Jhumur Basu

Muralidhar Girls' College

Is Aging a Social Problem?

The fact that life is a continuous process of growth, beginning from infancy and coming to old age through childhood and adulthood and that is ultimately terminates with the death of an individual, is an obvious phenomenon and need not be emphasised. The course of life is influenced by several factors, like biological & cultural inheritance of an individual. Age and aging equally related to role-taking, value orientations and modes of behaviour of a person the expectation of which varies at different age stages of members of a society.

Every society is stratified in terms of age of its members, just as there is stratification in terms of social and economic factors. The social system which depends upon the continuing performance of numerous age specific functions, must accommodate the endless succession of cohorts, (generations) that are born, grow old and die within it.(1)

Old age is a universal phenomenon. The number of old people is increasing all over the world both in absolute terms and in proportion to the populations. The challenges of old age come from various source as well old age is generally accompanied by a number of problems that the aged have to face and adjust with in varying degrees. These problems may range from ensured and sufficient income to support themselves and their dependents.

Loss of economic independence and physical vigor and the emergence of various types of, degenerative diseases change an aged from an independent self-suffering individual self-supporting individual to one who needs help from children, members of the family and the society in general. Absence of common interests and lack of extensive and regular interaction with the younger members in the family may result in social isolation and loneliness of the

aged. The aged having performed a long continuous and relatively well-defined adult role may find himself in a stage of life which presents only few alternative role be fitting his physical, social and psychological make-up. The nature and extent of his social adjustment may vary according to his own personality make-up his life experiences as an adult and the immediate family and community environment that surrounds him. It may be observed that the process of aging is not uniform for all persons and among all groups alike. Changes in the life of the aged are necessitated not only by their physical and mental capacities but also by the social and cultural practices.

The term "aging" has three different but inter-related connections, namely biological and physiological aging, social aging and psychological aging.

Biological and Physiological aging:-

The process of life consists of physical and mental changes characterized by growth and decline Aging generally comprises those changes that take place in the later part of life when physical and mental decline becomes more apparent both to the concerned individuals and to the society. Carlson and Stieglitz mention eight progressive changes of a physiological nature, which accompany aging. The changes are like gradual tissue & elasticity and degenerative changes are like gradual decrease in tissues elasticity and degenerative changes in the elastic connective tissues of the body etc. Such physiological changes do not necessarily occur simultaneously in the aging person or at the same rate and age among different individuals. When a more or less complete physical breakdown takes place and there is mental disorganized, the period is known as 'senility'.

Psychological Aging:-

Psychological Aging consists of a general decline in the mental abilities that accompany old age. Decline in mental abilities does not normally corresponds to physical changes. The process of psychological aging is hastened when the individual feels the he is growing old and there is " greater danger of wearing out from disuse than from sensible activities." (2) Some of the psychological changes is respect of an individual's conception of the self, his ideas about his worth as an individual and as number of social groups, his feelings about the attitudes and behaviour of others towards his and his general view of life and the world, including his own place therein, play significant part in the process of psychological aging. " The psychological causes of aging, when combined with the physical accelerate the aging process by speeding up the rate of decline. "

Social Aging:-

Every society has its own conception of aging and age groupings. Social aging, as distinct from biological and psychological aging, refers to the stage in the life span of the individual that is regarded as old age by the group. Often individuals have to give up certain adult roles, with or without substitution role, even though their biological and mental aging may not need such changes.

Aging has, therefore three main dimensions – biological, psychological and social (cultural). All the three aspects are so interrelated that acceleration of any one may speed up the other two also.

Social Adjustments:-

A Socially well adjusted person is one who is able to fulfil his various social obligation and role within the normative structure of his society and thereby promoted the satisfaction of his

personal interests and motives. Adjustment can be seen subjectively from the point of view of the society. According to Cattrell (4) " individual adjustment to the roles of old age will depend upon the clarity to which these roles are defined on the consistency with which others in the individual's life situation accord him the responses called for by the roles of old age, on compatibility of the various roles, on the degree to which the roles assigned to the aged permit realization of the dominant goals set by his sub-cultural groups, on the available means of compensation, on the gradualness of the new roles etc."

Several personality factors have been found to associated with social adjustment in old age. It was notices that three personality types, the mature, the rocking-chain men and the armoured, were associated with good adjustment to retirement and two types, the angry man and the self-hater there found to be associated with poor adjustment.

Greater reliance on irrational methods for the satisfaction of personal need and adjustment may cause personality problems and hampers in social adjustment in old age is a dynamic concept, just as the personal adjustment is. It is a function of interaction between the individual and his social cultural environment.

Retirement:-

The term 'retirement' has been understood in different ways by different persons. It has been used to denote a specific stage in the development process of an individual, a withdrawal from most of the economic and social responsibilities of adult life, a particular mode of life where free time activities and leisurely pursuits are the dominant goals of life, the end of a life-long career as an employee or as a self employed person. As an event, retirement denotes more or less a permanent departure from the world of work. The status of a retiree is different

from that of an unemployed person in the sense that the latter is still looking for an opportunity to fulfil his obligation as a worker.

Whatever be the pattern of retirement, an individual has no choice but to leave the work after a certain age. The main controversy about retirement relates to the arbitrary age limits and the logic for throwing people out of, work after they attain a particular age.

The age of retirement has been changing from time to time in the Central as well as the State Government. The governments are also empowered to extension to any employee or to retire him earlier than the formal age of retirement on the basis of some other considerations. It was observed that persons retiring at the age of 60 or getting some extension in their term of appointment generally, took a favourable view about the age of retirement. Loneliness is generally understood as a subjective feeling of being cut off from meaningful Social contacts or roles. It is a mental state in which an individual experiences some sort of vacuum. It is much more related to social looses (death of a spouse, some friend etc) than to enduring isolation. Isolation and loneliness are not coincident. The concept of social isolation implies a relative tack of participation in social relationships. But many isolated people do not feel lonely. Loneliness is not a necessary reaction at those who are extremely isolated.

Retirement from the world of work has several consequences for the older males. The adverse effects of reduced income and economic security are equally associated with other personal and

social problems exposure to other limitations , at an undesirable nature from the point of view of the retirees.

Problems of Aged

A man's life is normally into main stages namely infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. In each of these stages an individual has to find himself is different situations and face different problems. lnfancy and childhood are period of dependence. In the later stage of childhood and during the period of adolescence circumstances make a few of them to become delinquents, It is during the adulthood that an individual has to bear the main brunt of life. Old age is not free from problems. Though from the point of view of wider society the problems of old age are comparatively less, from the standpoint of the individual the problems are not less significant. In old age physical strength deteriorates, mental stability diminishes, money power becomes bleak and eyesight suffers a setback. For a large number of people it may actually become a period of disappointment, dejection, disease, repentance and loneliness. They become more and. more other - worldly in their attitude. Some seek to get satisfaction through the achievements of their children or grandchildren. Some old people cut off their relations with the external world and prefer to live in solitude. Only a few make compromises and try to equip themselves to sail along with the currents of life.

The psychological side of the problem :-

The problem of senility or that of the aged has been a curse of the modern civilization. The increasing proportion of a older people in modern civilized societies has given rise to a great many psychological, social and medical problems. The growing incidence of mental disorders is very much associated with old age. For example, in America in 1970, an estimated 7 lakh older persons were institutionalized for such mental disorders, even the ancient Roman writer Juvenal was quite aware of the mental problems associated with old age. More than physical disability, the mental disability and disorders make the old people to suffer. Two major psychotic disorder of older people are "senile dementia (associated with

cerebral atrophy and degeneration) and psychosis with cerebral arteriosclerosis (associated with either blocking or ruptures in the cerebral arteries)".

l. Senial Dementia :- Older people who suffer from senile dementia develop such symptoms such as the following-poor memory, intolerance of change, restlessness, insomnia, extreme mental depression and agitated ness, a gradual formation of delusions and hallucinations etc. In extreme cases, patients eventually become oblivious of their surroundings, bedridden and reduced to a vegetative existence.

2. Psychosis with cerebral Arteriosclerosis :- This is accompanied by physiological symptoms such as acute indigestion, unsteadiness in gait, small strokes resulting in cumulative brain damage and gradual personality change, convulsive seizures are also relatively common. This is also associated with symptoms such as weakness, fatigue, memory defect etc.

Socio - cultural factors of the Problem :-

Socio-cultural factors relating to the problems of the aged are equally significant. In one interesting study, psychologist Carothers (1947) found a high rate of senile psychoses among natives in Kenya & Africa. It is also observed especially in United States that the senile psychotic cases reported and hospitalized in the urban set up were almost twice the number of cases reported in rural set up. It can only be generalized that the urban set up is favourable to the development of mental disorders than the rural set up.

It is true that the experience of an older person seems to have little relevance to the problems of younger generations. He is deprived of active participation and decision making in both occupational and family settings. Many parents are treated as unwanted burdens and their children may secretly wish that they would die to relieve them of financial and other responsibilities.

"In a study of older people in France, De Beauviour (1970) has pointed out that when the French go away for vacations, they sometimes 'deposit' their aged parents in rest homes. Then on their return home, they "forget" to pick them up, abandoning them like doge in a Kennelo'- (Coleman). In the nuclear families in such cultures generally, there is no place for the grandparents unless they are self -sufficient. Even in the U.S.A. many older people are "deposited" in rest or nursing homes to die, even though they may be in relatively good health.

Reactions to aging and reaching the status of "Senior citizen" - are quite subjective. A sense of status, self-identity and meaning are very important in old age for they are most threatened at this stage.

The Actual problems of Old People :-

Old age is subject to stresses and strains, and some of them are typically confronting the aged. Some of them are as follows:-

l. Retirement and reduced income which may create a feeling that one's usefulness is essentially over and activities are restricted.

2. Old age has its direct impact on physical strength and stamina. Some old people fail to reconcile the fact that their physical strength is fading away.

3. Though physically weak, but the old people want to tighten their grip over the younger ones instead of developing a sympathetic attitude towards the old, start asserting their rights and power. The very next result is family tension and it is known as "generation gap" "Communication gap."

4. Isolation and loneliness which is usually caused by the loss of contemporaries and loved ones.

5. The problem of meaning of life and death, This is more aggravated in the case of those who look back on their lives and say, "It all adds upto nothing."

6. Social changes are taking place at faster rate than they were some years ago. The aged people find it extremely difficult to adjust mentally to these changes. The failure to accommodate the new trends on the part of the old would further alienate them from the young.

One of the immediate problems faced by the retirees on retirement is the proper utilization of the free time available to them in their retired life. Modern times are characterized by progressive shortening of men's time spent at his workplace. Now the distinction between the work and the non-work life has become more clear than was the case a few decades back, specially in the modern industrialized societies.

To most of the retiree, old people, who experienced difficulty in utilizing their free time, time was a burden. On perusal of the free time activities of the old people, we notice that worship and religious books etc. constitute the single most popular activity. Religion has, great leisure value for the aged.

Reading books, magazines, newspapers etc. has been mentioned as a free time activity by the aged people. Several retirees mentioned that they used to visit nearby public libraries regularly and it serves the dual purpose to them of going an outing and maintaining contacts with outside world.

Only a small section of the urban population participates in club life for regular leisure time activities and entertainment. But it is not very popular among the Indian middle class people.

Old people differ from each other in respect of their interest in religion. It has been observed that religious pursuits and the various time consuming activities related there to form the nucleus of the daily life of some aged and many of the other activities of the day revolve around their religious pursuits.

What has been observed about the living patterns and ambitions of the aged people and their involvement in the life of the children, it is fairly reasonable to say that the middle class Indian aged do not want to disengage themselves from their family and community relationships at the behavioural level even though they may relish the idea of being free from all the bondages of social life, as enunciated in the asrama scheme of Hindu social philosophy. It will not be out of place to refer here to the relevance of the theory of asrama(6) system as an approach to aging.

Asrama system as an approach to aging :-

The asrama approach is based on the view that a man's earthly life passes through four specific age-stages, known as asrama, leading to the corresponding role expectations. The four asramas are : brahamacharya, grahista, vanarastha, and sanyasa. The asrama theory is intimately related to the theory and practice of 'purusharthas' namely, dharma, artha, kama and moksha. The individual receives a psychological training through the asrama in terms of lessons in the use and management of the purusharthas.

Of the four asramas, the first one is called the brahamacharya asrama. With the upanayan ceremony the young boy is introduced into his asrama. He is expected to lead the life of a student and acquire knowledge and pursue his learning in accordance with the dharma, he has to learn dharma in all its various aspects and ramifications. The brahamacharya asrama is conceived as the first step in life's long journey.

After completing the brahamacharya asrama, the individual marries and enter the second asrama, i.e. the grahistha asrama. The grahistha is give high place from point of view of social values as in this asrama three purusarthyas, dharma artha and kama can exist together.

In the vanaprastha asrama, the third stage of life in the asrama theory, the dharma and moksha acquire greater significance, dharma being the dominant one. This is the stage where a conscious effort is made by the individual to withdraw himself from active social participation and life so that he may enter the final stage i.e. sanyasa asrama.

The sanyas asrama "provides the fullest opportunity for the self-expression and self-expansion of the individual in turns of the final 'yagna'.

It is interesting to note that the asrama theory presents a systematic approach to human life in developmental terms. During the brahamacharya asrama the society is expected to see to the comforts and development of the individuals, in the second asrama, the individual has to serve the society. In the third asrama, the individuals begins the process of gradual withdrawal from the previous stage and starts enchanting himself with the interests of next-asrama-the sruryas. In the fourth asrama, the individual serves his connections with the society and directs his energics towards his self-realization.

The brief description of the asrama theory reveals that the traditional Hindu view of life recognizes withdrawal from society as an approach towards old age. However the asrama theory has a positive feature, which the disengagement thesis lacks, namely, it is a theory of social organization from the point of view of age - stratification and age-based roles, social sanctions and allocation of facilities. The disengagement thesis, on the other hand, is too limited in its scope, and does not explain the objective facts about its non-applicability on a large scale.

The problem of old has become more pronounced now than before. The advent of industrial revolution advancement of science and technology and development of medical science have added new dimension to this problem. Prior to the Industrial revolution the average 'life expectancy' of man all over the world was very low. Now it has increased tremendously. As a result of this the number of old people has increased in almost all the countries. The presence at large number of old people has affected the composition of population.

Today all the developed countries have undertaken various social legislative, reformative and welfare measures to protect the interests of the old people. 'Old Age Homes' are to be found in all these nations, which give physical protection medical aid and economic security to the old. Due to the new trends that have gripped the modern nuclear families old people are often deserted by their own children. Such old people, who take shelter in these homes often suffer from emotional problems. In most of the modern countries under various welfare scheme due protection is given to the old by means of old age allowance pension after retirement, accident benefit, free medical aid for the old etc. To ensure economic security for the salaried people who become old at the time of retirement various labour legislations are welfare schemes have been introduced which include provident fund, gratuity, life insurance etc. Measures are also undertaken to take the benefit of the experience of the old people. While some retired persons are given part time job, some intelligent ones are again appointed as advisers, while a few others are accorded the status at guides or counsellors. The old people can render relatively good service to the society in areas which require more mental ability, skill and experience and involve less physical work. Problems of old age are relatively less in societies where the family ties very strong. In the Eastern societies, including India, family ties are comparatively stronger. In these societies old people are not neglected, they still get the feeling that they are still 'useful' and hence wanted.

The next and very obvious question arises that how to deal with the aged? What to do to minimize their problems? Whether or not to hospitalize the aged persons particularly those who are mentally deranged, is often a problem. Some individuals, who manifest such symptoms as confusion, violent and noisy behaviour, depression, anti-social behaviour etc, normally require institutionalization. But the decision to hospitalize is based primarily on the fact that no other community facilities are available to assist the individual.

Effective treatment of the older people suffering from mental and other problems requires a comprehensive use of medical, psychological and sociological procedures. The treatment has to be administered depending upon the needs of the individuals. Some may require just dietary measures while some other may need a surgical operation. Many reports have related that both individual and group psychotherapy would yield favourable results in treating mental disorders associated with old age.

Administration of group therapy or sociotherapy to older patients would mean the creating of a social environment in which the person can function successfully. In a hospital setting or nursing home sociotherapy would include the provisions of comfortable surroundings, together with stimulating activities that encourage the patient to utilize his capacities. It also includes working with the family in an attempt to help them understand the nature of the patient's disorder, to be supportive and to show that they care.

Scientists in many areas of the biological and social sciences are investigating the pathological and the normal aspects of aging. They are also exploring the ways to minimize the aging process. Community centers and clinics for assisting older people with retirement and other problems are increasing. Although society can do much to improve the status of the older persons, the individual also needs to prepare himself for the problems typical of old age. He needs to face realistically the fact that he is getting older, and plan ahead for an active

and useful life in his later years - a life that will take full advantage of the opportunities afforded to him. Of course, it is true that many at the adjustments of old age are highly specific to the situations of the given individual and hence cannot be fully anticipated. But at any rate, it is important to maintain mental flexibility and adaptability and establish new and satisfying impersonal relationships. As Simmons has pointed out, "The secret of success for any one facing a long life. .... .. Is to find for himself a suitable place in his society in which to age with grace and usefulness, and to participate tactfully and fully upto the very end if at all possible." "Old age thus poses special problems, but it is by no means incompatible with meaning and self, fulfilment." -Coleman.

Aged people provide a link between the past and the future. They help in keeping alive the traditions of the community. Despite their dependent status, they have an important role to perform in the society. Every society has developed its own system of caring at the aged based on its own culture and tradition. India has developed a unique system of caring for the old by the family, which maintains their dignity and fulfils their physical and emotional needs. Importance of this system has been recognized even in the western countries where caring of the aged has become a major social problem. However, due to urbanization, migration & also modernization, this system has come under some strain even in India & the Government is now gradually stepping in for providing social security.

Benefits for those aged who have no one to care. The stupendous nature of the task can be seen from the fact that there are 40 million old persons who need such care. This number would swell further is coming decades due to high population growth.

Existence of mass poverty, growing trend towards nuclear family, greater life expectancy and deteriorating urban environment are making if difficult for the aged to cope with changing times. Issues relating to their social role, health care, economic substance, leisure utilization

& place in the family have become crucially important. Tied by the natural law everyone has to grow old and so the aged people should get more care, love & respect from us.

Notes & References

1. Riley, M.W, John, M. and Foner, A. rg7z. Aging and society vor-3, A sociology of Age stratification pole p.4 New York. Russel sage Foundation.

2. Stieglitz, EJ. 1950, 'orientation in Gerontology,. In N.Y Academy of Medicine, Biological Foundation of Health Education,pp,g6-116, New York, Columbia, quoted in E.B. Hurlock, ibid, p-787.

3. Cattrell, L.s. Jr.1942. ' The Adjustment of the Individual to his Age and Sex Roles'. American Sociological Review ,7 Oct,1942, p-61,7.

4. The term 'asrama' is derived from the Sanskrit root, 'sram', meaning thereby to exert oneself. It may, therefore, mean by derivation.
   i>Place where exertions are performed and ii>The action of performing such extensions. The literal meaning of the term asrama, is a resting place. The word is, therefore, understood to signify a stage in the journey of life for preparing oneself for further journey towards the final goal of life.

Bibliography

Bhatia, H.S. *Aging and Society*. New Delhi: Arya's Book Centre Publishers, 1983.

Persell, Caroline Hodges. *Understanding Society - An Introduction to Sociology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1817.

Rao, C.N. Shankar. *Sociology - Primary Principles of Sociology with an Introduction to Social Thoughts*, New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Ltd., 2003.