



Short Communication

Neglect of the Elderly in Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's Novel *Pather Panchali*

Sangita Gautam

Michael Madhusudan Memorial College, Durgapur, West Bengal, India
gautamsangita.2003@gmail.com

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years, there has been a growing emphasis in old age problems. Old age care has become a matter of concern in our country. Now-a-days all of us are acquainted with old age homes. Elderly adults are shifting to old age homes for various reasons. And the reasons behind the increasing number of old age homes are the problems of the elderly adults and their care. Sometimes old age problems are represented through literature. In this article I shall highlight on a novel which represents the pictures of neglect or lack of care of the old widow, Indir Thakrun in Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's novel, Pather Panchali. Physical and emotional neglect can lead an elderly adult to death. The great writer Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay created the role of the old widow, Indir Thakrun in this novel and successfully portrayed the worst consequences of neglect of the elderly.

Keywords: Neglect, elder abuse, mistreatment, old age.

Introduction

Old age as a social construct is often tagged with a change of social roles and activities. Old age is often defined as a stage of decline in functional, mental and physical ability. Although in every age there is chance to develop disease or disability, in old age people are more prone to disease or disabilities. They experience a decline in the abilities such as vision, hearing, mobility and cognition that impact on various aspects of their everyday lives. Consequently, they often need support in daily life activities. The rise of smaller families and the increase in migration for work often mean that fewer children are at home to share physical, emotional and financial responsibilities for ageing parents and grandparents. This has the potential to lead to social exclusion, isolation, even abuse of older people¹. Family becomes the most important source of support and care in old age. Some older adults do not live within their families, whereas some have no family members. Family members spend time with their older generations, they invest money for their care and treatment, they offer other services to their older members. Family members offer instrumental and emotional support. Family is the source of connections to older generation. Family becomes the key provider of care in the time of physical illness and with the help of the family members health challenges are met². Family is the key provider of social and psychological support. As we get older, home and family life become more and more central. Due to industrialization, urbanization, globalization joint or extended families have transformed into nuclear one. Thus, families become smaller and their economic structures are changing. As a result new

values have emerged. Most significant of these is economic freedom. Another one is that women began working outside her house³.

In some cases, relationships can negatively impact an individual's life – specially in the case of neglect, abuse, abandonment, mistreatment by family or friends. The chances of physical, mental and financial vulnerability increase in late life. Neglect or lack of care, mistreatment negatively impacts the well-being of the elderly, increasing psychological distress as well as mortality rate. In old age, family functions as indispensable sources of social and emotional support. Moreover, shifts in family patterns over the life course leave older adults in vulnerable positions. Women in particular become increasingly vulnerable to partner loss as they grow older⁴.

Elder abuse, mistreatment and neglect

Abuse is a most frustrating thing in the lives of the elderly. In India we proclaim reverence for the elderly but its presence could be felt even in India. There are several types of elder abuse like assault, deprivation of food and deprivation of medical care and non-supply of prescribed drugs, emotional abuse, involuntary confinement and isolation, financial abuse, legal abuse etc⁵. Abuse of the elderly may be categorized into various forms such as physical abuse, financial abuse etc. Moreover, it can be advertant or inadvertant. Any form of elder abuse is harmful. It may cause either temporary or permanent psychological disorder for older adults. Physical abuse of the

elderly is the form which can be most easily recognized. Financial abuse, neglect can not be recognised and are generally not reported. Psychological abuse is the most difficult to identify and quantify⁶. The prolonged abuse causes lots of psychological disorders in elderly persons. The family is the basic source of living together and sharing economic responsibilities. The problems faced by elderly are managed by the family, which is the primary caregiver for its aged members⁷.

Old age problems, elder abuse are represented sometimes through literature. Literature is a great medium to sensitize readers about the old age care. In Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's novel *Pather Pachali: Song of the Road*, we can see the picture of elder abuse in case of the old widow Indir Thakrun. There is a story that Indir Thakrun had been married to a Kulin Brahmin. Kulin's were notorious for multiple marriages and Indir's husband, who apparently had many wives, seldom came to visit her. On the few occasions he did come, he stayed no more than a night or two and after collecting all the money which custom decreed to be his due, he ticked off the village in his book and went with his coolie to the next village he had married into. In consequence Indir Thakrun had very little memory of her husband. When her father and mother died she got a little food from her brother's house; but unfortunately her brother died too. Sometime later Horihor's father Ramchand came and built a house on the site that had belonged to Indir's parents and from then on she became a member of his household⁸. Indir Thakrun, an old woman of seventy-five, her cheeks were sunken, her body bent forward from her waist, and her eyes could not longer make out distant objects as they once did. Horihor came to Nishchindipur and set up house. Indir used to live in Horihor's family. Horihor had a small daughter whose love and companionship made these years in Horihor's household seem to Indir like those long past days when she was a young woman and a mother. Horihor's wife was very beautiful of face, but she had a most uncertain temper; what is more, she could not bear the sight of the old woman; to her Indir was an outsider - for no one could say how she was related to the family - who just sat there eating up half their food. Twice a day at least she quarreled with the old woman over some trifle or other; and sometimes after they had a long quarrelling, Indir would take her brass pot under her arm - it was all she had - and say, "I am off, young mistress, and if I ever set foot inside this house again.....!" When Indir came back with the little daughter, Durga, Shorbojoya commented, "So, the old wretch has come back, has she." "I suppose she has no where else to go to. There's no kitchen fire for her except this one. And she knows it! Yet she had the cheek to say she was going away". Shorbojoya called her an old witch and a vampire, because she was convinced that Durga was fonder of the old woman than she was of her mother. She was jealous and very angry to think that the child of her womb was being estranged from her; and she dropped hints at every meal that it would be a good thing if Indir made her way somewhere else while she was still able to go. But way was there? For the last seventy years, as long as she

could remember, she had been searching for that way in vain **8**. But Shorbojoya was an exception in this case. She was not at all a caring woman. She had no empathy for Indir Thakrun, she could not feel any responsibility towards Indir Thakrun. Lack of care or neglect is a problem that can negatively affect the mental health of the elderly. The neglected elderly has to face a number of problems such as loneliness, low self-esteem, isolation, depression and other psychological disorders. Prolonged neglect can affect the functional and cognitive ability of the older adults. Neglect of the elderly can be either physical or emotional. Emotional neglect takes place due to lack of support, respect and love, such as: not attending to the elder, ignoring calls for help, inattention to the elder's need⁹.

Conclusion

The condition of the poor elderly is acute. Due to their economic dependency on the family members or the society, they face insecurity till death. Even they can not afford proper medical care or formal care in need. Because of increased economic dependency, isolation, chronic diseases, psychological problems the elderly adults become the weaker section of the society who can not protect themselves. This means the personal integrity of the senior citizens can be harmed or violated. These are the reasons why the old age brings vulnerability to abuse, exploitation and neglect. In Moral Philosophy, we often use a principle - the principle of vulnerability. It poses a normative value before us that we should protect the integrity of the elderly. Abandonment or neglect of elderly means that someone is not recognizing her/his dignity as human being and treating her/ him accordingly. Dignity of all human beings must be preserved. The dignity of the elderly is questioned or violated when that elderly is used, neglected, forced or injured⁹.

The programmes and policies of the central and state Governments aim at equipping Aged to live a life of respect and dignity. In this process, the government sector, autonomous bodies, NGOs and even the corporate world are involved in formulating and implementing the policies. The constitutional provisions are also providing immense protection in the name of directive principles of state policy and the fundamental rights. All the programmes and provisions related to aged are meant to provide aid and protection, prevent neglect, abuse and exploitation and provide assistance to those deprived and mainstream them¹⁰. i. Article 41 of the Indian Constitution. ii. National Policy on Older Persons -1999, iii. National policy on senior citizens-2011, iv. The maintenance and welfare of parents and senior citizens act, 2007¹¹. v. Section 20, Maintenance of children and aged parents, vi. Section 125, Order for Maintenance of wives, children and parents.

It is the glory of human society to help the weak and especially those from whom it can no longer expect material gain. It is by studying the lot of old people and by improving it as much as

possible that our civilization will develop further and be able to look upon itself, if not with pride, at least without shame¹².

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