

BOOK REVIEWS

Urban Elderly: Coping Strategies and Societal Responses

Asiya Nasreen, 2009, New Delhi, Concept Publishing, ISBN-10:81-8069-552-2, hard cover, pp.224, price: Rs.500

The large scale social, economic and technological changes, which are taking place in society, have significantly transformed the pattern of formal and informal support systems available to the older people. With the growth of "individualisation" in modern industrial life, there is greater alienation and isolation of the elderly from their family members and from society at large. The review of the efforts in the field of aging made so far clearly revealed that India's elderly are a heterogeneous lot. The traditional values and institutions are under the process of transformation due to industrialisation, urbanisation and the changing trends in the society. An important segment of India's elderly, which has been increasingly affected due to this transformation, is that of those living in urban areas. In view of this, greater attention needs to be paid to the increasing awareness on the issues of aging and its socio-economic effects and to promote development of policies and programmes for the well-being of elderly in urban areas. Given the inadequate focus on the elderly made so far in India, the attempt of Asiya Nasreen to look into the situation in which the elderly live in our urban areas and the various strategies adopted by them to cope with their problems is commendable.

The book is based on the results of an empirical study undertaken by the author in three localities of the capital city of Delhi. The sample of the study consisted of 300 elderly persons, with equal proportion of 100 each – 50 men and 50 women - from the selected three localities. The data for the study were collected through the method of interview and observation with

tools like scales and interview guide/schedule. The collected data were analysed gender-wise and locality-wise.

The book has been presented in five chapters. The author has extensively reviewed the literature on ageing issues including several studies on elderly and presented it as part of the first chapter. The profile of the three selected study localities in Delhi and the personal characteristics of the respondents like age, sex, religion, marital status, educational status and family background are introduced in chapter two. The major focus of chapter three is on the socio-economic problems of the elderly and the coping mechanisms adopted by them to overcome their problems. The societal responses in terms of different programmes, services and activities undertaken for the well being of the older people at international, national and local (three localities of the city of Delhi covered in the research study) levels are presented in chapter four. In the fifth and final chapter, the author has suggested certain intervention strategies for improving the quality of life of elderly in the society. Ten case studies of elderly persons living in various socio-economic settings are presented as appendix. The document on National Policy on Older Persons, 1999 is also presented in the appendix.

The study found that for a large proportion of elderly, the most preferred strategy to manage or cope with income inadequacy is by seeking help from children. In order to overcome emotional disturbance caused by economic hardships, the elderly were found to be employing different coping strategies, of which participation in religious activities was the prominent one. Another significant finding of the study was that men elderly were more prompt in seeking medical treatment than women elderly who are mostly ignorant and enjoy lesser priority in household. An inverse relationship between economic and physical dependency, and the position that a person holds in his or her family was observed in the study. The study found that 66.7 per cent of the respondents have reported fulfilment of the basic needs of food and clothing as most important for them, followed by 18.3 per cent who stated affection and companionship from family as their need and 14.3

per cent who regarded finance as their basic need. The study has observed that the problems of financial dependence in old age are mainly due to irregular income and unplanned expenditure pattern. The effective ways of improving the lives of elderly according to the author are providing professional help of trained social workers to not only the elderly but also their family members, and lending financial support to low-income families with older persons.

The present book has made a special effort to pay attention to understand the individual coping mechanisms and societal responses towards various issues of ageing which hitherto have been a less explored area of gerontology. The author has presented the subject matter of the book in a systematic way, with a blend of conceptual and empirical studies along with details of the various aspects of the living conditions of elderly. Attempt made by the author to present gender and locality-wise ageing issues has enhanced the understanding of the problems of elderly in a more realistic way.

Though the author has touched upon several issues of elderly and presented them systematically in the book, there are certain inadequacies which have affected the quality of the work. First of all, gender and locality-wise data are presented with the absolute number of respondents without using percentages in almost all the tables. For the purpose of comparison between groups of respondents, percentage, which is a standard measure, should have been provided. Secondly, the sample size distributed by the variables of gender and locality is quite adequate to analyse the relationships across the groups by using appropriate statistical tests. However, the author has not attempted to use statistical tests in this regard. In the absence of statistical tests in the analysis of the collected data, the extent and nature of the relationships among different groups could not be ascertained in the study. Description of the methodology adopted for the study could have been better presented as a separate chapter than placing it as part of the introduction. The section on research methodology appears to have been a simple reproduction from the research proposal made before the

commencement of the study. The author could have appropriately reframed the presentation of the methodology that had been adopted in the study, of which the report is published in the form of the book. There are also a few cases of incomplete sentences and incomplete references in the book.

On the whole the author deserves to be complimented for her painstaking piece of research work on an important emerging issue of quality of life of urban elderly. There are very few books available exclusively focusing on ageing issues in India. This makes the book all the more useful.

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