Research to Practice Paper:

Overcoming Social Isolation of Older People in India

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Lessons of Community and Compassion:
Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through
Policy and Program Development

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Introduction

       Today almost one in ten people globally are over the age of 60 and by 2050, this number will increase to one in five people[1]. This rise, however, needs to be properly addressed by various institutions, notably national governments, as a change in demographics will change patterns in healthcare consumption as well as social patterns and interactions. This paper focuses on India's ageing population, as India is home to one-eighth of the world's population over 60[2] and is undergoing major changes in family and social structures that have recently made older people much more vulnerable to social isolation. The Government of India must therefore take into consideration these changes in shaping future policies so that social isolation can be mitigated. The paper will begin by briefly conceptualizing social isolation and its relation to old age, after which it will outline rising trends and social norms in India around ageing. Then, areas of concern will be presented within the Government of India's current policies. Finally, the paper will explore policy recommendations that focus on enhancing the welfare system and promoting the regulation of old age homes, concluding

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[1] "Global Ageing Statistics | Data on Ageing." HelpAge International
[2] Lamb, Sarah. (2009). *Aging and the Indian diaspora: cosmopolitan families in India and abroad*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

that social isolation must be a core focus when addressing the well-being of the elderly.

<u>Conceptualizing Social Isolation in Old Age</u>

Social isolation is a complex and multi-faceted issue. In simple terms, it refers to the absence of meaningful interactions between one person and another, or with his/her community. Another way of looking at social isolation is through Amartya Sen and his theory of individual capabilities, which are the opportunities provided by the state to achieve basic functioning[3]. These opportunities include the right to participate in major social institutions and have access to adequate housing, healthcare, education and so forth. Social isolation can occur when these citizens are denied access or are unable to secure these social rights[4].

Taking a step back, social isolation relates to the greater context of development as a whole. Over several decades, income has been the primary measure for assessing development within a country. However, as Amartya Sen pointed out, there is a major gap in income generation and income usage, indicating that income does not always equate to greater access to

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

education or health care[5]. Rather, people of various incomes and backgrounds can be excluded from access to these basic rights, which provides the foundation for social isolation to grow. It is also important to understand that social isolation is exacerbated within vulnerable groups, such as women, children, disabled persons, Indigenous communities, and without a doubt, older persons.

Globally, old age is "neither universally defined or constant across time,"[6] so the concept and definition of older people differs across societies. In some societies, older people are venerated, while in others, they are subjected to negative stereotypes. Nonetheless, older people are especially vulnerable to social isolation. First and foremost, older people's isolation is reinforced by negative stereotypes, contributing to the idea that old people are 'useless' and 'idle'. Second, positing that social life involves intersubjectivity, and that interactions help people make sense of their place in the world, then anything that denies older people the opportunities to be 'useful' members within their communities contributes to their social

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[5] Samuel, Kim. (February 2016). "Social Isolation and its Relationship to Multidimensional Poverty". Policy Brief No. 4. Institute for the Study of International Development.

[6] Lamb, Sarah. (2009). *Aging and the Indian diaspora: cosmopolitan families in India and abroad*: 8.

isolation[7]. Additionally, if older people do not have the opportunities to experience reciprocity, the ability to give back, or live their lives the way they want to, it could potentially enhance feelings of being a burden to others and/or having no purpose in life[8]. A final point to consider relates to policy, in that countries focus more on addressing where, and at a cost to whom, will older people be 'looked after', rather than facilitating the means for older people to continue living meaningful lives in an existing environment of reciprocal relationships[9]. This is a growing concern India has been facing over the past couple of decades as the ageing population continues to grow.

Indian Context and Ageing Trends

There are approximately 98 million elderly people in India, and it is estimated that this population will increase to 240 million by 2050[10]. The majority of Indians still live with adult children in multigenerational homes where the daughter usually takes care of her parents-in-law, an arrangement that is considered to be the normal and proper model of ageing in the

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[7] Bhalla, Ajit, and Frédéric Lapeyre. (1997). "Social Exclusion: Towards an Analytical and Operational Framework". *Development and Change*. 28 (3): 413-433.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] A, Divya. (June 6, 2015). "Retirement Apartments: Senior living in India comes of age". The Indian Express.

country[11]. As the middle class grows, families are facing greater difficulties in traditionally taking care of their elders due to greater formal female employment and migratory work patterns. Therefore, there has been a new phenomenon of old age homes in cosmopolitan centers in India, replacing the conventional model of multigenerational, co-residential family units. While these residences only house a small minority of older people to date, they have received a large amount of media and public attention, deliberating what the rise in old age homes means for individual Indians, their families and society as a whole[12].

A long-term study carried out by Sarah Lamb on older people in India reveals different experiences and attitudes towards old age homes and the new prevailing family dynamics[13]. For those whose emotional focus and sense of self-being is centred on the family, it is an alienating and distressing experience, as they are stripped away from their fundamental familial bonds. For others, the opportunity of living away from their family has allowed them to actively cultivate a much more independent and individualist way of

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[11] Lamb, Sarah. (2009). *Aging and the Indian diaspora: cosmopolitan families in India and abroad*.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Lamb, Sarah. (2009). *Aging and the Indian diaspora: cosmopolitan families in India and abroad*.

living. These contrasting views highlight that the sentiments of older people

regarding family centricity and old age homes are complex and mixed.

Current Government Policies and Concerns

Many Indians are engaging in debates spurred by international

discourse on the ageing population, probing "Where is the best site of elder

care: the individual, the family, the market, or the state?" and "What kinds

of social, cultural, moral and economic principles are entailed by the

competing answers to this abiding question?"[14]

At the government level, there is no coherent policy across India in

addressing the increasing ageing population and shift in family living

patterns. There is one national policy that has existed since 1999, titled *The

National Policy on Older Persons*, recognizing the growing difficulties

faced by families in elderly care. This policy promotes the view that older

people should be treated as valuable members of society, not marginalized

from it[15]. Sarah Lamb notes that while this law sounded promising in terms

of valuing reciprocity, it would have been very hard to implement at the

individual state level. Additionally, in 2007, the Indian Parliament sought to

enforce elderly care by the family as a legal obligation. Under this law,

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

children can be fined and jailed up to three months if found guilty of neglecting their parents[16]. The law fails to fully consider and embrace shifts in family structure, and does little to address the agency of older people in the matter. Nowadays, there are some government programs to support the elderly beyond the current legislation, which simply urges families to support their elders. These programs include retirement pension schemes for employees in the formal sector, old-age pensions for the destitute, and limited support for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing services to the elderly, such as HelpAge India and the Agewell Foundation[17].

These programs are inadequate in mitigating social isolation because they highlight the lack of a complete social welfare system in India. For the rural and urban poor, there are a very limited number of old age home options, and there is a clear sentiment that old age homes and residences are for the wealthier classes[18]. Many elders must still count on their own communities, or resort to begging or selling on the streets[19]. This issue was highlighted in a Telegraph editorial, where a middle-class elderly woman, who was abandoned on the streets by her sons, critiqued the absence of a welfare system. The article powerfully illustrates that this absence creates an

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

"inordinate dependence on the family… To blame [the current situation of the elderly] on the demise of the joint family is to misrepresent the complex, systemic and political nature of the problem—an evasive moralism behind which governments often hide."[20] If the government of India focused on improving the welfare system, this would ease the isolation and pain caused by family breaks and help older people stay off the streets and merge into new communities.

Another area of concern within government policy involves the lack of regulation of old age homes in India. There were a few disturbing cases where a toilet stood right in the middle of sleeping and eating quarters, and instances where nurses were unsupervised and unskilled to provide care for the elderly[21]. Additionally, a large proportion of old age homes provide minimal formal activities, some of which do not fully promote social connectedness. Many "residents spend their time reading, chatting, simply sitting, playing cards, knitting, writing journals and letters, having tea, watching television, going on morning walks, taking a stroll to a nearby market, and (in the fancier ones) attending occasional cultural programs and

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[20] "UNACCOMMODATED." (March 11, 2006). The Telegraph - Calcutta: Opinion.
[21] Sengupta, Uttam. (2005). "New Deal for the Old: Isn't It Time the Government Tried to Find Out What Actually Happens in Old-Age Homes?" Telegraph.

functions."[22] Hence, a lack of government regulation of these homes creates a precarious situation, wherein the basic rights of older people are often violated and are not provided with the utmost opportunities to enhance social connectedness.

Overall, it is evident that state support for older people is still limited due to both economic factors (notably most of India is still poor) and cultural principles (family is the best place for elders)[23]. Policy recommendations are therefore needed to create a welfare system that can mitigate social isolation and support the connectedness of older people within old age homes.

Policy Recommendations

Two key issues have been highlighted in analyzing current Indian government policies. Firstly, there is not an adequate social welfare system to support poor and middle-income older people in dealing with changes in family care. Secondly, within old age homes, there is a lack of regulation concerning basic hygiene rights and limited activities that promote social connectedness. Based on these issues, if the government puts social isolation at the forefront of their policies, older populations in India will have the

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[22] Lamb, Sarah. (2009). *Aging and the Indian diaspora: cosmopolitan families in India and abroad*: 64.
[23] Ibid.

opportunities to exercise their capabilities and continue living a lifestyle suitable to them.

The government should focus on adapting to the reality of demographic and cultural changes within India, rather than trying to force children to uphold elderly care. Poverty and access to social institutions should be taken into account in both rural and urban areas when it comes to administering an effective welfare system. More specifically, the government should provide more support for old age homes and pension plans. This will allow older individuals to cultivate independence – through savings and open mindedness about potentially living in old age homes – which is important given that they may not be able to count on their children in old age[24]. Further support should also be directed to NGOs that support the elderly, such as the aforementioned HelpAge India and Agewell Foundation.

As old age homes grow across the country, the Indian government should also focus on greater regulation. This includes setting standards and monitoring schemes to ensure that old age homes are maintaining basic hygiene and catering to the actual needs of older people. It is also extremely important that the government work with practitioners to help ensure

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[24] Ibid.

reciprocity and provide a social space within and outside the homes for older people to interact and connect with the surrounding community[25].

There are many models within India that the government can look to for building social connectedness. Within India, retirement communities in the south Indian states of Kerala, Andra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu provide clusters of housing groups that allow elderly people to maintain similar lifestyles outside of their homes. The aim of many of these residences is to provide active and independent lifestyles[26]. For example, privately owned Antara focuses on offering a lifestyle that is "active, healthy, carefree, dignified and independent."[27] Antara provides various options for the elderly to get involved in the community, whether it is through volunteering, teaching at a local school nearby or holding social events in the residences. CEO of Antara, Singh Vachani, stated that the idea of providing "lifestyle with life care" was an unprecedented vision for India[28]. These examples within India demonstrate that social connectedness is achievable within old age homes. However, Antara is considered a 'luxury' residence, and it is

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[25] Thompson, Sue. (2013). *Reciprocity and dependency in old age: Indian and UK perspectives*. New York, NY: Springer.

[26] A, Divya. (June 6, 2015). "Retirement Apartments: Senior living in India comes of age". The Indian Express.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Behal, Ambika. (February 26, 2015). "The Unheard Of Model For Senior Living In India". Forbes Magazine.

crucial that the government focus on providing and supporting similar services and values to old age homes targeting lower-income older people.

Conclusion

The growth in the ageing population within India has been coupled with the unprecedented rise of old age homes across the country. However, recent shifts in cultural norms have led to less elderly care provided by the family, making older people, especially those of lower income, more vulnerable to social isolation than ever before. As demonstrated throughout this paper, social isolation hinders individuals from having the opportunities to meet their basic needs and the reciprocal relationships necessary to continue living a meaningful life. This calls for the Indian government to enact policies that will allow older people to continue meeting their basic needs, with or without their families. More importantly, these policies should focus on reducing social isolation by creating a better welfare system, regulating old age homes, and learning from elderly residence models that emphasize social connectedness. As India hits roughly 240 million people above the age of 60 by 2050, the country has the potential to impact and connect 240 million lives all together.

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