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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STATUS OF OLD AGED PERSON IN INDIA - A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE

*Janhavi M. Zanje

Panchavati, NASHIK 422003, India

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the honorable status of the elderly in various religions in India. With changes in the traditional practices of supporting the elderly and their rapidly growing numbers, this could become a serious social problem in coming days, particularly so far the families in urban areas. India like many other developing countries in the world is witnessing the rapid aging of its population. Urbanization, modernization and globalization have led to change in the economic structure, the erosion of societal values, weakening of social values, and social institution such as the joint family. In this changing economic and social milieu, the younger generation is searching for new identities encompassing economic independence and redefined social roles within, as well as outside, the families. The changing economic structure has reduced the dependence of rural families on land which has provided strength to bonds between generations. The traditional sense of duty and obligation of the younger generation towards their older generation is being eroded. The older generation it's caught between the decline in traditional values on one hand and the absence of adequate social security system on the other.

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INTRODUCTION

Old age is an indispensable stage of life of a human being which a man cannot refute except untimely death. The childhood and old age are natural reliant conditions of life where children depend on parents and vice versa. The concept of nuclear family and influence of western civilization affected this usual cycle resulting in misbalance of the normal life of elderly people by defeating thousand years old practice of India where parents are treated as a pious obligation or pious form of God. Old age had never been a problem for India where a value- based joint family system is supposed to prevail. Indian culture is automatically respectful and supportive of elders. Ageing as a natural phenomenon has all along engaged the attention of the civilized world. Provision for the aged in the society has become one of the constitutive themes of our modern welfare state. The problems of the aged vary from society to society and have many dimensions in our country. However, the disintegration of the joint family system and the impact of economic change have brought into sharp focus the peculiar problems which the old people now face in our country. And in the traditional sense, the duty and obligation of the younger generation towards the older generation is being eroded.

The older generation is caught between the decline in traditional values on one hand and the absence of an adequate social security system on the other hand thus, finding it difficult to adjust in the family. Nowadays, the parents are becoming burdensome for their child whenever they losses their strength to work and earn that's why laws in all sphere have come to restore the preexisting value based principles to protect the interest of old age person.

Traditional societies and status of old age in the world

The magnitude of Elder Abuse is not known but various studies have given various estimates. In a report published by National Center on Elder Abuse, the best available estimates say that between 1 and 2 million older Americans have been injured, exploited, or otherwise mistreated by someone on whom they depended for care or protection. According to research report of National center for social Research, in UK, approximately 0.34 million older people were subject to some form of mistreatment in the last one year. Many traditional societies of the past considered family harmony to be an important factor governing family relationships. This reverence for the family was reinforced by philosophical traditions and public policy. In Chinese society it was embedded in a value system that stressed "filial piety". Mistreatment of older people was unrecognized and certainly unreported. These traditions are still influential today.

Studies in the United States of attitudes toward older abuse revealed that citizens of Korean origin believed in the primacy of family harmony over individual well being as a yardstick for determining whether a particular behavior was regarded as abusive or not. Similarly people of Japanese origin considered the "group" to be paramount, and that an individual's wellbeing should be sacrificed for the good of the group. In some traditional societies older widows are abandoned and their property seized. Mourning rites of passage for widows in parts of Africa and India include practices that elsewhere would certainly be considered cruel, for example sexual violence, forced levirate marriages and expulsion from their homes. In some places accusations of witchcraft, often connected events on the local community such as a death or crop failure, are directed at isolated, older women. In sub-Saharan Africa, accusations of the practice of witchcraft have driven many older women from their homes and their communities to live in poverty in urban areas. In the United Republic of Tanzania, an estimated 500 older women accused of witchcraft are murdered every year. These acts of violence have become firmly entrenched as social customs and may not be considered locally as "elder abuse".

Situation in India

In the context of the changing demographic scene and social values, the situations of the elderly in Indian society as becoming more critical and of late abuse and neglect of the elderly in the family context especially is emerging as a significant problem. The traditional norms and values of Indian society laid stress on giving respect and taking care of older persons. The family has traditionally fulfilled the needs of the elderly in respect to social, psychological and economic security. In turn the elderly have contributed acquired wisdom, accumulated wealth and maintained family harmony. In other words, this relationship has been symbiotic. Such a system of mutual support however, is facing headwinds in a modern day society. Assessing the impact of the forthcoming social changes on the status of older persons, many experts apprehended that the transitions from an agrarian to an urbanized society would certainly worsen the plight of older persons. Hence the older persons face innumerable problems to adjust to, in varying degrees. These problems range from absence of income to physical dependence and loss of social role and recognition.

Today's problems of the elderly

Though aging is the natural stage of human life, it brings with it innumerable problems for the people who have grown old. There are some major problems of the aged in the lights of the findings from various studies is explained below.

1) Economic problems – as far as economic problems are concerned, they are very basic to all the other problems faced by the aged. With superannuation, a person has to retire from the service, which not only results in loss of employment and social status but also a substantial reduction in his income level. Majority of the elderly face acute financial problems, which makes older persons economically insecure.

- 2) Physiological problems – with growing age, older persons experience various anatomical and physiological changes. This changes bring many psychological, behavioral and attitudinal changes in them. Consequently, they have to suffer varied sorts of psychological problems such as loss of physical strength and stamina, which become more acute as a person grows older.
- 3) Housing related problems – Housing for the aged should be suitable not only to the living pattern which they have established in optimum health, but also to conditions of failing health and illness, commonly associated with later years of life such as failing eye sights and hearing, slowing and unsureness of step, diminishing energy and more acute disabilities such as blindness, forgetfulness etc. on this pattern, the housing available to a majority of the senior citizens may be found inappropriate and unsuitable to their requirement. The sizable populations of older widows as well as the older males have been facing the problems of "where to lives peacefully".
- 4) Problems of the Elder Abuse – Elder abuse is usually defined as any ill treatment to an older person. It refers to as older to "infliction of physical, emotional or psychological harm on an older adult." Some of the elderly persons face the problem of verbal abuse some face neglect followed by material abuse and physical abuse.

Elder abuse

The definition developed by Action on Elder Abuse in the United Kingdom and adopted by the International Network for the prevention of Elder Abuse states that: "Elder Abuse is a single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person." Such abuse is generally divided into the following categories:

- Physical abuse- the infliction of pain or injury, physical coercion, or physical or drug induced restraint.
- Psychological or emotional abuse – the infliction of mental anguish.
- Financial or material abuse- the illegal or improper exploitation or use of funds or resources of the older person.
- Sexual abuse – non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with the older person.
- Neglect- the refusal or failure to fulfill a care giving conscious and intentional attempts to inflict physical or emotional distress on the older person.

Religious aspect of oldaged in India

All religions and all societies in India have given parents an honorable status. From a purely material view point, we find ourselves indebted to our parents, particularly our mother. She not only nourished us in her womb, but went through pain and suffering. She loved us even before we were born. She toiled when we were totally helpless infants. She spent sleepless nights caring for us. Our parents as team provided for all our needs: physical, educational, psychological, and in many instances religious, moral and spiritual. Our indebtedness to our parents is so immense that it is not possible to repay it

fully. In lieu of this, it becomes obligatory for us to show the utmost kindness, respect, and obedience to our parents. In following passages Researcher have explain general and comparative sources of religious aspect of old aged or parents in various religions:

Hinduism

“The father is the physical form of the Lord of creatures, the mother is the physical form of the Earth....The trouble that a mother and father endure in giving birth to human beings cannot be redeemed even in hundred years. He should constantly do what pleases the two of them..... [The Laws of Manu, 2:226]

“This earth is my mother and I am the son of this earth”... [Atharva Veda, 12-1-12]

Both of these sources shows human beings should respect their mother and father.

Our Shashtra's have always been raised the status of a mother to the level of Goddess. The first thing that a child is taught is respect for the mother and father. For children, the parents are therefore divine. This concept of respect for mother and father is extended to other natural phenomena which provide sustenance for life. For example- Rivers are worshiped as mother, the cow provider of milk, is worshipped as mother. Similarly the earth is treated as mother and is respected. Hindus consider the service of one's parents to be a pious and divine duty and preventing any one from carrying that duty is considered to be a sinful act. The story of Shraavan kumar, who was dedicated to serve his parents, is often recited.

Cultural perspective and social interaction in Hinduism

Aged in India has been highly regarded since the earliest times of Indian history. Teachings of Hinduism strongly emphasize the concept of filial piety along with a moral responsibility to take care of one's parents in old age. Hindus are expected to venerate and worship their ancestors ritualistically. A period of "shradhs" among Hindus is set aside each year to engage in such rituals to perpetuate the memory and remembrance of the deceased parents. If one worships their ancestors, they are blessed and prosper in their chosen profession or business. The family and kinship ties in India are intense, emotional and socially obligatory. There is deep respect for age and honorific titles such as *bapu*, *aapa*, *ji hazur*, *abba*, *bajuarg*, *mata*, *dad*/, *chachi* and many other titles are used every day in addressing the elderly. A frail and elderly person is given hand in public places to cross the street or walking up a staircase. People willingly give up their seats for the elderly in buses, railway compartments and other modes of transportation. If one refuses to do so, the public brings guilt and shame upon the person. Such kind of behavior interaction in everyday life has great relevance for the position and reverence accorded to the aged in India. Traditionally an Indian family in rural areas consists of more than three generations sharing economic activities and living under the same roof. The patriarch of such a joint family has the absolute authority and makes all the major decisions, from choosing a bride for an unmarried son to permitting

another son to enter a profession of his choice. Sons when they get married bring their wives to this joint household. The matriarch does not have similar authority; nonetheless, she exercises a great control over the matters of hearth and home. All daughters-in-law are expected to pay homage as well as be obedient to her. Any violation of such family norms could result in humiliation, disrespect, or denouncing of the daughter-in-law. The patriarch seldom interferes in the affairs of the women in the household and segregated sex roles are maintained between sexes. Even today both in the urban and rural areas majority of the families are managed by a patriarch. If and when a joint family grows very large or the patriarch dies, the family will divide itself among several households headed by each brother. The surviving parent could choose to live alone, as some do; but majority of the choose to move with one of their favourite sons. These brothers start their new joint families and the process of formation and fission continues. Seldom does one think or plan setting up a conjugal household in the typical Western sense.

In a joint family everyone is not hard working or successful in their endeavors. By the efforts of those who are energetic and able, the older parents as well as less capable kin are supported with a sense of moral obligation, religious duty and filial piety. By doing so one is able to perform both the Dharma and Karma expected of all Hindus transgressing a cycle of births and rebirths in this world. Reluctance to take over such obligations or perform them according to the social norms could result in invisible, unexpected and sometime heart wrenching consequences such as severe illness, birth of a handicap child, injury to one's self, destruction of a valuable possession, or severe mental anguish. There are overwhelming cultural compulsions if one do not take care of elderly parents or kin.

Islam – The position of parents, and the mutual obligations and responsibilities, have been addressed in Islam in great detail. The Qur'anic commandments as well as the sayings of Prophet Muhammad guide us in this matter. The parent child code of behaviors in Islam is unique, since rules were laid down by divine command. Reference to parents has been made at least 15 times in the Holy Qur'an. There are numerous traditions of the prophet Muhammad on this subject. Researchers first quote some of the Qur'anic verses here:

“And We have enjoined upon man concerning his parents - His mother beareth him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years - Give thanks unto Me and unto thy parents. Unto Me is the journeying. (14) But if they strive with thee to make thee ascribe unto Me as partner that of which thou hast no knowledge, then obey them not. Consort with them in the world kindly, and follow the path of him who repenteth unto Me. Then unto Me will be your return, and I shall tell you what ye used to do - (15) [Luqman31]

According to the above verse, gratitude to God and to parents go hand in hand. Gratitude to God is incomplete without showing gratitude to one's parents. Since being grateful to God is a form of ibadah (worship) which earns heavenly rewards, it can therefore be said that being grateful to one's parents also earns heavenly rewards.

Thy Lord hath decreed, that ye worship none save Him, and (that ye show) kindness to parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age with thee, say not "Fie" unto them nor repulse them, but speak unto them a gracious word. (23) And lower unto them the wing of submission through mercy, and say: My Lord! Have mercy on them both as they did care for me when I was little. (24) [Al-Isra 17]

And serve Allah. Ascribe no thing as partner unto Him. (Show) kindness unto parents, and unto near kindred, and orphans, and the needy, and unto the neighbour who is of kin (unto you) and the neighbour who is not of kin, and the fellow-traveller and the wayfarer and (the slaves) whom your right hands possess. Lo! Allah loveth not such as are proud and boastful, (36) [An-Nisa 4]

Thus, God has enjoined on us to show kindness, respect, and humility to our parents. We are commanded to do this, even though they may have injured us. The only exception to the above command is made in the following verse

We have enjoined on man kindness to parents; but if they strive to make thee join with Me that of which thou hast no knowledge, then obey them not. Unto Me is your return and I shall tell you what ye used to do. (8) [Al-Ankaboot 29]

Some of the traditions of Prophet Muhammad and of the learned members of his family, about our responsibilities toward our parents are quoted here:

"Paradise lies under the feet of the mother."

"God's pleasure is in the pleasure of the father, and God's displeasure is in the displeasure of the father."

"He who wishes to enter Paradise through its best door must please his parents."

"It is a pity that some people may not attain Paradise, on account of not serving their old parents."

"If a person looks with love at his parents, God writes in his favor the reward equal to the performance of one Hajj."

[Someone asked, "will this promise be good if one looks at his parents one hundred times a day?" The Holy Prophet (pbuh) replied, "even if one does so a hundred thousand times a day, God gives the reward accordingly."]

"A man or woman is bound to be good to his or her parents, even though they may have injured him or her."

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (r.a.), the great-great-grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have quoted Imam 'Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) that, "disobedience to parents is a major sin." He also stated that, "if a person looks at the face of his or her parents with wrathful eyes, despite the fact that injustice was done to him or her by the parents, his or her salah (prayer) will not be accepted by God."

According to one of the Hadith-e-Qudsi, the following is reported about the status of parents:

"God has commanded that if anybody prays equal to the invocations performed by the prophets, such prayers will do no good if that person has been cursed by his or her parents."

It has also been related that the very first words which have been written on the Lauh-e-Mahfuz (The Heavenly Preserved Tablet) are:

"I am God, and there is no deity except Me. I am pleased with those with whom their parents are pleased, and I am displeased with those with whom their parents are displeased." Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said: "On the Day of Judgment, my person will not be seen by those who drank liquor, those who on hearing my name did not invoke the blessings of God on me, or those who were cursed and disowned by their parents."

'Ali ibn al-Husain (may Allah be pleased with him) is reported to have said: "The right of your mother on you is that you should know that nobody could endure the trouble and the conditions under which she protected you and nourished you with the juice of her life, and tried with her heart and soul to satisfy all your needs in relation to hunger, thirst, dress, etc. She passed sleepless nights, suffering anxieties. She provided you with shelter against heat and cold, and protected you from ailments. It is not possible for you to compensate her, or thank her enough for all the services, except that God may give you guidance for that. The right of your father on you is that you should know that it is he who brought you into existence, and you are a branch of the tree of his life."

According to a reliable tradition, it is related that a man came to Prophet Muhammad and asked him to whom he should render kindness. The prophet told him to be kind to his mother. Three times he put the same question to the prophet, and three times he got the same answer. When he asked the question the fourth time, he was told to be kind to his father, indicating that the mother's right took precedence over that of the father. Parents' duties: Islam has assigned certain duties to parents that they must fulfill. If they fail in those, they will be questioned about it. Besides providing the basic necessities of life, Islam requires that the parents teach their children about the Oneness of God, the Quranic commandments, values, the Prophets and their teachings, and the moral code of Islam as according to the Quran and the Sunnah (teachings) of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Let us pray to God that He guide us to be respectful, kind, and obedient to our parents, and that we continue to show them humility regardless of the power, position, wealth, and influence we may possess. Let us also pray that we be patient, kind, thoughtful, and friendly with our children, as we guide them through their lives, and that we discharge our responsibilities towards them as required by our religion, so that God may be pleased with us, and may He Bless and reward us, both in this world and in the Hereafter. *Ameen.*

Confucianism

Confucius. *Analects*, Arthur Waley translation, Chapter Two:

Mang I asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "It is not being disobedient." Soon after, as Fan Ch'ih was driving him,

the Master told him, saying, "Mang-sun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him, '-not being disobedient.'" Fan Ch'ih said, "What did you mean?" The Master replied, "That parents, when alive, be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety." Mang Wu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "Parents are anxious lest their children should be sick." Tsze-yu asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "The filial piety nowadays means the support of one's parents. But dogs and horses likewise are able to do something in the way of support;-without reverence, what is there to distinguish the one support given from the other?" Tsze-hsia asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "The difficulty is with the countenance. If, when their elders have any troublesome affairs, the young take the toil of them, and if, when the young have wine and food, they set them before their elders, is THIS to be considered filial piety?"

Judaism

Jewish Scriptures

Honor your father and your mother that you may long endure on the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you. (*Tanakh*, Torah, Exodus 20:12)

Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter desolation. (*Tanakh*, Nevi'im, Malachi 3:23-24)

Excerpts from *The Legends of the Jews* by Louis Ginzberg, Volume III

But when the people heard the fifth commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother," they said: "According to our laws, if a man enrolls himself as a servant of the king, he thereby disowns his parents. God, however, makes it a duty to honor father and mother; truly, for this is honor due to Him." [222]

It was with these words that the fifth commandment was emphasized: "Honor thy parents to whom thou owest existence, as thou honorest Me. Honor the body that bore thee, and the breasts that gave the suck, maintain thy parents, for thy parents took part in thy creation." [223]

For man owes his existence to God, to his father, and to his mother, in that he receives from each of his parents five of the parts of his body, and ten from God. The bones, the veins, the nails, the brain, and the white of the eye come from the father. The mother gives him skin, flesh, blood, hair, and the pupil of the eye. God gives him the following: breath, soul, light of countenance, sight, hearing, speech, touch, sense, insight, and understanding. [224]

When a human being honors his parents, God says: "I consider it as if I had dwelled among men and they had honored Me," but if people do not honor their parents, God says: "It is good

that I do not dwell among men, or they would have treated Me superciliously, too." [225]

God not only commanded to love and fear parents as Himself, but in some respects He places the honor due to parents even higher than that due Him. A man is only then obliged to support the poor or to perform certain religious ceremonies, if he has the wherewithal, but it is the duty of each one even to go begging at men' doors, if he cannot otherwise maintain his parents. [226]

Christianity

Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*

Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. Q. What does this mean? A. We must respect and love God, so that we will neither look down on our parents or superiors nor irritate them, but will honor them, serve them, obey them, love them, and value them.

Conclusion

It may be conclude by saying that even though our all religions have given parents an honorable status then why we say that, in India, older generations are not aware of their human rights due to high prevalence of illiteracy and lack of awareness. Our all religions totally emphasizes on obligation for children to show the utmost kindness, respect and obedience to our parents. Unless there is service done to our elders, we cannot consider ourselves any closer to being human beings doing our duty. We may have all our worldly education, qualification ranging from graduation, post graduation, doctorates etc. we may be well educated but definitely not learned if the fundamental aspects of life are not adhered to. On the other hand, in our country, due to comparatively high physical as well as psychological vulnerability their cries for help remain within four walls, that's why only a few cases of violation of human rights of elderly come out. Ever increasing numbers of distress calls from older persons clearly indicate disturbing condition of Human Rights of older persons in India. So it should be the constitutional duty of the state to make an act for the welfare and extra protection of the senior citizen including palliative care.

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