Chapter 6

Feminization of Old Age and Experiences of Subalternity: The Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Inclusion – Exclusion in Urban India

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ABSTRACT

The demographic feature of twenty-first century has been the rise of the aged population, making them socially visible. However, the concern is that an aging world is also a feminized world. But this transition does not hold a very vivid future as the elderly women are the most vulnerable section of the population. They make up for the majority of the poor due to scarce access to education, property, and employment opportunities. Widowhood often leaves them impoverished and victims of abuse. Until recently, aging women have not been considered a subject requiring serious attention in India. Most of the studies on old age have adopted a gender-neutral approach to the problems of ageing. It is a paradox that the feminist movement has marginally addressed this issue even though gender along with social, economic, and political factors has a profound impact on how people age, thus making aging a gendered experience. The question remains why aging has not been taken up as a feminist issue in India. This chapter gives insight into the reasons for their vulnerability.

INTRODUCTION

Ageing is a universal experience for everyone, with diversity in meaning and interpretation (Bali, 2001). However this ageing population has become the most challenging demographic phenomenon of the 21st century. As per the United Nations projection, the world population will increase from 6.5 billion to 9.1 billion by the year 2050. Another report on “Ageing in the 21st Century: A Celebration and a Challenge” also revealed that the number of centenarians will rise nearly tenfold from 316,000 today to three million by the year 2050 (UNFPA, 2012). This global phenomenon of the growing bulge in ageing population also afflicts India in several ways. The country has experienced a dramatic transition in the

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last 50 years, entailing almost tripling of its population over the age of 60 years (Government of India, 2011). Today, India ranks second amongst the countries of the world in terms of the absolute number of the ageing population, next to China only. The challenges and opportunities for the India’s burgeoning youths are much talked about at the national and international level, but however, very little attention has been paid how to take care and wellbeing of the country’s bulging ageing population. According to recent report by a UN agency, with 1.2 billion people, India is sitting on a social time bomb (Murray, 2012). It is projected that the proportion of Indians aged 60 years and older population will rise from 7.5 percent to 11.1 percent by 2025 (UNDESA, 2008). Along with this the oldest-old age segment (80 years and above) is the fastest-growing segment and by 2050, about 20 per cent of older persons will be 80 years and above. The coming decades therefore are characterised by ageing of the aged. This will have significant implications for the older persons themselves, as well as the families and societies they live in (Subaiya & Bansod, 2011).

The advancement of technology and liberalization of economy through the process of Globalization has been changing the face of India. The population policies, technological and medical advancement helped in big way in improving the quality of life as well as longevity in life. Indirectly it helped decline in fertility as various birth control methods were used extensively. However, it posed a major challenge due to changing social norms of the family and inability of the social institutions to handle the bulging aged population in the society. As remarked by Ban Ki-Moon, the UN Secretary General, that older people bring significant benefits to the society, but warned that a spiralling population will spark major challenges for the nations in areas like healthcare and pensions (Webb, 2012).

With the changing family structure from joint/extended family to nuclear, migration of male population from rural to urban spaces for better job prospects, limited space rented accommodation, aspiration for children’s future, changing values structure, growing individualism, rising aspiration for consumerism along with technological revolution and education the space for the aged in the family is becoming gradually redundant. Given the overarching emphasis, the society and its institutions place on youth, vitality and physical attractiveness, older people tend to become marginalized or ‘invisible’ (Srivastava, 2000). The economic inadequacy due to modern life style is resulting in not just shrinking of resources for the aged in family but has caused them severe abuse and neglect. The aged no longer considered as custodians of traditional knowledge rather they have become redundant for the younger digitized generation. The gradual erosion of the traditional joint family system and the inability of the government to sustain the incremental burden of pension expenses for its own employees makes the situation worse and precarious (Bhattacharya, 2005).

The entry of women in large scale into workforce in recent times has had made the life of elderly vulnerable, total neglect and full of abuse and insecure which infact has created another segment or another phenomenon of ‘feminization of old age ‘especially in the 80+ segment of the population. In a country where female foeticide and infanticide is a common social practice, UNFPA report suggests that the India elderly women population exceeds the male population. However, Sasirekha & Sarulatha research findings suggest that the elderly women population size has been increasing remarkably (Sasirekha & Sarulatha, 2012). The Census data for the 2011 also reinforces the facts stated above (Table 1).

India’s elderly population has already crossed 100 million marks during the year 2011. Though aged women are in greater proportion in developed nations but their number exceeds in absolute number in developing countries. As per the Census 2011, whereas for total Indian population sex ratio is in favour of male population in ratio 940:1000, for elderly at (60+) population it’s in favour of elderly women by 1022:1000. In upper age groups, population of older women is increasing remarkably. At the age of
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