

Abstract

The present research work is a qualitative study of the elderly persons of some localities in Siliguri of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. An effort has been made here to sketch an account of the economic, demographic, physical, familial and psychological conditions of aged people through an extensive field work. The thesis contains six chapters. The first chapter is Introduction which introduces the problem and also includes review of literature, the objectives of the study and the methods of study. Chapter 2 provides the socio-economic and demographic profile of the elderly people on the basis of collected data from sample population. Chapter 3 depicts the health condition of the aged people, the nature of treatment and care. In chapter 4 the status of the aged in the family has been highlighted on the basis of their living arrangements, family support system available for them, their participation in family decision making process and their relationship with other family members. Chapter 5 deals with the psychological condition of the aged. It incorporates the leisure time activities of the aged people, their feeling of loneliness and happiness, their perception about their problems and about their future. Finally, chapter 6 confers on major findings of the study as well as the concluding remarks.

In the present study, it has been observed that elderly people is not at all a homogeneous social category. Wide spread differences are found among them in terms of age, sex, health condition, marital status, economic condition, situation of the family and psychological state. Therefore, any sweeping generalization about their condition would not only be misleading but may also impose stereotype ideas about the gray population. Broadly, it could be said that in old age the elderly people go through a process of transition. At the beginning of old age, there remains certain continuity in the life situation of the aged people with that of middle age in the sense that still they perform some of their roles that they used to play in their middle age. But with the passage of time the health of the aged persons gradually deteriorate, their physical

dependency on others increases, they lose their spouses, the life of their children get settled; they also gradually withdraw themselves from day to day affairs of the family. However, it is worth mentioning that though majority of the aged persons accept such transition as natural in course of life but at the same time they also expect that in major family issues the children would consult with them before taking the final decision. Thus, both the situation appear as problematic for the elderly people where they have to carry on too much familial responsibility due to the inability or unwillingness of the children to take responsibility and where they are too much isolated from family due to the ignorance of the of children.

The loss of spouse plays a pivotal role in the life of the elderly in general and elderly women in particular. Because in old age, the children gradually become busy with their own personal life and problems. They do not get enough time to share with their elderly parents even when they render all forms of instrumental and associational support. Some short of mental distance is also built up between the elderly parents and their matured children even in those cases where the relationships remain very jovial. At this juncture, the dependency of the old people on their spouses, for different kind support ranging from financial to emotional, increases. Therefore, the loss of spouse brings certain disruption in the support system for the aged, particularly in respect of emotional support. The elderly widows suffer more from the problem of loneliness, they remain less involved in family matters and sometimes they also suffer from inadequate support from the family.

The situations of the elderly female remain into a more vulnerable state than men in several respects. They suffer more from different kind of ailments and till date women health is given less priority in many families. As a result sometimes their ailments take more acute form. Further, majority of them are economically dependent on others and are widows, therefore, they have to depend more on the generosity of their children for different kind of support. The aged women get few opportunities to go outside the home and to intermix

freely with the outsiders. Most of time, they remain in their home and suffer more from the problem of loneliness, particularly after the death of their husbands.

If widowhood is appeared more problematic for elderly women, the economic dependency on others is found more demoralizing for aged males. The economically dependent men suffer more from the problem of loneliness, rate their health as poor, remain least involved in family decision making process and are found relatively more unhappy with their condition. They show higher level of frustration with their life and the withdrawal tendency is also observed relatively higher than others. Though the economic status of the aged people may not determine the quantity or quality of support flow to the aged from their children but it largely influences their decision making role in the family.

It is also observed that the elderly people are now exposed to social transformation. Though majority of them still live with their unmarried or married children, but simultaneously substantial section of them are compelled to live separately from their children because of several reasons like migration of children in other places for employment, education or marriage, disintegration of family due to conflicts between parents and children, only daughters family due to the downsizing of family, etc. This section of the elderly population remains in vulnerable state in terms of familial support particularly at the time exigency. The authority of elderly persons in the family has not remained supreme. In major family issues the aged persons have to give considerable importance to the opinion of the elder children even in those cases where the day to day family decision making power remain in the hand of the aged parents. Moreover, the involvement of the aged in family decision making process declines with the advancement of age, with widowhood and with deterioration of health. Similarly, though majority of the aged do get different kind of supports from their children and children also in most of the cases see it as their moral obligation to support their aging parents but still the

flow of such support is largely conditioned by the nature of relationships the elderly people have with their adult children. It is further observed that though majority of the aged do not face any serious problem regarding institutional and associational support, probably as a consequence of growing individualism in society where most of the time people remain busy to fulfill their own personal aspirations, certain mental detachment is also noticed between elderly and their children. In such situation, many aged people feel inadequacy of emotional support from the children particularly after the death of spouses. In other words, children do support their aging parents, but they do so more because they believe it as their moral obligation rather than due to their affection towards their elderly parents.