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Ageing with Poverty: A Study Among the Poor Elderly in Dhemaji District of Assam, India

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Abstract

The vulnerability and destitution of elderly persons substantially increased with poverty. This article attempts to study ageing and poverty in the Dhemaji district of Assam. Known for regular floods, the population of this district is prone to poverty and hence vulnerable. This vulnerability exponentially increases in the case of elderly persons. The complex relationship between poverty and ageing shows how ageing can be the cause of poverty, along with the fact that poverty pushes elderly persons into vulnerable situations. The sociological understanding of ageing and poverty examines the multiple sociological factors associated with elderly persons and their impact on the causes and consequences of poverty.

Keywords: Poverty, Ageing, Elderly.

Introduction

India's socio-economic situation necessitates a critical examination of ageing in the backdrop of poverty. The high rate of poverty and the increasing ageing population have drawn the interest of social scientists to engage with the complex character of the relationship exist between poverty and ageing. As both poverty and ageing require a nuanced understanding to comprehend the social situation of the country, this paper seeks to examine their complex interrelationship.

Poverty has both global as well as contextual dimensions. As such, poverty assumes a complex character in India to understand which is associated with the issues of lack of livelihood and issues of access to resources that go beyond the simplistic interpretation of the poverty line in rural areas. The influence of poverty on the aged population is multifaceted. The understanding of the influence of poverty on the aged population is not limited only to the question of "old age poverty" (Srivastava & Mohanty, 2012, pp.494-495), it requires a more engaged study. As Dommaraju (2016) suggested, out of ten aged men, one does not have assets, and approximately one fourth do not have source of income and other one third are fully dependent on others for finance (Dommaraju, 2016, p.8) thereby reflecting the significant presence of poverty amidst the aged population.

While discussing ageing in the backdrop of poverty, it is crucial to locate 'age' as an element affecting poverty. One pertinent question that comes to our mind while understanding poverty and ageing is whether ageing can be taken as a cause of poverty. How does the aged population's poverty differ from that of the non-elderly population? While the lack of proper implementation of government policies is



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attributed as a cause of poverty among the elderly population; limited savings, absence of pension, and increasing health care expenses are understood as causes of poverty among the elderly population that affect poor health outcomes, social isolation and reduced quality of life. Lack of proper implementation of government policies and the financially weaker sections can be identified as the cause of old age poverty in India (Junofy, 2013, p.148). In such a context, it is imperative to understand the effectiveness of various state policies, including the old age pension scheme of the government, in reducing poverty of the aged population (Junofy, 2013, p.148). In the backdrop of the constraint of the government in tackling the poverty of the aged population, Singh et.al. (2015) suggested the need for a universal pension scheme by the Indian government for both elderly men and women (Singh, Bharati and Sangal, 2015, pp. 40-41). While there is no reservation regarding the necessity of effective governance in dealing with the poverty of the aged population, it is beyond doubt to locate the social dimension of poverty among the aged population in India.

This paper seeks to examine the sociological nature of relation between poverty and ageing in the Dhemaji district of Assam. Being a flood-prone district of Assam, many people are vulnerable to poverty and other challenges. Apart from understanding various sociological causes and consequences of poverty and ageing, this paper also aims to illuminate on the specificity of the challenges faced by the poor aged population.

Field and Methodology

The present research is based on a study conducted in two villages, Hatipara and Garaimari, in the Dhemaji district of Assam. The researcher used a purposive random sampling method to select sixty respondents from poor households. The study also selected elderly respondents who were more than sixty years old. Adescriptive and analytical research design is used for the study.

Both villages have a substantial number of elderly persons living in poverty. Further, both villages are continuously facing the negative effects of floods, making them vulnerable. The Garaimari village under Chamarjan Village Panchayat of Dhemaji Development Block has 290 households and is situated at 10 K.M away from Dhemaji town. On the other hand, Hatipara village is under the Batghoria Panchayat of Dhemaji Development Block, has 139 households, and is situated at a distance of 12 K.M. from Dhemaji town.

Results and Discussions

Community

Both the villages under study are inhabited by the Sonowal Kachari Tribe. Several clans and sub-clans of Sonowal Kachari tribes are inhabitant of both Hatipara and Garaimari village. Among them *Formal, Hagral, Dingial, Dangral* and *Borhajuwal*, etc. are significant. There are also several kinds of *Hons* (Family/poriyal) such as Demari, *Pedari, Tepari, Keotari, Kasori, Hazari, Bormajhiri, Horumajhiri*, etc. Tribal status of the villagers affects both poverty and ageing to a significant extent, necessitating its critical understanding.

Socio-economic profile of the respondents

The sociological understanding of ageing and poverty requires an understanding of the socio-economic profile of the respondents. The socio-economic background of the respondents, characterised by age, sex, family type, sources of livelihood, education, income, etc., are important aspects that significantly



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fluence poverty and ageing and their concomitant variables.

Age

While the age of the respondents is important for any sociological understanding, it is more relevant while understanding the ageing and its consequences. Ageing not only has physical consequences for the aged persons, it can also have socio-economic consequences. Bakshi & Pathak (2016) state that while moving into the realm of older adulthood, most people find themselves either retired from active economic life or on the verge of retirement. An individual's economically productive life span may terminate with her or his retirement (Bakshi and Pathak, 2016, p.15). As such, they are more prone to poverty.

As regards the age of the selected respondents, the majority of the respondents (30%) are from the 60-64 age group, followed by 28.34% from the 65-69 age group. Other 18.34 % are included in the 70-74 age group, 6.67% are included in the 75-79 age group, 8.34 % are from the in the 80-84 age group and 5 % are included 85-89 and the other 3.34 % are from the 90-94 age group. Respondents belonging to 60 to 69 years of age are seen active both physically and economically than other elderly groups. This activeness decreases with the increasing age group which is closely associated with increase in poverty.

Sex

Socio-economic life of elderly people needs to be inferred in the backdrop of the sex of the respondents in general. The way of life, social status, income, power etc. are different from male to female. Gender does influence the life expectancy of elderly persons. As per UN data in 2013, 85 men per 100 women were 60 years or above and 61 men per 100 women were 80 years or above (Adjei, Brand, & Zeeb p, 2017, pp. 1-2). In such a context, it is necessary to understand the differential impact of gender on the life of elderly persons.

Agewell study in 2015 reported that

"Older women have more critical problems than men. Due to social and traditional family structure, they are forced to live with many limitations. Hence they find themselves marginalized and isolated all the time. Aged women live longer than man, a larger number of older women have to live a life of a widow in their silver year. A study by Michael S. Rendall and Alden Spear Jr. stated that the increases of poverty with age is greater for elderly women than for elderly men" (Agewell Study, 2015, p.1).

Similarly, the field data reflects 61.67 % are female and 38.34% are male. It has also been found that women are more vulnerable compared to men due to poor economic conditions and most of them are widowed and live alone. This makes it necessary to have specific provisions for the elderly women in society, both due to their specific nature of problems and the large proportion of elderly women in the society.

Marital Status

Marital status is a significant dimension in understanding the problems, wellbeing and lifestyle of elderly people. Married elderly living with a spouse have relatively more possibility of getting moral and other support at the old age. As Chaurasia & Srivastava (2020) stated, single elderly people face more abuse than the elderly who are married (Chaurasia and Srivastava, 2020, p.1).

In the present research, it is observed that 41.67% are married, 31.67% are widows, 15% are widowers and 11.67% are single or unmarried. It has been found that widows and single elderly women face more abuse, loneliness and discrimination than men. Thus, gender is important along with marital status



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in understanding the challenges faced by elderly persons. In the line of similar observations in literature, it is found that those who live with a spouse get more mental support and care than others and are hence less vulnerable.

Educational Status

Understanding the education status of elderly persons is important as education is a significant element as a precursor to good employment. Hence, education is an important factor and determinant of the socio-economic situations of the population, along with their health and well-being. Lower literacy in the Dhemaji district and particularly in the study area significantly affects the lives of elderly persons. As the study reveals, 38.34% of the respondents are illiterate, followed by 28.34% that studied up to primary education. 18.34% are studied up to secondary education and 15% are studied up to upper primary. It is reflected that illiteracy is a significant reason for the poor socio-economic condition of elderly persons.

Family

Being a source of support, the type of the family can be an important determinant of the life of elderly parents. The type of family influences the nature of elderly care. In the present research, it is observed that 46.67% live with a spouse and alone, 43.34% are living in a nuclear family and the other 10% live in a joint family. During the interview, it was found that those who live alone or with a spouse have been suffering from financial insecurity. Those who live in a nuclear family opined that they are deprived of care and support from family members in contrary to joint families. Joint family provides required support for members of the family even if they are deprived of financial aidof the government.

Sources of Livelihood

The study of the sources of livelihood is important in this research considering the nature of the financial support that the respondents are getting in old age. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood among them followed by daily wage labour, shopkeepers, business and government jobs. It is observed that illiteracy, flood havoc, lack of knowledge about modern machines, technology and inadequate communication are obstacles in getting suitable livelihood avenues by the respondents, thereby forcing them to live a life of poverty.

Table No. 1 Source of Livelihood of the Respondents

SN	Economic Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage%
1	Economically dependent on Others	25	41.67%
2	Cultivation	8	13.34%
3	Pension/Ration card	10	16.67%
4	Daily wages labour	5	8.34%
5	Small shop	3	5%
6	Selling local wine	6	10%
7	Bambo craft/handicraft	3	5%
	Total	60	100%

Source: Data are collected from selected field



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On the basis of the table given above, it can be inferred that 41.67% of the interviewed respondents are economically dependent on family members due to poor health and weakness and hence are vulnerable. While 13.34% of the respondents depend on cultivation, 16.67% depend on old age pensions and ration cards. 8.34% are economically dependent on daily wages. They work as a Master Mason (Rajmistri), assistant (jogali) and Carpenter (Kathmistri). Engagement in these works on an everyday basis is extremely hard for the respondents, considering the non-availability of the works and their age-related difficulties. On the other hand, 5% of the respondents are engaged in small shopkeeping, 10% are engaged in selling local wine, and the remaining 5% are involved in making bamboo crafts which are sold in the local market. From the above discussion, it is noticed that economically, the respondents have precarious sources of livelihood, which makes their lives more vulnerable, necessitating a constant source of income for them.

Income

The income of the respondents clearly reflects their vulnerable condition. Income is crucial variables that help to comprehend people's status, lifestyle, and occupational status. The low income along with their age-related risk, makes their lives embedded in struggle. Being retired and suffering from age-related illnesses, low income along with absence of a constant income source increases the struggle of the people.

Table no 2 Monthly Income among the Respondents

SN	Monthly Income	Number of Respondents	Percentage%
1	Zero income	25	41.67%
2	Up to Rs.1000	2	3.34%
3	Rs. 2000	8	13.34%
4	Rs.3000	3	5%
5	Rs.5000	4	6.67%
6	Rs. 6000	3	5%
7	Rs.7000 and above	15	25%

Source: Data are collected from the selected field

Above table shows that the highest proportions of respondents i.e. 41.67% have no income sources and are fully dependent on family members and relatives. Further, 3.34% have a monthly income of up to 1000; 13.34% have declared their monthly income as Rs. 2000, which is also not sufficient considering the increasing cost of living of the elderly people.

Challenges faced by the Elderly Respondents

As observed from the above discussion, there are different sets of problems faced by elderly people emanating from their poor socio-economic conditions. Further, age is a significant element responsible for distinctive sets of problems of the elderly people. In such a context, it is necessary to identify and categorize the distinctive set of problems faced by the elderly in order to design comprehensive policies for elderly people. It is found from the field that elderly people face issues such as food and nutritional problems, physical health problems, nutritional problems, accommodational insecurity, living arrangements/loneliness, abuse, economic insecurity, and inadequate care. It is found that one in six



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people who are 60 years old and above face abuse or violence in community or household-level settings in some form or another. This can have cataclysmicconsequences in health, socio-economic conditions and psychological situation of older adults (Sinha, Mishra, Srivastava, & Kumar, 2021, p.2). Sathya, Nagarajan & Selvamani (2022) reported that

"Physical and mental health conditions such as lower functional ability, cognitive impairment and chronic health conditions are associated with elder abuse. Poor physical health has been identified as a key risk factor of elderly abuse" (Sathya, Nagarjan & Selvamani, 2022, pp.14-15).

Thus, elderly people face a distinctive set of problems that are multidimensional in nature and require comprehensive intervention which takes care of the different problems faced by elderly.

Table No. 3 Sex-wise Distribution of the Problems Faced by the Respondents

Problem →	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total	Percentage%
Sex J										
Male	2	4	3	3	2	2	3	4	23	38.33%
Female	3	9	2	3	4	5	6	5	37	61.67%
Total	5	13	5	6	6	7	9	9	60	100%
Percentage										
% Male	3.33%	6.67%	5%	5%	3.34%	3.34%	5%	6.67%		38.33%
Female	5%	15%	3.34%	5%	6.67%	8.34%	10%	8.34%		61.67%
Total	8.34%	21.67%	8.34%	10%	10%	11.67%	15%	15%	100%	

Source: Data are collected from selected field

List of Different Problems Faced by the Elderly as given in Table No. 3

- 1. Food and Nutritional Problems
- 2. Physical health Problems
- 3. Mental health problems
- 4. Accommodation insecurity
- 5. Living arrangement/loneliness
- 6. Abuse
- 7. Economic insecurity
- 8. Inadequate care

As observed from the respondents, 61.67% are female and 38.33% are male. It is pertinent to mention here that the female are found more vulnerable in the backdrop of the different challenges faced by elderly persons. The researcher attempted to get a typology of the challenges and problems faced by the



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respondents and found that 21.67% have been suffering from physical health problems. Among total respondents, 15% female and the 6.67% male respondents are suffering from physical health problems. Again, the nature of physical health problem suffered by the respondents are diverse in nature. Among female respondents, two women stated that they have joint and muscle pain. An elderly woman stated that she has been suffering from visual problems. Among male respondents, two said that they are suffering from stroke and the resultant physical abnormality. It is observed that they are able to speak and hear but unable to walk without support. Hence, we can safely argue that physical health issues are of immense concern for elderly persons of both sexes. Still, there are significant gender differences in the nature of the problems faced by male and female members.

Age-related physical health issues became more challenging for the respondents due to their poverty. Respondents with increasing health-related issues do not get proper medical care due to poor economic conditions. Field data shows that 15% of respondents are suffering from economic insecurity and of the total respondents, 10% are female and 5% are male. The economic insecurity is to the extent that respondents even fail to manage the goods of daily survival. 15% of respondents said that they are deprived of adequate care and support. Among total respondents, 8.34% are female and 6.67% are male who do not have adequate care and support.

Respondents also opine on the lack of proper care, mental support, good manners and negligence from children and family members as significant challenges. It is also observed that 11.67 % elderly face elderly abuse and mistreatment. Of the total respondents, 8.34% of female respondents are victims of abuse, along with 3.34% of male respondents. Two female respondents mentioned that they had been suffering from physical assault and being beaten up by their daughters-in-law. One male respondent highlighted the financial abuse he has been facing and the conflict with his sons over his property and pension.

The table shows that 10% of the respondents face accommodation insecurity. An elderly woman and two elderly men have been staying in a very poor and unhygienic house. One elderly man and two women do not have their own house and they live with their relatives. 10% respondents stated that they have challenges in arranging their living. It is found from the study that two men and two women live separately from the son and daughters-in-law and live with their spouse in very isolated areas and unhygienic house. They have said that they live separately due to abuse and mistreatment by son and daughters-in-law. Two females stated that they live alone due to death of their partner and their children do not live with them.

8.34% of respondents have been suffering from food and nutritional problems. Respondents have given their opinion that because oftheirold age and poor physical and financial situations, they are deprived from nutritious food. Two persons stated they are unable to get proper nutritious food due to lack of sufficient money. One woman and one man said that they consume local wine regularly and it affects their health. Remaining 8.34% are suffering from mental health issues. Among them, two male and one female have lost their memory, and another woman is suffering from depression, and the other two people are feeling irritable.

Based on the above discussion, it can be inferred that the poor elderly are facing multiple challenges which have a multidimensional impact on the population. It is also important to understand the complex nature of the relationship between poverty and ageing which also have a gender dimension in order to get comprehensive understanding.



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Conclusion

On the basis of the study conducted in *Garaimari* and *Hatipara* villages of Dhemaji District, the researcher has found the complex relation between poverty and ageing. The poor socio-economic background of the respondents in the two villages significantly influences the nature of problems and challenges faced by the elderly in the two villages. Further, poor and elderly people are vulnerable due to a lack of access to government welfare programmes, due to their unawareness of such facilities. Poverty increases the vulnerability of elderly persons along with their vulnerability due to their age. In such a context, there is a necessity to enhance the economic conditions of the elderly to tackle with the challenges that are faced by the poor elderly.

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