

## A SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF ELDERLY PEOPLE IN THE RURAL SETTING OF WEST BENGAL

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### ABSTRACT

The demographic profile of rural and small towns has changed rapidly and significantly in recent decades. The continued out-migration of increasingly educated young adults, and the growing numbers of retirees, have resulted in rural communities where residents are older, more diverse, and more likely to be female than in the recent past. These changes have transformed rural economies and as a result a number of old age homes are developing to cater to the needs of the aged. Without, diminishing the idea of old age homes to a negative expression, the researcher seeks to find out the perception of the idea of old age homes in the rural and small towns of West Bengal and how the aged people feels that they help to maintain meaningful social roles, recognition, inclusion and mending of the quality of life for them. With such a backdrop the study aims to develop an insight about elderly people living in their own homes, their problems and their perceptual understanding of the idea of living at old age homes in rural settings in Midnapore. Accordingly data were collected on 60 elderly people (Males and Females) residing in West Midnapore District of West Bengal through interview method. Findings suggest that the elderly respondents living in their own homes either with their family or alone have different idea and opinion. Those who are living alone feels isolated and lonely and miss their children, but their lives are not miserable. They can retain some identity of their own and have an identity. Contrarily, those who are living with their families are becoming constant victims of day to day conflicts within the family and losing their peace of mind.

Key Words: rural elderly, rural communities, quality of life, out-migration, identity

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### Introduction

Ageing is a significant phenomenon throughout the world. The overall population of India is rapidly increasing and the number of people who are entering the 60+ age group is increasing even faster. According to the United Nations projected age structure of population for 2010 (UN, 2008 revision), India was expected to have a total of over 91.6 million persons aged 60 and above (Alam and Karan, 2011). It is expected to be the second largest population of older adults in the world after China. According to the 1991 Census, the population of the elderly in India was 56.7 million, which increased from 26 million in 1961; it indicates a doubling of the elderly population in the last thirty years. The 1991 Census also specified that 6.58 per cent of the total population belonged to the elderly segment. This section has been increased to 7.4 per cent in 2001 and is expected to reach 9.87 per cent by the year 2021 (Deccan Herald, Nov 2009). The needs of the elderly are undergoing changes and the problems faced by them are becoming steadily visible day by day. Out of the total elderly population of India, a considerable number of the aged reside in rural areas.

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Indian economy as well as Indian society is passing through a phase of extensive change since the time of independence. The steady transformation of Indian Economy from an agriculture based economy to an Industrial growth has not only led to economic development of the country but also an alteration in the social profile and mental make-up of the people including the elderly people. Processes of modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, changes in ideology, have transformed the outlook of the younger generation and have led to a growth of their individual autonomy and decision making ability which has changed their perceptions as well.

The traditional joint family pattern of the Indian society is changing and the situations of the aged are deteriorating. The values of the Indian society make it obligatory for the younger generations to look after the elderly persons, but the changing socio-economic scenario is making the elderly population vulnerable. The status accorded to the elderly previously has been gradually receding. The disintegration of the joint family system, changes in the value pattern, migration of a large number of young people from rural areas to urban areas, increase in the participation of women in paid employment has led to the prospect of the younger generation with an increased alienation and marginalisation of the older people.

The traditional Indian society and the age-old joint family system have been helpful in protection of the social and economic security of the elderly people. But, with the fast changes in the social situations and the emergence of the incidence of nuclear family set-ups in India in recent years the elderly people are likely to be exposed to various insecurities in the years to come. At the level of central and state governments, policy makers, administrators, voluntary organizations, civil society are becoming attentive towards the needs of the elderly persons (Situation Analysis Report).

Taking a note of the current scenario, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India proposed to adopt 'National Policy on Older Persons' in January, 1999. The policy offers comprehensive guidelines to State Governments for formulating their own policies and plans of action. The policy defines 'senior citizen' as a person who is 60 years old or above. It attempts to guarantee well-being of senior citizens and improve quality of their lives by providing specific facilities and services and helping them adjust with problems associated with old age. It also proposes that, action on the part of Government Departments must be undertaken and it must ensure that the existing public services for senior citizens are user friendly and accommodative to their needs. It provides a holistic picture of various facilities and covers many areas like finance, health, accommodation, education, protection of the life of the elderly etc. (Situation Analysis of The Elderly in India, 2011). This is a significant step taken forward by the Government to ensure the well-being of the most experienced citizens of the nation. In many situations, the elderly are being neglected and abandoned by their family members. The National Policy for Older Persons 1999 mentioned that although in India a large numbers of older parents live with their sons and are supported by them, but, because of operation of several forces, positions of a large number of older persons has become vulnerable. Due to shortage of housing space and high rents of living in urban areas, the migrators, prefer to leave their parents in their native place. In India, a large number of those who have attained the age of 60 years have worked in organised sector and get pension and other retirement benefits. But for those who are not covered by pension plan, Government of India and state governments provide very nominal old-age pension coverage. Also elderly people require some additional benefits as their health related problems increases and their medical expenses goes up at old age, and their physical, mental and economic dependency on children or relative also increases. In the National Policy Statement of National Policy on Older Persons' 1999, which is under revision the older persons were ensured opportunities and share in development benefits, and different development programmes and administrative actions should reflect sensitivity in older persons who are living in rural areas.

This has prompted the Government, different non-governmental organisation and researchers to consider the issues of old age.

Industrialisation and urbanisation tend to make family care of the elderly more problematic with the change in the locale of production from land based resources to factory or workshops. The increased participation of women in the labour force and declining fertility rates also reduces the care which was earlier available to the elderly. Moreover, industrialisation resulted in rural to urban migration and it has created a separation between the two generations. (Rao, 2007).

Industrialisation process changes the family structure. Functional thinker, Talcott Parsons noted that, in pre-industrial societies, there was the prevalence of extended family structure in which family members for generations lived in same location. In Industrialised societies, nuclear form of family is prevalent which consists only of husband wife and their children (Blacksacademy, 2004). Families and children reaching adulthood are more mobile and they tend to relocate to where jobs exist.

### **Rationale of the Study**

With the aforesaid backdrop the researcher delved to explore the situation of rural elderly of West Midnapore district of West Bengal, to see how the situations of rural elderly are different from the urban elderly and how far industrialisation and urbanisation has created an impact on their life as well as to investigate their perception of old age home living. **Objectives**

1. To analyse the nature of problems faced by elderly people living in family setting in West Midnapore district of West Bengal.
2. To assess the understanding of these elderly people about the idea of staying in old age homes.

### **Method of study:**

This research paper has been written on the basis of secondary information produced by different authors and researchers have been used. For obtaining information, relevant books, journals as well as websites have been explored by the researcher which has been mentioned in the reference section. Also a sample study on 60 elderly people was conducted to gather an empirical view.

**Area:** - Midnapore district is a district of West Bengal which was divided into East and West Midnapore in the year 2002. West Midnapore is one of the most backward districts of the country. It has a total population of 5,943,300 population (2011, Census). This district has a high literacy rate in the state which is 79.04% (Wikipedia). Economically West Midnapore is mainly agrarian, but nowadays engagement in agricultural occupations is receding and the younger generations are enrolling in schools, colleges and university in increasing number. Many people in this semi-rural society are engaged in various office jobs and the younger generations are also opting for these jobs. Since the distance and transportation facility between Midnapore town and nearby urban areas and state capital Kolkata is not much, migration to these places for education or job opportunities frequently takes place. This study was conducted among elderly people (males and females) staying with their families and staying alone in West Midnapore district of West Bengal.

**Sample, Tool and selection criteria:** - A total of 60 elderly persons (26 males and 34 females) living in their own homes or in their children's home were interviewed on the basis of purposive non probability sampling. They were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule containing both open and close ended questions. They were all above 65 years of age when they participated in the survey.

**Data Collection:** - Data were collected on the basis of face to face interviewing by visiting the respondents.

### **Results and Discussion:**

The findings are based on limited observations and are mainly focused to show the nature of problems faced by rural elderly and how the idea of old age homes is perceived by the rural elderly. It aims to show what exists in the field but it does not exclude those who have not been covered in this study.

#### **Elderly people in rural setting of West Bengal**

Ageing is a natural phenomenon and it knows no barrier. It does not consider urban or rural space. The change in the Indian economic structure with the increase of the output composition of the country with a shift from primary to secondary and tertiary sectors and shrinking of the agricultural sector has significant impact on the social structure of the rural areas. The educational attainment of the students in rural areas is increasing speedily and students going for higher education are growing even further. This reflects in the occupational choices of the rural youth. The reduction in the jobs in the agrarian economy is accompanied by an increase in the expansion of service sector occupations. These jobs are mostly concentrated in the urban areas which consequently are giving rise to a migration of rural youth from rural to urban locations.

The elderly people were mostly left behind in the rural areas to look after the house or their land in the village, high accommodation expense and space shortage in the urban area, reluctance of the elderly to leave their roots are some of the reasons why residents in the rural areas are mostly aged.

**Table -1: Showing Elderly males and females on the basis of their demographic profile**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Male (N=26) No.(%)</b>	<b>Female (N=34) No.(%)</b>	<b>Total (N=60) No.(%)</b>
<b>65-69</b>	8 (30.77)	10 (29.41)	18 (30)
<b>70-74</b>	14 (53.85)	16 (47.06)	30 (50)
<b>75and above</b>	4 (15.38)	8 (23.53)	12 (20)
<b>Educational Qualification</b>			
<b>Illiterate</b>	2 (7.69)	4 (11.75)	6 (10)
<b>Primary</b>	3 (11.54)	8 (23.53)	11 (18.33)
<b>Secondary</b>	6 (23.08)	16 (47.05)	22 (36.67)
<b>Graduation</b>	14 (53.85)	6 (17.67)	20 (33.33)
<b>Post-Graduation and above</b>	1 (3.84)	0	1 (1.67)
<b>Marital Status</b>			
<b>Married</b>	12 (46.16)	17 (50)	29 (48.33)
<b>Unmarried</b>	4 (15.38)	2 (5.88)	6 (10)
<b>Widow/widower</b>	10 (38.46)	14 (41.17)	24 (40)
<b>Divorce/ Separated</b>	0	1 (2.95)	1 (1.67)
<b>Family Setting</b>			
<b>Nuclear family setting</b>	12 (46.16)	18 (52.94)	30 (50)
<b>Joint family setting</b>	8 (30.77)	13 (38.24)	21 (35)
<b>Living alone</b>	6 (23.07)	3 (8.82)	9 (15)

Table 1 shows the social and demographic profile of the elderly people who were interviewed. In this study, 30.77% male and 29.41% females are in the age group 65-69 years, 53.85% male and 47.46% female are in the age category 70-74 years, 15.38% male and 2.53% female belong to the 75 years and above age category. It can be seen from the table that, 53.85% male elderly are graduate and 47.05% female elderly have secondary education. Most of the elderly (46.16% male and 50% female) are married, 15.38% male and 5.88% female are unmarried and 38.46% male and 41.17% female are widow/ widower. Out of the 60 elderly persons who were

interviewed in various parts of West Midnapore district of West Bengal, 50 per cent of the respondents stayed in nuclear family settings comprising of son, daughter in law and grandchildren. This growing trend of nuclear families was at times creating problems in the ability of the aged to cope with their changing circumstances. A majority 40 per cent of the elders have both sons and daughters, and 30 per cent has only son and 20 per cent has only daughter and 10 per cent has no children.

**Table - 2: Distribution of Elderly Person's on The Basis of their Economic Need Satisfaction**

Means of meeting the economic needs	Male N-26 No.(%)	Female N-34 No.(%)	Total N-60 No.(%)
Pension	9 (34.62%)	4 (11.76%)	13 (21.67%)
Children or other family members	10 (38.46%)	27 (79.41%)	37(61.67 %)
Savings	7 (26.92%)	3 (8.83%)	10(16.66 %)
Total	26 (100%)	34 (100%)	60 (100%)

Table-2 revealed that, (34.62% males and 11.76% females) receive pension, which somewhat reduces their economic insecurity. Out of the total elderly respondents, a majority (38.46% males and 79.41% females) depend on their children and (26.92% males and 8.83% females) depend on their life time savings for meeting their economic needs.

The most imposing problem faced by the rural elderly in their twilight years is economic problem. Most of the elderly people do not have any steady source of income. Many do not have pension or other sources of income. To fulfil certain obligations of daily life, they need finance and they need to depend on others and this sometimes creates humiliation and it gives rise to hurt self-esteem. Apart from these, the elderly people have a constant expense on their health requirements. Some of the elderly people finds it difficult to perform normal functioning of daily life like bathing and going to toilet and are at times scolded by their family members badly. While those who were not staying with family members were helped by some neighbour or domestic help in these tasks.

In a study by Debdulal Dutta Roy ( 2004) in the district of Nadia in rural West Bengal, it was found that a large number of people (66%) expressed desire to die and this desire was strongly related to meaningless feeling and negative self-image. Meaningless feeling occurs among elders due to inadequate financial condition, role shrinkage obsolescence, less control over his family affairs and over his health. Negative self-image occurs due to changes in looks and likability and a feeling that others alienate elderly people. These can be remedied and prevented through individual and community intervention.

A common psychological problem of the elderly people is loneliness. Interaction and presence of family members gives immense mental support to the elderly people and they feels wanted. Elderly people who are staying with their family members do not feel physically lonely. But few of them said that, they rarely interact with their family members as they remain busy with their own work and don't have the time to interact. But some others said that, they interact with their family members often. The elderly people whose children do not stay with them either due to work needs or daughters getting married, said that they do feel lonely, without their own family with

them, few have lost their spouses and with loosing the physical ability to work or do any household chores anymore their days seem not to pass.

In a study on rural elderly in Singur Block of Hoogly district of West Bengal, Maulik and Dasgupta (2012) cited that economic development and the changing family structure was making the elderly population feel insignificant within the household. They were starting to feel lonely and depressed. They also suggested that depression was higher among females than males and illiteracy, lack of income, economic dependence on other members were determinants of depression. With change in social structure in rural areas the study highlighted the necessity of conducting mental health programmes for the elderly people.

### Decision Making Ability of the Elderly

Consultation with the elderly parents regarding various matters by the children is an indication of the status of the old people and the importance accorded to them by their family members. It has been seen, majority as many as 42 respondents, said that their decisions were not given due importance in family or their opinions were not asked for in the family matters. And the rest 12 respondents, who said that their decisions were given importance, were mainly those who were living alone, or it was only regarding their own matters that the children paid heed to their decisions. The elderly respondents also said that even if their decisions were asked for, the advices given by them were ignored and not followed by the children. Only 6 respondents felt that they were given respect in the family and their opinions were taken into consideration.

Old age can be broadly characterised by time-altered changes in an individual's biological, psychological and health related capabilities and its implications for the consequent changes in the individual's role in the economy and the society (Irudaya Rajan and Misra, 1995). This immediately implies that there are a vast number of issues that call for an attentive focus and the most important recurring issue is the health care of the elderly population. The care given to the ailed or sick person during this time is very critical for them to recover.

**Table-3: Shows the Extent of Health care and Medicine Received by the elderly in Family Settings**

Extent of health care and medicine received at family	Males and Females N-60 No.(%)
Health Care and medicine received	52 (86.67%)
Health Care and medicine not received	4(6.67%)
Health care and medicine received at times	4(6.67%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>60 (100%)</b>

Table 3 highlighted that 52 respondents (86.67%) said they received health care and treatment, but 8 respondents said that they do not receive any treatment or health care or received it at times. This is because, they were staying alone in their home and with none to look after them or take them for treatment of their illness.

Qualitative data highlighted that, the children who are staying far away calls them at regular intervals and inquire about their health. But to them, it is just a routine call which they make. Physical touch, contact and presence of the children make the elderly people comfortable and happy mentally. Those who are staying at home they are in more contact as they live with their

offspring. Some of the elderly respondents feel that if they stay at old age homes, they would get a routine of their daily life, some work, some rest, interaction with peers, which they feel would give them meaningful social roles, dignity and some sense of identity. They could stay in company of other peers. With age, one expects respect from others and people around them. Humiliation and suffering makes them depressed, frustrated and lonelier.

### **Understanding of the elderly people about the idea of staying in old age homes**

The elderly people who were interviewed were all staying with their family or alone. They were asked to opine about the idea of staying in Old Age Homes. The elderly people were mainly unsure about how they would feel if they have to stay in Old Age Homes. But they were able to give some reasons why it is preferable to stay in Old Age Homes rather than with their family. The kinds of conflicts which the elderly people face at home are mainly family issues like the mismatch between their way of life and the youth's way of life. The elderly persons sometime did not understand the demands and needs of the contemporaneous times and this gave rise to difference of opinions between them. Financial matter was another reason for which conflict took place between the family members. The elderly people felt left out, unwanted giving rise to social isolation that created a sense of burdensomeness and they would prefer to opt for old age home living. Some others were staying alone at home since their children were not in town due to work or they are widowed or unmarried and so they prefer going to an old age home with the hope of finding some social peers. Not everyone wants to leave their home and opt for old age homes, but it is their perception of the idea of old age home. The reasons which they gave for opting Old Age homes are mainly to get relief from tensions and dilemmas, also there is no space for the older members at home with the coming of new members in the family. Many of the elderly people said that there was no one to look after them at home and they were unable to stay alone at their own residence since all the family members are busy with their own work. Moreover, the children and the grandchildren were finding it difficult to adjust with the parents and grandparents.

### **Conclusion**

The study revealed that the problems which the elderly usually encountered were – economic problems, problem of loneliness, health, how to utilise the free time available, social security, social participation, dignity, respect and so on. Since the old people perceived that they were not useful and were like a burden to the family, children, society, it caused a lot of unhappiness.

The elderly people are constantly living in domestic conflicts, mental abuse, feeling of burdensomeness and they feels that living in old age homes would give them peace of mind. They accept old age homes positively, as a place where they would be able to live peacefully, in the company of other elderly persons. However, they feel strong ties or bond with their family and their roots at their homes. The elderly persons also felt that it is desirable to live with one's own family although they did not perceptually retain their previous position or hold in the family and remained on the whims and dictates of their sons and daughters. They are denied a dignified living and are in constant humiliations from their own children and they are unable to retain their own identity.

The values of Indian society emphasises showing respect and providing care for the aged and consequently, the aged are usually taken care of by the members of the family itself. But growing individualism and desire of the independence and autonomy of the young generation (Serow 2001) affects the status of these elderly along with the demographic and sociocultural change. The process of ageing is always accompanied by a decline in the wellbeing of the human beings that results in the rising economic, health and social insecurity among the aged. The aged generally suffer from economic dependency, physical immobility and insecurity in the form of access to health care and also from social isolation.

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Studies across the globe (World Bank, 1994, Steyn 2000, Bradshaw, 2006) and the present study have revealed that researchers need to delve into the elderly in rural background to pinpoint the predicaments, deprivations and discriminations.

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