

Ageing with Dignity: Elderly and Elder Abuse



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Ageing, as we all know, is a natural phenomenon with opportunities and challenges. With the advancements in science and medicine, people worldwide are living longer. Today most people can expect to live into their sixties and beyond. Thus, all countries across the globe are experiencing growth in both the size and the proportion of older persons in the population. Older adults, with their wealth of experience and wisdom, serve as a beacon of guidance and inspiration for younger generations. It is rightly said that the best classroom in the world is at the feet of an older person. Unfortunately, in contemporary times, many people look at them as a burden.

As per World Health Organization (WHO), by 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or over. At this time the share of the population aged 60 years and over will increase from 1 billion in 2020 to 1.4 billion. By 2050, the world's population of people aged 60 years and older will double (2.1 billion). The number of persons aged 80 years or older is expected to triple between 2020 and 2050 to reach 426 million. According to Census 2011, India has 104 million older people (60+years), constituting 8.6% of total population. Amongst the elderly (60+), females outnumber males.

World Elder Abuse Awareness Day, takes place every year on June 15th, is a vital global event dedicated to raising awareness about the mistreatment and neglect faced by older people. This day encourages communities, organizations, and individuals to recognize the signs of elder abuse and take action to protect the dignity and rights of seniors everywhere. The day also serves to educate the public, promote understanding, and inspire efforts to support and safeguard older adults. This Day was first established by the International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and the World Health Organization in 2006. Since then, it has grown into a global movement, recognized by the United Nations and marked by countless initiatives worldwide. The day continues to foster collaboration among governments, organizations, and individuals to create safer communities for elderly people. In India, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is also celebrating this day. The theme for this year is – “Addressing Abuse of Older Adults in Long Term Care Facilities: Through Data and Action”. This theme focusses on the abuse of older adults in long-term care facilities. Many of us may not know, however there is a toll-free “Elder Line” helpline number – 14567, which is specifically designed for Senior Citizens.

Elder abuse, as per the World Health Organization, refers to a single or a repeated act, or lack of an appropriate action, happening within any relation that involves an expectation of trust, which causes distress or harm to an elderly person. Reports indicate that about 16% of aged people are subjected to abuse worldwide. As per the WHO (2024), around 1 in 6 people 60 years and older experienced some form of abuse in community settings during the past year. The rates of abuse of older people are high in institutions such as nursing homes and long-term care facilities, with 2 in 3 staff reporting that they have committed abuse in the past year. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic rates of abuse of older people increased.

India is no exception to the global trend of rising elder abuse, and, regrettably, a significant number of the elderly population in India is subjected to various kinds of abuse that mainly include physical abuse, neglect, and psychological abuse. Undoubtedly, abuse can occur in any place, ranging from their own homes to their relatives' homes, from hospitals and nursing homes to old age homes, or even workplaces. However, evidence suggests that violence against older adults primarily occurs at home, at the hands of family members, who often are also their caregivers. According to HelpAge India's nationwide research report 'Bridge the Gap: Understanding Elder Needs (2022)', 59% of elderly report abuse as being prevalent in Indian society, while 46% of the elders were not aware of any abuse redressal mechanism.

The Government of India has implemented various schemes and programmes to provide healthy, happy empowered dignified and self-reliant life to senior citizens, along with strong social and inter-generational bonding. In 2021, the **Department of Social Justice and Empowerment launched the Atal Vayo Abhyudaya Yojana (AVYA) which** brought together articulation of each of the current schemes, future plans, strategies and targets and maps it with schemes/programmes, accountabilities, financials and clear outcomes. Then the very recently launched Promoting Silver Economy which is a new scheme launched with an objective to encourage the entrepreneurs to think about the problems of the elderly and come out with innovative solutions. Another new addition being, the Channelizing CSR funds for Elderly care, this scheme has the objective to channelize the CSR funds in an appropriate manner for elderly care projects. Under Schedule VII of Section 135 of the Companies Act, setting up old age homes, day care centres and such facilities for Senior Citizens is an approved item for CSR funding. Other programs aimed at improving the overall well-being of older adults include the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme, the Annapurna program, the National Policy for Older Persons (1999), and Atal Pension Yojana (APY) to name a few.

India has also adopted progressive laws to enable elderly to lead a secure, dignified and productive life. The legal provision for maintenance of aged or infirm parents was first made through the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, which laid down that maintenance must be provided only to those who are unable or have no means to sustain themselves. The major drawback of this act at the time was its applicability only to the Hindu population. Then came in the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act (2007) which made care, maintenance and well-being of parents by their children obligatory and justiciable. In cases of abuse, the Act provides the older adults the right to approach a dedicated tribunal. With the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens (Amendment) Bill, 2019, older adults can avoid ill-treatment or abuse. The bill penalizes individual perpetrators with imprisonment for three to six months, a fine of up to Rs 10,000, or both. This bill also eliminates the Rs 10,000 maintenance fee upper limit, which was provided in the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007.

Coming to the context of Assam, the State Government really needs to be lauded for its effort in promoting a healthy and dignified life for the older people by enacting the Parents Responsibility and Norms for Accountability and Monitoring (PRANAM) Act 2019. A brainchild of the Chief Minister of Assam, Shri Himanta Biswa Sarma, this act is an important tool to financially empower the elderly and persons with disability (*divyang*) who do not have any source of income. Assam is the first State in the country to implement the PRANAM Act, which is an effort to protect elderly parents and *divyang* siblings of Government employees in their times of need. As per the Assam Government, 'the main aim of this Act is to cultivate a sense of responsibility and understanding amongst the working population in Assam. The dependent parents or differently abled siblings may need assistance in managing their finances and we may need to take a more active role in assisting them, so they are financially secured. Any dependent parent/ *divyang* sibling residing in Assam may approach the Designated Authority under the PRANAM Commission for apportionment of the salary of their son/ daughter/ brother/sister if they do not have the means to lead a decent life. The Designated Authority after verifying the eligibility of the case will ensure that they receive righteousness as per the provisions of the PRANAM Act.'

Despite this sustained policy effort focused on social security for older adults, none of these laws and acts are completely able to shield older people from ill-treatment or abuse. Awareness and sensitization of the population to the issue of elder abuse in one way this can be achieved. There is an urgent need for advocacy and awareness campaigns through partnerships with local communities, educational institutions, and government and private establishments, as it is essential to raise awareness about warning signs of abuse and where to reach out for assistance. It is also important to educate the older people about their rights and the redressal mechanisms available for them. There is an urgent need for all stakeholders such as civil society organizations, government agencies and policymakers to effectively collaborate to influence policy changes aimed at protecting the rights of the elderly and to oversee the effective implementation of the schemes and policies for the older people.

One of the easiest ways of reaching God is by respecting our elders, especially our parents. The Vedas stipulate “*mathru devo bhava, pithru de-vo bhava*”. The story of Shravan Kumar stands as an enduring symbol of filial devotion and selflessness, captivating the hearts and minds of people over centuries. The renunciation of the kingdom of Ayodhya, despite being the rightful heir, is a key example of Lord Rama’s devotion to dharma and his love for his parents. The presence of laws, policies and schemes will alone not make this world a safe place for older people. Safe spaces are made by sustained efforts. This, World Elder Abuse Awareness Day let us all take a moment to be with the older people around us in our families, neighbourhoods and communities and offer them support and companionship. After all, ‘One kind word can warm three winter months’.

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