Chapter 9

Demographic Transition in India: Issues and Concerns

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ABSTRACT

India’s older population will increase dramatically over the next four decades since aging is an inevitable law of nature. It is estimated that the population aged 60 years and above will grow from 77 million (7.4% of the total population) in 2001 up to 300 million (17%) by 2050, according to the latest release by WHO. This profound shift in the share of older Indians—taking place in the context of changing family relationships and severely limited old-age income support—brings with it a variety of social, economic, and healthcare policy. The administration has duly recognized the elderly as a national resource and instituted policies in this regard. But the policies are yet to be implemented earnestly. Hence, there is an exigent need to discuss the issues of old age. The key messages for highlighting the issue of old age include, “Older people are a valuable resource for their societies, and societies, which care for their older populations, will be better prepared to cope with the changing world.” Let’s redefine old age as a time of growth instead of inevitable decline.

INTRODUCTION

Population ageing is an inevitable and irreversible demographic reality that is associated with welcome improvements in health and medical care. With longevity and declining fertility rates, the population of older persons (60 years and above) is globally growing faster than the general population. When populations age rapidly, governments are often caught unprepared to face and mitigate the consequences; this has implications for the socio-economic and health status of the elderly. Three key demographic changes—declining fertility, reduction in mortality and increasing survival at older ages—contribute to population ageing, reflected in a shift in the age structure from young to old. The demographic transition process of declining fertility and mortality gives rise to increasing bulge in older cohorts, compared

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to younger cohorts. The old-age dependency in the population therefore gradually increases. The shift from a period of high mortality, short lives, and large families to one with a longer life, far and fewer children is the hallmark of demographic transition. A top-heavy age structure means that the elderly have to depend upon incomes and revenues generated by a dwindling number of younger workers. In general, ageing is defined in terms of chronological age with a cut off age of 60 or 65 years. This definition is partly due to the fact that retirement age is also similar to this cut off age. When populations age rapidly, governments are often unprepared to mitigate the consequences. This has serious implications for the socio-economic and health status of the elderly. However, in many developing countries, chronological age may have very little relevance to retirement as majority of the elderly are engaged in informal sector with no specific retirement age. In such cases, the socially constructed meanings of age are more often significant, such as the roles assigned to older people or loss of certain roles that signify physical decline in old age. Globally, the 60-plus population constitutes about 11.5 percent of the total population of 7 billion. By 2050, this proportion is projected to increase to about 22 percent when the elderly will outnumber children (below 15 years of age) for the first time in history.

In India too, the size and percentage of the elderly population have also been increasing in recent years and this trend is likely to continue in the coming decades.

The demographic profile of India reveals that India now home to 1.27 billion people is projected to overtake China in the next decade and become the world’s most populous country. The United Nations Population Division projects that India’s population ages 50 and older will reach 34 percent by 2050 (UN 2011). Between 2010 and 2050, the share 65 and older is expected to increase from 5 percent to 14 percent, while the share in the oldest age group (80 and older) will triple from 1 percent to 3 percent. The population dynamics fueling India’s growth and changing age structure are rooted in the combined impact of increasing life expectancy and declining fertility. Life expectancy at birth in India climbed from 37 years in 1950 to 65 years in 2011, reflecting decline in infant mortality and survival at older ages in response to public health improvements. By 2050, life expectancy at birth is projected to reach 74 years. Fertility rates in India have declined to 2.6 children per women, less than one-half the early 1950s rate of 5.9 children per woman (Haub & Gribble 2011). As India’s population ages, the nation will face a shrinking pool of working-age people to support the elderly population. By 2042, the share of Indians 60 and older is projected to exceed children and youth ages 14 and younger (Chatterjee et al. 2008). Bloom (2011a) notes the burden of old-age dependency will be substantially offset by the decline in youth dependency associated with declining fertility. The population dynamics fuelling India’s growth and changing age structure are rooted in the combined impact of increasing life expectancy and declining fertility. Life expectancy at birth in India climbed from 37 years in 1950 to 65 years in 2011, reflecting decline in infant mortality and survival at older ages in response to public health improvements. By 2050, life expectancy at birth is projected to reach 74 years. Fertility rates in India have declined to 2.6 children per women, less than one-half the early 1950s rate of 5.9 children per woman (Haub & Gribble 2011).

Since ageing is inevitable, and the number of geriatric population is on increase in the country, there is an urgency to address the socio-economic and health needs of this growing mass of elderly population as a separate segment. Considering this matter with utmost seriousness, the administration has recognized the elderly as a national resource, creating opportunities for their development. Despite instituting a policy to consider the elderly as a resource; the policy is yet to be implemented by all States of India. Hence, there is an exigent need to discuss the issues regarding old-age on a broader platform with far-reaching consequences. The World Health Organization (WHO) in partnership with the Union Ministry of Health & Family Welfare has called for greater attention to the ageing of India’s population,