

# Case Studies of Elder Abuse - Roots and Bases of Interventions

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There is no authentic data revealing changes in the dynamics of family member interaction, their attitudes and behavior towards each other. Nevertheless scanning of newspapers, magazines and impressions derived from the discussion with people, it appears that the crisis of old age is not only demographic, but also a value crisis. Intergenerational studies reflect on this issue. The influence of market forces, consumerism have encroached the society and is gradually affecting the people regardless of their social, economic and cultural background.<sup>1</sup> Our country has been subjected to the ravages of demographic transition, migration, modernization, with dwindling joint families, fluctuations in market economy, poor public health and hygiene, low social and economic security.<sup>2</sup> In the present scenario, people cannot expect their children to look after them when they grow old. The longer life span implies an extended period of dependency needing short and long term planning and programmes.<sup>3</sup>

Elderly people across all the groups are facing problems of disrespect, indifference and other emotional problems, the nature of problems may not be the same in all sections of the society.<sup>4</sup> Elderly from the upper class, although fully secure on economic dimension are suffering with emotional problems, loneliness and are facing emotional abuse of greater intensity. They are suffering from property disputes with children who are revolting against the traditional values and inflicting torture to the elderly. The elderly from lower classes are suffering from economic crisis, need a secure place to live and have minimal resources to meet their health and other essential needs. The economic support on the part of children is fast eroding. Elderly from the

middle class are facing a number of problems – most of them have spent their earnings in building the house, educating and settling their children. They did it with full expectation that their old age needs would be looked after by their children. In many cases children have migrated for their livelihood and elderly parents are left alone. Expectations based on conventional thinking regarding old age care is getting unrealised. In many cases the youth are focussing on their own needs and have become ignorant to the essential needs of their aged parents. A study conducted by Chakravarty in Kolkata has indicated that elder abuse varies with their socio economic backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> Abuse, neglect and violence vary from stratum to stratum due to socio economic conditions of the families.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, D'Souza observed that changes in the family structure and mode of sudden retirement adversely affect the old in increasing proportions, who are losing the status and the security which they enjoyed in the traditional Indian family structure.<sup>7</sup>

In order to get a realistic picture a modest effort was made to study the issue by conducting in depth case studies on people belonging to different categories of the society – upper, middle and lower socio economic classes. Interviews were conducted in the three selected colonies and we came across cases of elderly abuse which were evaluated to establish the reasons for the abuse occurring with elderly in our society. It is an attempt to analyze possible solutions to put an end to such occurrences. The details of the cases are presented below.

## Case I

Mr M L aged 83 years lives with his wife Mrs S D, 75 years old in a low income residential colony. Mr M L used to work in a private firm during the pre-independence era. He is a graduate and his wife is class eighth pass. He has five sons (three stay in the same house and two stay out for employment) and

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two daughters. All are married and working. He and his wife stay in a two-storied house with his three sons and their families. All the three sons stay and eat separately with their respective families whereas Mr M L and his wife stay in two rooms and eat separately. His wife who has poor vision somehow manages to do the cooking for the two of them. None of his sons or daughter-in-laws bother about the old couple. In fact they always misbehave and coax him to give them their portion in the property, which is in his name. He has no other source of income as he has invested all his money on the house, in rearing his children and on their marriages. To earn his livelihood, he has resorted to ironing and washing clothes for his neighbors who call him Dhobi Baba. During interview he clarified that he is not a Dhobi by caste and that he had to take up this job to be able to meet his basic needs of food, clothing and medicines.

His eldest son had bluntly refused to acknowledge him as his father when he had first expressed his intention to start this work. He promised that if he abstains from doing so, then his sons staying with him would share the responsibility of looking after their parents and give them money regularly turn wise. After 4-6 months, his daughter-in-laws started fighting amongst themselves and slowly began to make lame excuses to avoid paying for their parents needs. They slowly avoided cooking for the old couple, trying to motivate the other to do so and thus the couple faced great difficulty in eating and in procuring clothing. Finally the old man decided that rather than depending on whims and fancy of his children, he would start his own work. His wife agreed to cook for themselves rather than to rely on their children. He felt that they would be able to lead their old age with dignity. Soon the children became quiet, in fact pleased that they would not have to look after the couple and presently are not bothered at all. They completely neglect the couple, occasionally giving them monetary help as per their wish. He has no authority or any involvement in household matters or in any family functions. Recently his second son arranged to celebrate his son's graduation in a big way but the old man and his wife were invited very customarily at the last moment.

His sons are busy with their own families and dislike old couple's interference. He has five grandsons and three granddaughters, out of them two are married. Though he is fond of all of them, only one of his grandson – a 16 year old boy helps and cares for the

old couple. Rest of them are busy with their own lives. On falling sick he and his wife somehow take care of each other and avail help of a local doctor for buying medicines. He is very bitter and curses his entire family for misbehaving with him. On enquiring what would happen to him or his wife after one of them expires or if they develop some disability or chronic illness, he has no answer and just says that as they are facing this present situation, his children will also face the same which he anticipates will be even worse.

His daughters come occasionally, unable to stay for long and help him monetarily. He does not expect them to do anything as it is not in their family tradition to take anything from the daughter after their marriage. To find out the root of the problem, he has many a times felt that his property is the main cause of his problems. People are now more self centered, selfish and insecure and shirk responsibilities. He could have thrown out his children but is afraid that they would all fight and go to the court. His wife refuses to allow him to do so. She says that even if they misbehave, one day they will feel ashamed of their wrong doings and she is always ready to forgive and forget.

On probing that what he expects from the government or the community, he bluntly replied that when his own blood has cheated him what can he expect from the government. When his children do not care for even his basic needs then why should he expect others to help him. He on the other hand hates any one to pity him and assures that till he lives he will not depend on others. He regrets having not saved for his future and advises all who come in contact with him including his grandchildren to plan for old age in advance.

We had the opportunity to meet his youngest daughter in law and queried about the old man and his wife. She just snorted, made a face and said that the old man and his wife are eccentric and they were doing all this to create nuisance. She further added that they are so rude and adamant that no one wanted to keep them with their families. She was non committal to his working at this age and thought that he may do what he wants to.

*Highlights of the case*-The case study reveals that property (house) as such is not a guarantee of happy ageing. It has created unreasonable claims amongst the children and its non fulfillment has created undesirable changes in the entire family members. Ironing and

washing clothes at this stage of life of course appears to be unacceptable amongst the family members. At the same time it also denotes self esteem and to remain independent. The regret of not having saved for old age opens a big door for old age planning. It also reveals ongoing changes in the family towards old age care. It is quite possible that the three sons discouraged the old parents in the initial stage but at the same time they hardly bothered and did not fulfill their promises of providing financial support for the basic needs of the elderly. Parents thus waited for some time and finally out of desperation decided to work, earn and live independent lives.

This is a problem emerging as a common phenomenon. Society and state government can easily solve such problems by entering into the local frame of old age care. Old age care should not be treated as individual issue. The roots of the problem should not be seen centered only on the children but it needs to be recognized as a problem of the society. It is a subject of value crisis, an element of deteriorating traditional system of family structure, functions and perceptions. All these require scientific planning for healthy ageing.

### **Case II**

Mr S, a 68 year old man lives with his wife Mrs M, 65 years old and his two sons in a simple house. House or rather the shed is in his wife's name and it is in a very poor condition with no lighting facilities. He used to transport sand and cement in a donkey driven cart to the building contractors. At present he is literally bed ridden due to arthritis and also has very poor vision. Both he and his wife are illiterate. He also has periodical attacks of asthma, which has further incapacitated him. They have no other source of income and have applied for pension under social welfare scheme. His four daughters are married while his sons are unmarried, are school dropouts and do no work. One is fourteen years old and the other sixteen years old. Both are very unruly, misbehave with the couple, show no respect, and are not at all bothered about their parents' illness or day to day problems.

The daughters come occasionally but are not able to help much as they themselves are quite poor. Mrs M at this age openly admitted that she was forced to clean dishes and do other household chores in three of neighborhood houses and it was with these wages she manages their daily needs. She has been suffering

from gall bladder stones for last 5-6 years, and she could not afford to get it operated even for free in a government hospital as there is no one to look after her husband and sons. She takes painkillers from local doctors frequently. Both the parents are embittered with the behavior of their sons. They are not only rude but sometimes verbally abuse them and resort to physical assault. Mr S says that he avoids any confrontation with his sons, and doesn't want to be insulted or beaten by them. He has tried many times by requesting neighbors to employ his sons in a shop or factory but they don't want to work. About the future, both are very depressed and have no idea what would happen to them. Mr S regrets at his inability to have saved for their future and also blames himself for having such a big family. Had he been able to instill sense of responsibility in his children, he would not be suffering today. He expects from the government pension, free ration and medicines. He feels that the government should provide old age homes or day care centers free of cost for the elderly who are sick and homeless.

*Highlights of the case* - This case raises few pertinent questions – What is the basis of our claim for development? Is it only figures and economic data? Many aged people like these are counting every moment of their lives and cursing themselves for not saving anything for old age and regretting for having a big family in the absence of proper planning. Why an old lady like her has to accept work for earning something to live life? Why they could not get government provision of economic support and medical care? These questions need to be analyzed in different dimensions. We desperately need to evolve some viable mechanisms to address the basic needs of millions of old persons who are neglected and abused by their own children. Mr S and his wife are the real case for old age home because jobless, unruly and misbehaving sons of 14 to 16 years are a liability and a source of torture to the poor parents.

### **Case III**

Mrs A, a 68 year old widow is a graduate with three sons and three daughters – all married. All the sons stay separately and she has very poor relations with her sons and daughter in laws. She has been forced to stay with her youngest daughter and son in law as there is no one to take care of her. She is suffering from hypertension for which she takes homeopathic treatment. Though her daughter really

cares for her and is very affectionate but at times she feels very lonely and left out in her daughter's family. Her son in law is very cordial in his behavior but is uncomfortable in her presence. Though her basic needs are all being met adequately, she is seldom consulted in any important family matters.

Her sons neither keep any contact with her nor send any money to her. For them she is as good as dead. She has no independent source of income and has to depend totally on her son in law and daughter. Her husband was an engineer and used to work in a private firm thus she does not get any pension. She has some savings in her name. She feels afraid to spend it now and wants to keep it for her future. Her husband would never have expected that after marriage her sons would leave her alone and he had not planned out anything for her. Many a times she has to repress a desire to spend money the way she wants to feeling conscious that what would everyone say. Her son in law feels ashamed to introduce her to any visitor or guest as she is staying with her daughter. Though they look after her but she is very embittered about having three sons and none of them caring for her. She has very poor relations with her daughter in laws specially the eldest one who she feels has also misguided others by setting a bad example. First her eldest son left the house as his wife could not see eye to eye with her and then the other two followed suit after their marriages with their wives, feeling that they would have more independence and lead life as they wish.

She feels very depressed and lonely and has no wish to live. Being continuously admonished and criticized by her daughter in laws for her behavior, habits, dressing pattern etc. she prefers to stay with her married daughter. She feels that she is not to be blamed for the conflict in her family and she being elder, they should have been courteous and had adjusted with her. Till she is alive she does not wish to see them again and agrees that she would not have handed over the household authority to any of her daughter in laws had they lived with her. She appeared to be a very dominant lady, very conscious of her self pride and dignity, who was being forced to adjust to this situation.

*Highlights of the case* - This case is very unique. Own sons have completely disowned this old widow of 68 years and youngest daughter and her husband are taking care of her. Relations with sons as the case

reveals has almost ended. She perceives that she is dead for them. Her husband had not made good saving due to expenditure for children's education, marriages etc. Son in law takes care of her but she is not comfortable socially with apprehension of what others may feel of her sons who have abandoned her forcing her to stay with her daughter. She suffers with sense of loneliness due to emotional problem. This case also validates the importance of education and counseling as a most important component of happy ageing. In most of the families of today, there is a strong assertion of self, freedom and absence of concern for other members leading to inevitable clashes and interpersonal conflicts. In successful interpersonal relations what is required is keeping behind inflated egos, providing anchorage to other's emotions and perceiving mutual benefits in staying in a close knit family.

#### **Case IV**

Mrs S G, a sixty nine year old lady lives in a beautiful two storied house with her husband and two sons – both married. Her husband Mr R P G, seventy two year old is retired. He had a clothes shop, which is now being run by his sons. Mrs S is a graduate and a housewife. Few years after their sons marriage, their sons demanded share in the property and shop and now stay separately in the same house. Cooking is done separately and Mrs S cooks for herself and her husband, she has a maid servant for washing the dishes and doing the cleaning.

Their sons grossly misbehave with her and her husband. They shout and scream at them and threaten to throw both of them out of the house though the property is still in her husband's name. She feels that they are provoked by their wives who though openly do not misbehave, never oppose their husbands from misbehaving and remain neutral and watch the fun and pose as if they are not a party to it. The old couple's means of livelihood at present is income from their savings. Her sons do not render any financial help. When any one of them falls sick, an old servant who works in the shop comes over to help and takes them to doctor, buys medicines and nurses them. Though at present both are not suffering from any such ailment she can't think of what would happen if one of them were to die or fall very sick. She earnestly feels that it would have been better not to have any children rather than have such children who totally neglect and abuse them and are after their money. She feels no law or

government can punish them and only god can punish them adequately for their misdeeds.

*Highlights of the case-* Such cases are becoming very common feature today where the young married sons are loosing the value of elderly care and command them to live according to their whims, showing disrespect and unruly behavior towards them. Such behavior needs to be strongly condemned and made punishable by suitable legislations.

#### **Case V**

Mr J S S, a seventy three year old widower, is a retired teacher who was employed in a government school. He is a postgraduate and has three sons and four daughters well educated and married. Two of his sons stay away with their families due to employment. He stays with his eldest son, daughter in law and two grandchildren in his house. At present he gets adequate pension and he is not dependant on any of his sons for his needs. His three daughter in laws are also working. The entire family is very close knit and he is given due regards by all. At present he is very lonely and depressed as against his expectations one of his daughter had filed a case against him demanding share in the property. He was shocked and initially just could not come to terms with the fact that his own daughter could do this to him. Soon the other two daughters also followed suit and joined their sister in demanding their respective share. He admits that all his children have share in his property and he has already given his daughters their fair share during their marriage. He still has household authority but he could not just believe it when his daughters resorted to go to court to claim their rights.

As told by his son he does not impose his views on anyone but does expect due respect and regards from them. He does not believe in interfering in their day to day lives and is very adjustable by nature. He has always helped not only his children but also other relatives at times of need and no one had expected that he would have to suffer this mental agony at this stage of life. He was so depressed that he had to consult a psychiatrist and is under his treatment. He feels embarrassed to face his friends, relatives and neighbors and avoids them. He feels it is his eldest son in law who is very greedy for money and is provoking his daughter to behave in this manner. He misses his wife but on the other hand he thanks god that at least she is not alive to see this brutal behavior

by her daughters. He criticizes the legislations protecting women's right to inherit paternal property and feels that there are many loopholes in it for which he and his family have to suffer. Though his sons are very supportive he feels cheated at this stage of life.

*Highlights of the case-* Thus it is not only the sons and daughter in laws who are notoriously blamed to be the perpetrators of elderly abuse but in this case his own daughters are not hesitating to hurt him out of greed for money and property.

#### **Case VI**

Mrs S K, a seventy years old widow, lives with her youngest son in an old building. She has three sons – all working and married. Her husband had a factory dealing with motor parts and had a big house. He had wanted the property to be shared equally by his three sons but after his death they all fought with each other and wanted the house to be divided into three separate parts. The worst part was that no one wanted to keep the poor old lady with them. Finally the youngest son agreed to keep her with him on the condition that he would be given a bigger portion in the property. As his children were very young and his wife was also employed as a teacher, he wanted his mother to look after the children in their absence. Finally they decided that two rooms would be allotted to her in the younger son's share. The other two sons have since then renovated their portions, which now stand out separately due to partition by walls and have separate gates. Her youngest daughter in law cooks food for her and sees to her needs but is very miserly in spending on her. The old lady curses herself for being still alive and not having died with her husband. Two of her other sons neither speak to her nor allow their children to come in contact with her. She blames no one but her fate and this modern era which she feels has made her sons so self centered and selfish. She also blames her husband for not having saved for her separately so that now she has to completely depend on her youngest son for each and every penny. Once his grand children grow up, his son will not hesitate to throw her out. She relishes the company of her two grandchildren and misses the other grandchildren who do not keep any contact with her. Rest of the time she spends in religious activities and is an active participant in kirtans in a nearby temple as well as a regular visitor to a local Gurudwara. She just prays to god to pick her up before she falls sick and becomes

dependant on others for her routine activities.

She had applied for pension under social welfare scheme and is receiving Rs. 300 per month enabling her to get some monetary relief. She suffers from mild arthritis for which she takes medicines on her own from local dispensary. When asked whether her sons take care of her during illness she laughed bitterly with tears welling up in her eyes. She said that they are least bothered and on the contrary they must be praying every time she is sick that 'Budhi Mar Jaye To Acha Ho'. She has never misbehaved with anyone and is a very gentle and soft spoken lady as told by her neighbors. Even after all this she says I have faith in god and soon everything will be okay and children will realize and repent for their mistakes.

*Highlights of the case-* Such cases where the children have completely lost values and do not hesitate to torture and neglect their parents are very common in today's era of consumerism and market forces. Having property today is no means of feeling secure after death of spouse rather it may invite more trouble for the elderly as this case shows.

**Conclusion**

The transition and progressive degeneration of human body with age is a natural phenomenon.

Whether human psychology of life, life values and beliefs are also transitory cannot be concluded. How far the old people are ready to get away from the old frame of mind and develop a new mind set congenial to healthy ageing is an undiscovered issue. We can at this stage believe that if the people are properly educated, prepared for healthy ageing then they can live comfortably. It is also possible that they can be moulded to some extent depending upon the reciprocity provided by the care providers, youth, own children, own son and other family members. Therefore it is equally important to evolve this concept of preparing youth and children as an important partner of healthy ageing. Any system devoid of reciprocity would not be functional. So it gives genesis of two approaches of healthy ageing 1) old age care perspective and 2) life long perspective of healthy ageing i.e. old age planning.

The first approach primarily focuses on present section of older persons. In this, we need to bother about how best congenial environment is needed and can be created for healthy ageing. How much the older people should be educated and how much the family member needs to be educated, on what dimension and for what purpose?

Under the second approach we need to concentrate

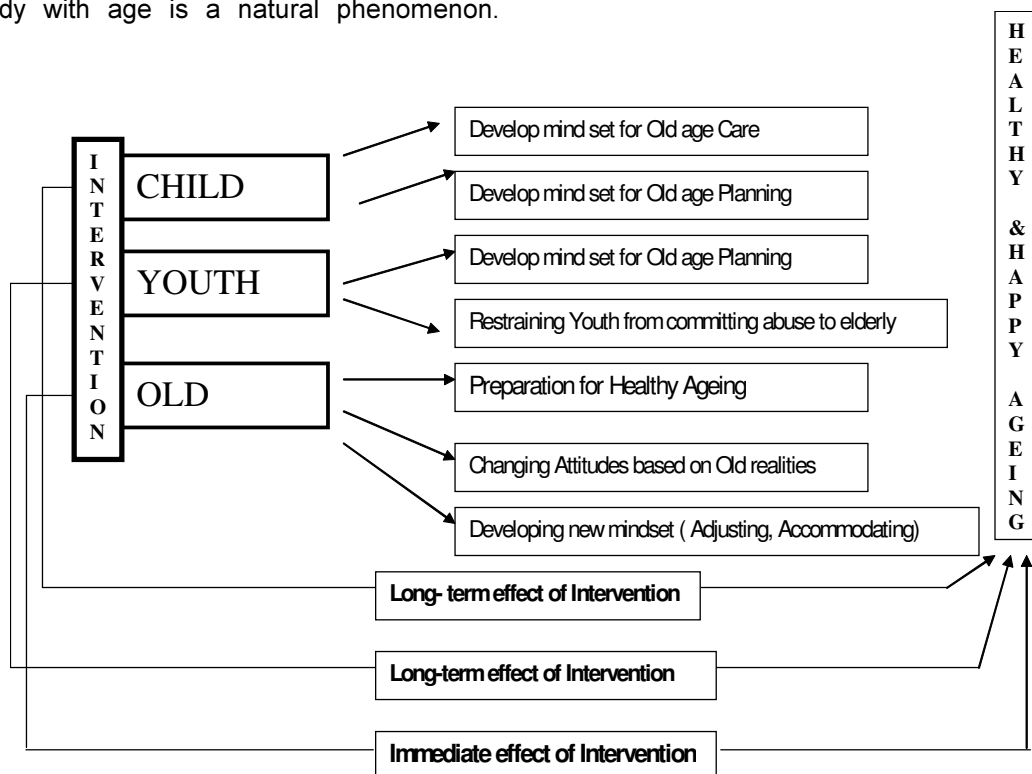


Fig. 1: Age related interventions for happy ageing.

on the youth and the children. The children need education for future life perspective. They must be explained about future social system, family set up, longevity of life and accordingly the possible support system they will have to create on their own. This stage could also be taken as golden period for inculcating in them values of old age care. The sensitivity to old age care would result into healthy treatment in behaviors of children in present as well as sensitivity to old age care when they would grow up as youth. It would provide a strong mind set for the planning for future old age care support. Most likely they would plan their economic resources from the very initial stages of earning during their youth. The other section under the second perspective is to target the youth of today who have already entered into earning stage of life either having completed their education or those who are earning besides undergoing some form of formal or informal education. It would require specialized focus on some care issues like long term economic saving and insurance, preparation for ageing-emotionally, financially and socially. Care of aged parents is desired who had not done any substantial planning and devoted their earnings in nurturing their family and in their children's education, their needs, marriages and other responsibilities etc. (Fig. 1).

The role of family counselors, community support, provision for home, legal measures of restraining children from committing abuse of any nature, awareness generation about elderly care, planning for old age need is to be recognized as important issues of healthy ageing. Both NGOs and volunteers should be provided training to work as watchdog of old age care.

Child awareness of old age care- School children needs to be educated about old age and old age care. They need to be sensitized about the sacrifices that old parents have done for the family, society and community. The old age generally perceived as burden, disease and non productivity is likely to come in

everyone's life. They need to develop mind set for old age care. The children with right type of inputs are likely to develop two types of mind sets- one is to grow with mind set of old age planning during prime youth of productivity and second is to grow with positive attitude towards older parents.

Youth's preparation for old age care - They should be encouraged to save money for old age so as to avoid economic insecurity. The youth also need to be given positive mind frame for old age care. They need to be sensitized about the old age care and associated problems. They need to be explained that denial of the basic needs of elderly can put them under punishable circumstances legally as well as socially. It may deprive them from natural inheritance of parental property.

Old age education- If healthy atmosphere in the family and society is to be created for healthy ageing, then need for educating older people for developing new mind set is equally important. Emotional and adjustment problems, loneliness, depression and clash between young and old are pertinent issues which need to be addressed. Reciprocity among family members is a key issue and it requires initiatives from all child, young and the old.

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