



# Two Days National Level Conference on Elderly Issues



**Organised by  
Department of Sociology  
North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU)  
in collaboration with National Institute of Social Defence (NISD)  
Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment,  
Government of India**

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Venue: NEHU Shillong**

## Concept Note

### **Elderly in Contemporary Society: Their Predicaments, Challenges and Prospects (with Special Reference to Northeast India)**

Gerontology is a multi-disciplinary science that encompasses a more expansive definition of the study of ageing that also includes the study of later life, old age and older people concerned with the study of ageing. Hence, it integrates biological, psychological and social aspects of the elderly. Comparatively a 'young' science: the term 'gerontology' was first used by a Russian biologist Metchnikoff in his book, *The Prolongation of Life* published in 1908 (cited in Victor, 2005, p.1-2). Ageing and perception on ageing is associated with culture, social context, behavioral aspects and hence provides the much scope to perceive, examine and analyse the issues associated with ageing from diverse perspectives. Writers from the times of Aristotle onwards have been interested in the attributes required for living to old age and the first question many are asked upon achieving their centenary is what they ascribe their long life to. Distinguished scientists such as Francis Bacon, Benjamin Franklin and Francis Galton all wrote about ageing. Ageing as the last stage of the life cycle is inevitable and therefore warrants attention from the scholars, policy makers and philanthropists to address the problems associated with ageing so that they lead a healthy and dignified life at the prime stage of their life. As a member of the society, an elderly expects all possible support both physical as well as emotional and more importantly the much needed compassion to overcome age related anxieties and stresses.

The sociology of ageing is concerned with using sociological perspectives to understand ageing. Social gerontology encapsulates wider range of issues on elderly wherein scholars across the social science disciplines carry out studies on ageing, develop new insights and formulate diverse theoretical frameworks thereby to develop a comprehensive and better understanding on ageing. As such social gerontology incorporates three distinct perspectives - individual, social and societal – at two levels of analysis, the micro scale and macro scale which illustrates the complexity of the subject area. The micro scale approach is concerned with understanding and explaining ageing as an individual experience by investigating the changes in the perceived age identity as the individual progresses through the life course. Various processes of social change i.e., urbanization, modernization, globalization bring transformative changes in the society. Elderly too do not remain immune to these changes. While some cope themselves well with the changes, some find it extremely difficult to navigate (ibid., p.4-5). In this context, this seminar will be an attempt to elucidate what it is like to be an older person within contemporary society.

With the advance in health facilities, health care and awareness there has been steady rise in our life expectancy. While being able to reach old age is something to be thankful for, in many ways, there are several challenges the elderly face, which we all need to pay more attention to.

Often it is not until we start to age ourselves or we see a loved one struggling with a problem that we remain a passive acceptor and quietly observe rather as members of society, we consciously take initiatives to make life easier for our ageing population. Therefore, taking this into cognizance, this seminar will also attempt to outline the biggest challenges that elderly people face today and how we can support them and enable them to age with dignity.

There are lots of stereotypes about elderly people, which can lead to isolation and marginalization in a lot of communities. By coming up with innovative ways to involve older people in the community through social events, engaging them in creative and recreational activities, we can not only help them to maintain a sense of identity and self-esteem but also tap into the wealth of knowledge and experience they have, which is so vital for the development of society (SmithLife HomeCare, 2020).

Ageing comes with varied challenges. The cultural misconceptions and stereotypes pose diverse problems and challenges to the elderly. Further, with the fact being that the older persons are not a homogenous group, the challenges they face in the protection or enjoyment of their human rights also varies greatly. With waning physical abilities and age discrimination, they are hardly left with any option but to depend on others which remain a potential aspect of the process of ageing. While some continue to lead active lives as part of their community, many others face homelessness,

lack of adequate care or isolation. However, none of these justify the necessity for the elderly to enter old age without dignity (Krithika, ePathshala, n.d). Hence, it would be academically enriching to delve into the discussion and deliberation of these issues particularly the human rights of the elderly. This seminar will provide the platform for the experts cutting across disciplines to rigorously dwell on this issue.

There is no denying of the fact that advancing of age comes with diverse challenges. Social prejudices, narrow mindedness, insufficient legal protection and lack of social awareness and moral values all make the life of the elderly terrifying. Discrimination, fear, idleness, lowered self-esteem, dependency, lack of privacy become the harsh realities of old age. Addressing these concerns of the elderly has become a very big challenge to the state as well as the community. Policy interventions coupled with social awareness therefore, could provide a sustained safety net and defence mechanism against the increasing insecurity and hardships that the elderly in the modern society face. Respecting the aged and treating them with dignity is the only solution to the issue. Adequate legal protection to the rights of the elderly will also enable to effectively address the plights of the elderly.

In order to appreciate the importance of the various human rights the elderly are entitled to, it is necessary to understand the challenges faced by them during the process of entering old age. Some of the major challenges (just indicators and not exclusive) that the elderly face in the society can be summarised as follows:

Society started viewing the aged as a burden and thus arose the concept of 'ageism'. Ageism implies 'discrimination based on age'. For elderly, discriminations get multiplied; the age-related discriminations are often compounded by other forms of discrimination such as sex, socio-economic status, ethnicity, etc. Such a treatment meted out to them tends to lower the self-esteem of the elderly and lead to various psychological implications. They start feeling a sense of loneliness and deprivation, feel a lack of power and control over their daily living situations. Further, ageism makes the elderly vulnerable to abuse. They might be denied access to health care, work, education, voting, etc., only because of their age. Such kind of discrimination leads to the social exclusion of the elderly and their isolation.

Lack of health care or failing health goes hand in hand with the advancing age. This issue is further complicated by the non-availability of timely good quality and age-sensitive health care. The aged face issues like poor accessibility to health care services, lack of information and knowledge, high costs of treatment, lack of assistance, inappropriate medication, etc.

The elderly increasingly face the problem of economic insecurity either owing to the lack of opportunity or capacity which gradually loses its strength. Societal mind-sets, limited access to resources, lack of awareness of their rights and entitlements and the waning of their physical and mental faculties all play critical roles towards their challenging economic security independence. Loss of employment is indeed a major cause for the financial

insecurity of the aged. With the growing economic insecurity, the elderly become more and more dependent on the younger generation which in turn deprives them of their independence. Discrimination in workplace, forced retirement, barriers in accessing the welfare benefits also contribute to their insecurity and dependence (ibid.).

Isolation and social exclusion are very commonly seen with regard to the elderly. Societal prejudice and family neglect are the root causes of this issue though in few instances isolation can be self-imposed. Many elderly feel isolated from their families, friends and community with the difficulty in access to social, cultural and recreational activities as well as the public services like transport, public places like parks, etc. Forced retirement from employment leads to a sense of withdrawal from normal course of life. This further aggravates when these aspects get deeply entrenched and manifested in different spheres of life. There has been steady rise of institutionalised old age care centres i.e., old age homes which create space for elderly care away from their families the modern society. Despite the care and support in old age homes, one cannot deny that they miss the family care and home comforts. The phenomenon of social exclusion of the elderly and feeling of isolation, if not addressed, no doubt, will have major implications and would lead to a tragic deterioration of the quality of life.

The need for care and assistance increases with advancing of age. If the necessary care is not provided in a timely manner, the elderly suffer from neglect. The shift from traditional joint families to the present nuclear family structures and the redefined priorities of the modern

society are increasingly leading to the neglect of the elderly both by the families as well as the community. Neglect can be of varied forms like lack of interaction, malnutrition, inadequate care, poor hygiene, institutionalisation in elderly care homes, etc. Long-term neglect can have major implications on the elderly by disturbing their mental peace which in turn might affect their physical as well as mental health. Community awareness and counselling of families might help in addressing this issue. The elderly abuse is another cause of worry as they are more vulnerable to abuse. Elderly abuse can be of diverse forms like physical, psychological, sexual as well as financial. With the growing discrimination against the aged and the economic insecurity they are facing, the elderly are more prone to abuse. In majority of the cases, the elderly are abused by their caretakers or those close to the victim like family or friends.

One of the recent challenges that the elderly are facing in the modern society is detention. Detention need not necessarily be in prisons. With the increasing trend of nuclear families, more and more elderly are being institutionalised in elderly care homes wherein their movement and interaction with the outside world is restricted. While this is the case with a few, the situation of the age suffering from illnesses especially like that of dementia or Alzheimer, etc., is more pathetic. In majority of the cases, their life is confined to a single room or a house at the best. Such restrictions imposed on the elderly will have a direct impact on their quality and standard of life by complicating the issue rather than solving it. The solution to the problem lies in creating

awareness, family counselling and most important of all by respecting the aged and treating them with dignity.

The elderly most often experience ignorance. Lack of awareness of their rights is a grave concern. The elderly are unaware of the benefits they are entitled to, the rights they possess or the services they can avail. This lack of awareness in most instances leads to their exploitation (ibid.). Hence, there is a need for generating awareness on the rights of the elderly.

### **Aims and Objectives**

On this backdrop the seminar will broadly aim to:

- To understand the broad realities of old age in the contemporary society, especially in the context of Northeast India.
- To focus on the social contexts of ageing, looking at the diversity of ageing and older people,
- To examine and analyse different factors that are important to understand the experiences of old age and ageing.
- To outline the prevalent challenges that the elderly people face today and how we can support them and enable them to age with dignity.
- To enable a deeper understanding on the various challenges which are being faced by the elderly and the violation of their rights.
- To enable the development of various perspectives to develop a comprehensive and systematic understanding on the status and role of the elderly.

Northeast India is known for its social and cultural diversity. Physical as well as political geography of the various states of the Northeastern region have added further dynamics. Within each cultural context, there are nuanced elements of ageing problems and challenges operating both at objective and subjective level. Hence, there is a need for debate and discourse at varied levels, viz., intra-culture and inter-culture, inter-generational and 'ageing in place' within north eastern region and vis-à-vis other states of the country.

In the light of above-mentioned discussion, need arises to have a holistic discourse across disciplines, institutions/universities, State governments, colleges, NGOs and every other recognised institution working for the elderly care, general as well as north eastern cultures with an emphasis to comprehend and understand the social contexts of ageing, outline the challenges of the elderly to probably arrive at dimensions for effective state intervention. The proposed national seminar shall be an attempt to achieve this objective and is designed to cover broad indicative themes such as (but not exclusive):

- a) Ageing: Theoretical, conceptual reflections and methodological bases for the study of ageing
- b) Demographic contexts of the 'ageing population'
- c) Ageism and a lost sense of purpose
- d) Financial insecurity
- e) Difficulty with everyday tasks and mobility
- f) Family, informal care and other services for elderly people: Finding the right care provision

- g) Health and illness: Access to health care services
- h) Family and social network
- i) Psychological and social old age problems
- j) Adaptation problems
- k) Social inclusion for the elderly
- l) Dimensions for State intervention: Suggestive policy frameworks
- m) Interventions: Role of Civil Society Organisations

#### **Methodology and Outcome of the Seminar:**

The proposed two days national seminar will be organized by the Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong in collaboration with the National Institute of Social Defence, Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India, New Delhi. The two days national seminar will provide a platform for holistic discourse across disciplines, institutions/universities, State governments, colleges, NGOs and other recognised institutions working for the elderly care. The scheduled dates for the seminar are during April 21-22, 2025. This will be a seminar with select invited papers from experts, and for the benefit of the larger academia, these papers will be published in the form of edited volume by a reputed international publisher such as Routledge.

#### **Seminar Co-coordinators:**

**Prof. B. Panda & Prof. Kedilezo Kikhi**