



As the elderly population grows, India faces new questions, must find new answers.

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Highlights

- For a society in the throes of **turbulent change**, however, even the most sacred of **relationships has come under pressure**.
- The share of the elderly in India living **alone or only with a spouse** increased from **9 per cent in 1992 to 19 per cent in 2006**.
- The modernising forces of demographic change, growth-induced **geographic mobility and a sense of individualism**, have transformed society within a span of **one generation**.

Reasons for increase

First,

- **Growing life expectancy and lower fertility** rates mean an increasing share of elderly in the population, putting additional pressure on a smaller number of children.
- Since 1991, the **number of households has grown faster** than the population.
- **Nuclear families** now constitute **70 per cent** of all households.

Second,

- **Better economic opportunities** mean that **children are leaving home** earlier than they used to, migrating not to the neighbouring town, but across states and countries.
- According to the 2017 Economic Survey, 90 lakh people, on average, migrated between Indian states for either work or education each year between 2011 and 2016.
- **Urban living is predominantly nuclear**, and only 8.3 per cent of the urban elderly live in joint families.

Third,

- Direct or indirect **exposure to the Western way of life** has given this

generation an **alternative idea of family responsibility and how to organise care.**

- The **share of adult children** who said that **caring** for their elderly parents was their **duty fell from 91 per cent in 1984 to 51 per cent in 2001.**

Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act

- The Government of India in 2007 enacted the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, which made it a **legal obligation for children** to provide maintenance to parents in the form of a monthly allowance.
- In 2018, the revised Act seeks to **increase the jail term for negligent children, broaden responsibility** beyond biological children and grandchildren and expand the definition of maintenance to include safety and security.
- This law will ultimately **safeguard the rights of those elderly** who have seen abuse and help them pursue legal action.

Prevailing Issues

- But when financial needs are met, and social ones remain, the bite of law is limited. **Isolation and loneliness** among the elderly is rising.
- Nearly half the elderly felt **sad and neglected**, 36 per cent felt they were a burden to the family. One in every five people will be above the age of 60 by 2050.
- As the **trends of smaller families and reductions** in the cost of mobility continue, it is our values that will determine what the future looks like.

Modified extended families and other alternatives

- On one hand, sociologists have predicted the **rise of modified extended families** to replace joint families.
 - This hybrid structure of nuclear families enmeshed in large kinship networks is characterised by close familial bonds despite geographic distance — manifested in frequent visits to parents, and participation in events such as births, marriages and festivals.
- An **alternative future** is one where **social support comes from other elderly.**
- Facing **greater competitive and economic pressures**, young Indians may create a tipping point where **old-age homes become the norm**, and there is **no longer any stigma or guilt** associated with them.
- In **Kerala**, there has been a **69 per cent increase** in the residents of old age homes in **2011-15.**

Conclusion and Way Forward

- For a society caught between greater economic opportunities and individual freedoms on one hand and traditional values and moral responsibilities on the other, finding a balance is not straightforward.
- With the passage of time, the values that were once internalised at the dining

table might become too distant a memory to check the opportunities and freedoms of the day.

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