

Age is not Just a Number: Reimagining the Definitions and Experiences of Ageing among the Elderly Tai Phake Community of Assam

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Abstract:

In the contemporary times population ageing is rising at a very alarming rate. Hence, the concept and definitions of ageing should have a multidimensional approach. When ageing is restricted to a fixed chronological threshold of age it isolates the cultural, social and subjective lived experiences of the elderly. This paper focuses on analyzing why the elderly must not be perceived through the lens of chronological age alone. It aims to highlight how community based definitions and perspective inclusive of roles and experiences on aging can be a pathway to help expand the understanding of aging and its approach towards the elderly.

Keywords: Ageing, Elderly, Chronological age, Buddhism, Tai Phake

Introduction

Aging is a universal, non - negotiable process which can be viewed via multiple dimensions (Singh, 2000). The idea of ageing itself is very broad and therefore requires wider perspective to understand its process (Chalsie, 2019). Most of the definitions of aging is related to the biological aspects of decline in bodily functions, gradual decrease in physical and mental capacity or age progressive decline in intrinsic physiological. It is however, necessary to acknowledge that the decline in functional ability does not equate with the loss of function due to diseases (Chalise, 2019). Some identifies the aging process with fear, anxiety and denial while others interpret it as an experience which fosters maturity, productivity and meaningfulness (Nilsson, 2022). Regardless of the multitudinous understanding of aging one can identify distinct biological, psychological and social changes. Since ageing process is multi-faceted and subjective therefore to accept a single definition of who can be considered as aged or elderly becomes quite controversial (Nilsson, 2022). Conventionally, the elderly represents people from 60 or 65 years and above and this representation is largely based on chronological age alone as seen in multiple studies (Ouchi, Rakugi Et.al, 2017). A study (Orimo et.al ,2006) defines individual from 65 years through 74 years old as “early elderly” and individuals above 75 years as “late elderly”. However, with the increase in life expectancy, as a result of advancement in medical sciences, science-technologies, standard of living the basis of this definition might no longer be appropriate. In the recent years, sharp rise in population ageing has been witnessed. Between 2015 and 2050 the aging population will double from 12 percent to 22 percent as stated by the World Health Organization. Therefore, building a social system in favor of the elderly where they are not viewed as dependents but as contributors has become of utmost

necessity (Dugarova et al., 2017). In this regard the outlook of how elderly is defined and perceived in a society plays an extremely crucial role in constructing and ensuring a bright, healthy and long living society. The term elderly is associated with several connotations and because of these variations the traditional and community based definitions might differ from the official definition of old age which is primarily grounded in chronological age (Kowal & Dowod, 2001). Culture is a collective and personal force which shapes the process of aging and varies enormously across and within cultures over time (Luborsky & McMullen, 1999). Hence, while defining the elderly one must take into account the pluralities in historical, regional and socio cultural factors. These narratives are also subject to the constructions by which each society makes sense of old age (Gorman, 2000). Therefore, even if aging is a biological reality yet one must look into other dynamics of aging like their roles, participation, experiences, and engagement of the elderly in the community.

Significance

The WHO in their studies considers individuals above 60 as the elderly. All their studies revolve around this definition of ageing. However, multiple studies have highlighted the importance of redefining ageing and elderly. These studies argue that the widely accepted chronological age of elderly is only associated with the retirement age set by the government. Meanwhile, this definition becomes incoherent for individuals who work outside the formal sector and within a larger cultural spectrum. A study in Africa suggests, 50 years as old whereas a study in Japan suggests 75 years and above to be regarded as old (Orimo et al., 2006). The gap between the present literatures and the heterogeneity in viewing and defining ageing is significant. Therefore in order to define and redefine ageing in the society one must acknowledge that the difference in demography, region, culture, social roles has a huge impact. As mentioned earlier the widely accepted age of the elderly can possess limitations for a small population community in perceiving old age which impacts the overall policies and programs associated with ageing. Therefore, community centric ageing research is the need of the hour because active and healthy ageing cannot reach its full potential without community implementation.

Objectives of the study

1. To understand how the Tai Phake community perceives the elderly.
2. To explore how the Tai Phake community defines the elderly.

Methodology of the study

Tai Phake is a small community who are residing in two districts of Assam; Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district with a total of nine villages and a population of 1600. Out of the nine villages Namphake has the highest population with a total household of 115 and 120 elderly population.

The study framework is based on qualitative descriptive design. It is designed to explore the views, perceptions and experiences of the elderly. The data collected for this study is both primary and secondary. The primary data has been collected from 100 respondents from four Taiphake villages; Namphake, Tipam Phake, Long Phake and Ninggam. The respondents are selected purposively which includes the elderly. The data was collected through structured and semi structured interview schedule, observation, group discussion and narrative analysis. The secondary data was collected from various books, journals, reports, articles i.e both published and unpublished.

Context/ background of the study

Taiphake is one of the branch of the greater Tai race of Asia who were the settlers of the Hokong Valley of Northern Myanmar for almost 400 years since 1215 A.D. It was during the settlement in this region when they started identifying themselves as Taiphake where “Pha” means wall and “Ke” means old or ancient. Thus, etymologically the term “Phake” means “ancient wall”. In the year 1775 A.D they migrated from Hokong to the Northeastern part of India due to various socio- political issues and threats from the then Burmese King. They migrated from the Patkai range and settled in a palce called “Nongtau” which is situated in Arunachal Pradesh. Then in 1798 A.D they moved to Jorhat, Assam and stayed there for a few years until the Burmese invasion. It was during the invasion the Burmese the Burmese identified the Taiphake as their own people and ordered them to move back to their country. In 1814 they started their journey towards Myanmar but due to extreme weather conditions their journey came to a permanent halt that forced them to stay near the source of the Lohitriver which was later known as “Namjik” where “Nam” means water and “jik” means source. In 1830 they finally established a permanent village in Margherita known as Bor Phake. There were one thousand households settled in total and was known as the largest Taiphake village before they disintegrated into smaller groups and formed another 8 villages in Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts of Assam. There are a total of nine villages at present with a total population of 1600. Two villages are situated in Dibrugarh district namely Namphake and Tipam Phake and seven districts are situated in the Tinsukia district namely Bor Phake, Long Phake, Maan Mo, Phaneng, Ninggam, Nonglai and Mounklang.

At present, the Namphake village is the largest village with a total population of 700 and the smallest village is Nonglai with a population of 34. The Tai Phake people are the followers of Theravada Buddhism. They are a small but significant community with their distinct culture, lifestyle, language, food habits, dress patterns, beliefs, traditions, rituals and customs.

Ageing as a spiritual dimension

The Tai Phake community is the follower of Theravada Buddhism. Hence, the beliefs and practices associated to Buddhism reflect greatly on how the elderly are identified and ageing is viewed in the community. These views in turn determine the social and cultural position of the elderly in the community. “Atthasila” also known as “Khaamsun Pet” is a practice which is kept in the highest regard and has a sacred significance in the community. It is practiced during the there months “Rains retreat”, usually from July to October. They are a set of eight moral precepts which are followed by the individuals strictly during observances. It includes; to restraint from lying, to restraint from harming/ killing living beings, to restraint from intoxication, to restrain from sexual activity, to restrain from luxury habits, to restrain from eating after noon, restrain from entertainment and adornment and other worldly desires. The individuals who follow “Khaamsun Pet” are known as “Ya Khaamsun” and Puu Khaamsun” which is basically the honorifics used for male and female “Khaamsun Pet” observers. This is a marker of elderly and is perceived as a reaching a milestone in one’s life.

A respondent (25, Female) stated;

“When you asked me to name few people I consider as elderly the first thought which came to mind was Yaa Khaamsun and Puu Khaamsun. When we have to invite elderly irrespective of their age they come to mind”.

Another respondent (65, Female) stated:

“We have to learn that we are not permanent residents of this world, hence practicing “Aathasila” is the highest form of Dhamma to attain Nirvana. That’s why the more number of “Aathasila” you observe the greater is your wisdom and recognition as an elderly.”

These statements reveal that irrespective of one’s age, elderly is considered as someone who practices “Khaamsun Pet”/ “Atthasila”. The more “Khaamsun Pet” one practices in their life course the greater is their esteem as an elderly in the community. It was expressed by the respondents that after one’s commitment into the practice their roles, activities and behaviour changes in the society.

Another concept of the teachings of Buddhism is the three truths of life, which are believed and expressed in their interpretations on old age. First is “Annica”, which means there is no permanence in life and everything will eventually change. Second, is “Dukkha” which states that because there is no permanence, clinging or expecting it to give permanent happiness creates sufferings. “Anatta”, means there is no permanent “self”. A person is living in a process and hence there is no- self. As a respondent (80, Male) express:

“Birth, being young, getting old it is all a process of life. Everybody will get old someday. If I hang in the fact that I was once youthful and could run I would only create more suffering for myself which I cannot control.”

It reflects the teachings of Buddhism where change is the only constant and with every phase of life the self is also continuously changing, adapting and revealing to new experiences good or bad. Hence, ageing is defined through the lens of these religious and spiritual observances.

Ageing as a socio – cultural construct

Socio-cultural concept of ageing is shaped by the norms, traditions, customs, social relationship, roles and societal expectations. Within the Tai Phake community, there is a hierarchy based on the social and cultural roles you perform. For instance, one’s involvement as a “Puu chale”, denoting a person who leads the religious observances. The individual’s transition into these roles are based on their conscience rather than being enforced. It has also been seen that when one person from a group transition into these roles it influences his contemporaries from the group to engage as well. Therefore, elderly is considered as someone who has great wisdom to teach to the younger generations, knowledge about religious teachings, history and active engagements in traditions, rituals and customs. A respondent (90, Male) states:

“If I cannot learn from my experiences over the years and teach the young can I even call myself an elderly. I would be called “Thau lo Thau nai” (which translates to aged only in numbers and uselessly). So, be old in experiences not just numbers”. (80 years, Female)

This reveals the expectations and roles that are associated with being an elderly which often times can be a set standards or social constructions around ageing. It is the perspective that a certain level of engagements and activities with the roles, and responsibilities, expectations defines an elderly.

Ageing as a physiological construct

With age there comes an unavoidable physiological change which gradually becomes visible. It changes our physical structure and characteristics. The physical attributes are also seen as a dimension of defining elderly in the community.

“ Koun Thau” (elderly) means someone who has gray hair, wrinkles, and decline in energy due to decline in functions of the body.” (45 years, Male)

“They say I look younger than my age but my body says otherwise. They don’t see the wrinkles. Maybe I have to dye my hair white” (66 years, Female)

These statements from the respondents reflect elderly and ageing from the point of systematic biological changes and functional ability as one age. The mentioning of change and decline in body stature, skin pigmentation, wrinkles, gray hair, changes in body composition are all physiological markers of ageing. This lived experience enhances the subjective understanding of ageing.

Ageing as a chronological construct

When ageing is viewed from a chronological perspective it defined by the number of years an individual has lived since birth. Age becomes the primary factor of identifying an elderly.

“60 years is not old, you still have the energy to engage in different things. But by 70 you have selective things you look forward to.” (75 years, Male)

“The vision that I have when you asked about elderly is definitely someone who is someone above 70. But yes according to retirement age it is 60.” (55 years, female)

The opinions about the elderly can be analyzed from the statements where elderly is identified from the chronological age of an individual. It is to be noted that the majority of the respondents under this perception asserted that when elderly are identified by age threshold, an individual of 60 years does not feel like a fitting representation of elderly in the community. so higher age threshold are considered as a fitting representation.

Findings

First, the study reveals that the definition of the elderly in the community is multi layered. It cannot be concluded by one single definition. There is chronological age, spiritual, socio-cultural and physiological markers of defining elderly and ageing in the community.

Second, chronological age in defining elderly in the community has very little significance. It is also worth mentioning that the formal age of “60 years” as identification of elderly is not widely accepted by the individuals in the community. Majority of the respondents did not identify the elderly from the chronological age of 60. Rather, 60 years is regarded too early to be considered an elderly.

Third, the way of life of the people in the community surrounded by the teachings and practices of Buddhism shapes their perspective on ageing and how elderly is defined in the community. For instance, the practice of “Atthasila” alters their way of life, status, roles and behaviour of the individuals who observe it within the community. Usually, the individual who observes it ranges from 55 years until they physically cannot. But, this does not limit it to a spiritual and religious observance alone. It becomes a guided way throughout their life and ageing process. Accordingly, this dimension has immense significance in the society of Tai Phake.

Fourth, the views on conceptualizing ageing and elderly overlap across multiple dimensions. It is a continuous process and the experiences are not confined and distinct rather they are characterized by inter-connectedness.

Fifth, the elderly position in the society is determined by the activities, roles and responsibilities they undertake in the society and the roles they undertake determines their position in the society. Hence, it is a vice versa process and is of utmost significance

Conclusion

This study has highlighted on the need for cultural inclusive studies of ageing in the community level which will help in dictating the course of the elderly population in the coming years. The study reflects that if we bind an age group as old and negatively represent them then it limits their potential of contribution in the society and ultimately impacts their life satisfaction. And with the sharp increase in the population ageing it has become a crucial time to look beyond the narrative and perspective of the Western methodology alone.

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