status, his/her sense of worth and the sense of being wanted. The status of the elderly within the family seems to be affected by gender differences, rural-urban location and by the degree of economic self-sufficiency of the elder.

Nayar (1996) says that the old are besotted with an important set of problems-fight of young able bodied to distant places for jobs and establishment of household there. Sometimes they take the elderly along with them, but in most cases, the aged are left behind and sometimes they are even forced to destitution. In some states like Kerala, the migration of young is very high, resulting in a crisis of caring for older people. According to Rao (2012), in rural India people are losing their control and authority and are forced to depend on their kin due to migration of sons. There is evidence to suggest that migration of the young is leading to

nucleation of the family and thereby, adversely affecting intergenerational support. The greatest complication for the parents arises when an only child chooses to migrate; even if there are other children, the loss of support can be substantial because it is generally the most dynamic and the most educated of adults who want to migrate.

Caring by the emigrated family is from a distance. Distance, time and expense separate children and parents. This is especially the case, if they have no other children. The parents do not have close interaction with the grandchildren. Visits may be short, infrequent and only when they are able to travel. The elderly may feel insecure that the children may not be able to return in time of emergency. The emotional vacuum the parents face reduces the quality of their life considerably.

Living Arrangement

It is seen that family plays a much lesser role in the country today on account of the structural changes taking place in Indian society and the concomitant disintegration of joint family leading to rejection of the aged (Planning Commission, 1963). Younger couples due to industrialization are displaced and live in nuclear household affecting the daily living of the elderly (Sudha, et.al., 2004). Hence, living arrangement of the elderly originates from the assumption of declining joint family in the Indian society (Rajan, et.al., 1995). There arises the elderly support differentials based on the family constitutional members and their living arrangements. The different living situation causes elderly to be valued most comprehensively (Burch and Mathews, 1987). What consists of the differential treatment of the elderly in variety of living arrangement depends upon the “component” of household goods including physical shelter, personal care, companionship, independency, power and authority (Martin and Perston, 1994). Living arrangements are influenced by variety of factors including marital status, family size, and cultural tradition. The changing household structure translates into a decline in support for the elderly (Muthukrishnaveni, 2010).

With regard to declining support of elderly in transition in living arrangements, studies show that in the living arrangement of houses in relation to elderly problem majority of elderly in rural areas expect to rely on children when they become old (Arnold, 1975), specially mothers are likely to depend on their sons for old age support (Sharma, 2002). Elderly living with family

and living with spouse are the most popular destinations of transition. It also suggests that attitudes toward living arrangements may also be an important factor for other developing countries in analysis of transition in living arrangements. It could be especially true for those countries which traditionally have a favourable attitude toward living with children and recently have experienced a rapid increase in the proportion of living either alone or with spouse only due to structural change (Balamurugan, 2013).

Chakravarty (1998) feels that the family still plays a major role in elderly care, but the sign of change are now becoming more visible. Mohanty (1997) from a study observed that care of the elderly, considered as a sacred duty in the past is breaking down in nuclear families. Due to socio-economic, political, psychological and physical changes coupled with changes in the family system and life style, the aged need specify Medicare besides other support. Case studies from rural areas reflect that, though the joint family system does look after the elderly there are, however, some emerging stresses and strains which in varying degrees, tend to increase the vulnerability of the aged (Upadhyay, 1992). Lakshminarayanan (1993) found that rural aged male are better adjusted and better education is associated with a greater ability to adjust. Female elderly who live in rural areas perhaps lack of social interaction and hence would have poor adjustment in their life widowhood could also be a factor in which social isolation plays a vital role. In addition, there is a negative stereotyped attitude towards older persons.

Kulkarni et. al., (2009) studies the adjustment problems of elderly using the technique of well adjustment inventory. It was found that older people have significantly more adjustment problems in the emotional, social, wealth and home areas than young people. It was also found that among old individuals, the non-working persons had more adjustment problems in the home area than the working persons. On the whole, the findings indicate that engagement in some purposeful and productive takes contributed significantly to old age adjustment.

Family support

The strength of family support cannot always be measured by the frequency of co-residence or of contact within the family. Rather, the strength lies in the ties of obligation and affection, bound in custom and social processes. For instance,

frequent contact between the generations in the same household can co-exist with a lower level of satisfaction for the elderly, most likely as a result of the lower socio-economic status associated with the multigenerational household. Emotional support, requiring longstanding trust and involvement between intimate persons, may be most universal kind of support rendered among family members regardless of living arrangement.

The kind of support that is affected most by residential separation in most countries is instrumental support. Modest assistance with the tasks of daily living potentially can be provided through private purchase, non-resident family support, or community services. However, when needs are intense and continuous care is required, there is little alternative to co-resident support, either in the home or in an institutional setting.

The underlying importance of family support for the elderly remains true across the countries though manifested and extended differently. Wherever the family persists, family support persists even if it is not always fully adequate and available for all older people. Families play important roles in providing financial, practical and emotional support.

Changes in the family support are more often predicted in the third world. Rapid changes in the structure of the economy, occupation, and education are inducing change in family size, location and geographical proximity. While changes in the family structure also mould changes in family support, the much-lamented "disintegration of the family" is neither a necessity nor a re-determined outcome, if adaptations to change are made appropriately and successfully.

In the recent past there have been marked changes in the living arrangements of elderly people, which have been associated with economic and behavioural changes. It is important to remember that there are also age-related changes in the circumstances of individual elderly people over time; longitudinal studies have shown that later life is often marked by changes in both household circumstances and location. Greater residential independence, especially in the context of an ageing elderly population, implies a greater demand for formal health and welfare services; greater pressure on the housing market and a greater incentive for the providers of public and private goods and services to take account of the needs of single persons and other small households. However, the age-specific prevalence of widowhood and childlessness is currently failing slightly and there are some suggestions that the pace of change in

living arrangements may also be showing in the longer term, changing patterns of family formation, fission and reconstitution.

A changing household structure is a most prominent socio-economic change with important implications for the elderly. The extended or joint family system has been the traditional basis of support for the elderly in most societies. Under the impact of modernization and increasing independence from the traditional family occupation, more and more siblings are moving away from the base family to distant places of work. Consequently, the nuclear family has become the norm in the present day context. Decline in family size has also contributed to this phenomenon.

These changes have also affected the living arrangements of the elderly. It is obvious that under the impact of increasing "nuclearization" of the families brought about by a reducing family size and the migration of siblings to distant places of work, the immediate family support for the elderly may further weaken.

Dependency among the Elderly

To maintain self-respect and status, one should not be economically dependent on others, and should have some personal income. Income flows from assets, past savings, pensions and gainful work. Some activities such as household work though may be supportive and hence very necessary, do not yield independent income. In India, assets, past savings and pensions account for income only in respect of a few. It is the gainful work, which is a source of income for a vast majority.

Discussion

The force of modernisation, technological change, mobility and the explosion in the later transmission of knowledge are making changes in the life style and values to adjust to the changing circumstances. Individuals and modernity, which sometimes lead to ambivalence in attitude towards the use of the knowledge and experience of the past in solving problems of the present, tend to make old people feel less valued.

The shortage of housing accommodation in the cities and high rentals act as a severe constraint in common residence of the aged with their sons, particularly for migrant families. The migration of younger people increases the vulnerability of the old who stay behind, particularly for families,

which do not have independent production assets such as land, livestock or household industry and are dependent primarily on their labour. Increasing employment of women outside the home in offices and in factories implies that they can spend less time for taking care of the older members, especially those who required constant care. Further, the relatively independent status acquired by a white-collar women worker, who has her own career and aspirations, sometimes leads to demand on the husband for setting up a separate nuclear family.

There is now a great investment by the family on education and upbringing of children, which affects the intra-family distribution of income in favour of the younger generation. The joint family system, an important sustaining factor of which is the common ownership of the means of production, is gradually breaking down. This has increased the vulnerability of the old, particularly those with no children or immediate kin, as there is lesser readiness in discharging long-term social obligations towards such members.

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