



AN INSIGHT INTO THE RELEVANCE OF INTER - GENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY IN A DIGITALLY CONNECTED WORLD

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Abstract: Social sustainability and growth of society demands strong intergenerational ties. Strong intergenerational relations, part of our social identity initiate the old and young to have a better quality of life and also have important implications for community cohesion. However, the twenty-first century has witnessed severe intergenerational conflicts. Disintegration of joint family system and emergence of nuclear families are regarded as the most common causes of this recurrent problem. Two of the age groups who are victims of this breaking of intergenerational ties are the old and the young. In a joint family structure, the older members were most valued and respected. Multigenerational families i.e., number of generations living together is important for the proper development of a young individual and for restoration of the traditional culture. Family structures are considered to be indirectly related to children's psychological well-being which in turn affects parent-child relationships. In this age where nuclear families are in abundance, digital technologies play important role in connecting these two generations and attempting to restore intergenerational relations. This paper aims to explore mechanisms through which the generational relations between old and young in a digitally connected world can be restored.

Keywords: Ageing, Digital Technologies, Intergenerational Solidarity, Nuclear Families.

Introduction

World population is ageing. The causes behind such a rise are improvement in life expectancy and fall in the fertility levels. Among the aged populations the ratio of 80+ among 60+ is constantly rising (United Nations, 2015). This calls for studies of the conditions of the aged and how they can be empowered to live longer and happily. Indian population has approximately tripled during the last 50 years, but the number of elderly Indians has increased more than fourfold. The 2001 census has shown that the elderly population (60+) of India accounted for 77 million and census 2011 data indicate that elderly population has crossed the 100 million mark. During past decade Indian elderly population has increased at a rate of 39.3%. In coming decades elderly population in India is expected to rise by 45-50% (Ramakrishnan, 2011). Despite the heavy rise of elderly population in India, there is a lack of elder-friendly environment in the country. In India traditionally 'joint family' was the predominant type of family. Joint families were in a position to provide support to elderly population. Industrialisation has led to breakdown of extended/joint family set up and replaced it with nuclear ones.

Family and community networks, which are important for providing informal care for their members, are under increasing strain. In this changed socio-economic scenario the growing numbers of women—the traditional caregivers in most societies—are moving into the workforce. Both parents being working, the child is often left behind unattended or not properly guided at home. Family is the most important social agency that plays an integral role in the psychological development of a child. Joint or extended family structure with a network of relatives acts as a close-knit community (Ahuja, 1993; Bisht & Sinha, 1981; Muttalib, 1990). The patriarch of an extended family (generally the oldest male member) is the one who controls the lives of other members of the family. They act as teachers who guide the young members to choose correct path in life and also try to ingrain in them values, modes, cultures and norms of the society. A nuclear family structure, which is becoming increasingly common, constitutes a single married couple and their children (Ahuja, 1993; Bisht & Sinha, 1981; Muttalib, 1990). In nuclear families, the child is more independent as he/she is no more under the surveillance of the adult members of the extended family. However, in nuclear families, children living with their parents often feel deprived of the affection from their parents owing to their stressful professional life. Affection from a grandparent can to some extent mitigate their feeling of deprivation. Family structure can influence children's psychological well-being by affecting family processes, such as parent-child relationships and parental conflict. Thus, emergence of nuclear family system has weakened familial ties especially that of a grandparent and their grandchildren. Formal education in schools alone restricts the intellectual growth of a young mind. The restricted environment and spread of informal knowledge can be acquired from the old members of a joint family system. Children living in joint families show better behaviour and have less behavioural problems than children living in nuclear families. In Nuclear families, Ravichandran and Sasikala (2002) showed that most significant changes brought in children are by the technological revolution. Children have grown up with remote controls and spend more time watching television and videotapes. This extremity leads to social isolation and monotony in the lives of the young. In this context, the paper explores problems of both the elderly and children and the significance of intergenerational solidarity in addressing their problems within the purview of a digitally connected world.



Intergenerational relations in 21st century: Its Problem

Change in family structure in India and improved longevity of elderly population has led to an emerging problem of social exclusion of the elderly in society. Increasing life expectancy in 21st century has strained the position and conditions of elderly. Ageing is becoming an issue owing to the rising neglect of the elderly in almost all societies of the world today (Christensen, et al., 2010). Throughout history older adults have been valued for the insights, wisdom and experience they can share with others (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). Leadership is generally bestowed upon them because of the social belief that wisdom and experience are acquired over time. In preindustrial or agrarian societies where families were intergenerational, the opinions of elders of the family were valued. In industrial societies the elders are less valued than that in preindustrial societies. Most developed industrial nations have long faced this scenario of break-down of generational ties leading to lessening the role of elders in community. Disintegration of joint family system in India has led to a vulnerable position of the elderly and left them with a lack of safety, security and self-confidence harboring feelings of social isolation in them. In this context it becomes important to find ways to motivate elderly to stay active for longer in mainstream activities, to prevent social isolation and promote societal inclusion and finally to help them stay independent for as long as possible. The elderly generation is not considered as contributors to social, cultural, economic capital due to their physical ageing. Thus, a large population of the elderly is often neglected by the society by and large. The disintegration of joint family system has led to a vulnerable position of the elderly and left them with a lack of safety, security and self-confidence harbouring feelings of social isolation in them. Social engagement and social support are important determinants of successful ageing in later life. This is a group that has acquired a lifetime of skills, knowledge and wisdom which can be shared with the younger generation, contributing to the knowledge capital of the society. Older people are not just recipients of social support; they should be treated as contributors: providers of social and intellectual care for our children. In this context, the paper proposes the use of digital technologies by both elderly and the young so that they feel included in society and connect amongst each other.

Throughout the last century, mainstream visions of aging have largely seen the senior years as a time for withdrawing from making contribution to the larger community, a time for winding down. However, history tells us that, until the Industrial Revolution, elders had honoured roles in the society that were defined and supported. Elders have been the nurturers of the community, the spiritual leaders, and the guardians of the traditions, the teachers, mentors and initiators of the young (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). Use of web-enabled and social media tools can help us redefine the roles of elderly in today's global society for educating the youth especially the marginalised children who stay in remote rural areas and have lack of quality education more effectively through video based interactive remote-teaching methods by forming virtual community. This approach will help enhance quality of living of elderly by making them responsible teachers and be an important agent in changing the deplorable scenario of primary education in remote rural areas to marginalised children.

Elderly can feel more socially included by way of interacting with younger generation vice-versa. They can play an important role in contributing to the knowledge capital of the society, by imparting their wisdom and knowledge to those deprived of it. Nuclear families have not only broken the ties of generations within a family but also weakened the morale of elderly who are no longer considered to be important in the family. Lack of proper policy implementation on elderly wellbeing in a country like India has led to the position of elders as 'Burdens' in the society. Ageism i.e., systematic labelling and discrimination against people who are old is a threat to society and this is mostly done by the media. Elders too have started to think themselves as burdens of the society. Here we can take in CH Cooley's idea of Looking glass self where a person's cognitive self of oneself is shaped by his/her social interaction with others. The youth of today and even children consider elders to be pessimistic, conservative, and petulant treating them derogatorily, as can be seen in the language they often use. A transcultural study of ageism carried out in different countries—Belgium, Israel, Japan, Costa Rica and Hong Kong—conclude that two main dimensions define ageing: competence and benevolence. Some authors affirm that stereotypes are also maintained within the collective memory of elderly people, to the point of contributing to their lack of illusion or motivation. The elders consider themselves less productive than they really are.

Towards an Intergenerational Society

There are various proposals for a change in attitudes in old age such as an active life-style for the elderly rather than sedentary aging (Cumming, 1961). Social networks facilitate intergenerational contact. Intergenerational networking can be maintained in the field of education where elders can share their past experiences to the children in the form of stories. Elders can use their experiences to deal with teenagers with their behavioural problems. In universities (Hawkins, 1996) intergenerational networking is done through service-learning pedagogy, that is, experience-based learning that complements theoretical studies and also gives the students an opportunity to help the community.

One of the many issues that were addressed by the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing in 2002 is the importance of kinship relations (United Nations, 2002). The Plan recognises the importance of maintaining close family ties in the face of major societal change, with all generations providing contributions. All sectors of society must work to strengthen those ties by promoting



dialogue aimed at boosting solidarity and providing for the specific needs of caregivers. One of the central themes running through the Madrid Plan is “recognition of reciprocity for social development.” (United Nations, 2002). The Plan links the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms—including the right to development—to the achievement of “a society for all ages”. Reciprocity between the generations in maintaining intergenerational solidarity is a priority concern but the means of achieving this objective have not always been clearly identified. Interestingly, in articles on youth and children, there is a dearth of references to the importance of intergenerational relationships. Member States of the United Nations are similarly silent on the topic when discussing young people, which leads one to suspect that perhaps societies have taken the view that older people need young people more than the young need the old. The time has come to employ a more age-integrated approach in constructing policies and programmes. In developing countries, less time should be spent focusing on the costs of ageing populations; energies must be directed instead towards developing opportunities for social and economic participation for multigenerational households, strengthening patterns of exchange and reciprocity, and maintaining mutual support structures.

Connecting Generations through Digital Inclusion

Importance of elderly wisdom is best understood within indigenous context of learning and knowledge acquisition. Indigenous elder knowledge sharing traditions have the potential to inform and address some of the mentoring and knowledge transfer needs within a community (Thomas, 2004). In our context, elderly citizens can use their knowledge, wisdom and experience for imparting education for children using social. A Social Media Platform using Web 2.0 technology can play important role in acting as a medium of communication between the two generations (Laszlo, 2006). Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) can play a major role in order to help achieve the above goals. ICT can help elderly to improve their quality of life, stay healthier, live independently for longer, and counteract reduced capabilities which are more prevalent with age. ICT can enable them to remain active at work or in their community.

Basset (2009) says wisdom as a form of informal knowledge is present in older people. But just as old age is a heterogeneous component, so is wisdom. Wisdom which can be shared with children as a form of informal knowledge is acquired through experiences and regulating emotions in various stages of life. In terms of maintaining intergenerational solidarity, this informal knowledge called wisdom can be acquired from some of the older members who have a potential of playing the role of a teacher to younger generation in a society. The paper thus focuses on importance of using elderly wisdom that can be best understood within indigenous context of learning and knowledge acquisition. Indigenous elder knowledge sharing traditions have the potential to inform and address some of the mentoring and knowledge transfer needs within a community (Thomas & Seth, 2004). Wellbeing of a community demands expansion of knowledge-based development that intends to strengthen the skills and knowledge of individual leading to social development (Laszlo & Laszlo, 2006).

Discussion

Social engagement, support and participation are considered to be an important determinant of intergenerational solidarity in society. Socially inclusive society is most desirable for the existence of intergenerational dependency in post-modern society. Establishing this issue and the need of building a socially inclusive society we bring in the whole idea of ‘Connecting Generations’. Importance of elderly wisdom is best understood within indigenous context of learning and knowledge acquisition. Indigenous elder knowledge sharing traditions have the potential to inform and address some of the mentoring and knowledge transfer needs within a community (Thomas, 2004). In our context, elderly citizens can use their knowledge, wisdom and experience for imparting education for children. In nuclear families, children living with their parents often feel deprived of the affection from their parents owing to their stressful professional life. Affection from a grandparent can to some extent mitigate their feeling of deprivation. Elderly can feel more socially included by way of interacting with younger generation. They can play an important role in contributing to the knowledge capital of the society, by imparting their wisdom and knowledge to those deprived of it.

As already mentioned, elderly, the possessors of wisdom, knowledge and experience can share them with the younger community through social media sites in a way contributing to society at large. Interactions with young people allow older adults to relate to another generation, learn about new technology and trends and serve as role models for children growing into tomorrow's adults. The excitement of seeing the world through younger eyes can get older adults 'up and doing,' reducing depression, relieving boredom and improving health. Teenagers who have difficulty relating to their immediate families may respond well to a caring older adult. Elders who stay alone and are not really mobile often face problem in availing basic items. In this context the younger group can actually help elders find the required items through social media sites. This caters to the problem of elderly with assistance. Young students can seek help from their aged friends through social media sites for school projects. Retired teachers or any educated elderly can play important role in guiding the younger generation to shape their future and become their mentors. The aged people can suggest them career opportunity based on their life long experiences. This model puts elderly in the role of contributor and facilitator in development of society and younger generation as responsible agents of change in its growth. Use of web-enabled and social media



tools can help us to redefine the roles of elderly in today’s global society and restore intergenerational ties between elderly and the children.

Conclusion

Society has witnessed severe intergenerational conflict which is the impact of separation of households between older adults and younger adults after disintegration of extended family system. Grandparents play various symbolic roles such as ‘being there’, ‘national guard’, and ‘active participants in the family’s social construction of its history’. Grandparents may also serve as mentors, historians, wizard or nurturer (Kornhaber& Woodward,1981). Troll, a scholar on Intergenerational solidarity pointed out that grandparenthood is a derived status only weakly regulated by social norms. As such, grandparent roles are ambiguous and vary both in form and functions. Wisdom is a multifaceted concept which means a form of advanced cognitive functioning, awareness of ignorance and all about knowledge. This paper has attempted to show grand-parenting or intergenerational solidarity as an indicator of successful ageing for the elderly and a possibility to enhance wellbeing of children in the 21st century. The paper too has tried to bring in the use of digital technologies in connecting the two generations and thus restore intergenerational ties in society.

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