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Role of Religion in Caring the Elderly: Cultural Perspectives

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Abstract:

Ageing is a universal phenomenon and it is a process of life. It starts from birth and covers the whole life span of a person. It is inevitable in the life of every individual usually people above sixty are considered to be aged. But nowadays they are known as senior citizens, like other stages in the life span, old age is characterized by certain physical, mental and psychological changes. In old age physical strength deteriorates, sight decreases, mental stability diminishes and financial situation become shaky. It is only for a few, old age proves to be a stage of contentment and satisfaction.

Religion plays great role in the formation of conscience of people. In fact, up to a certain extent, it regulates the life of the people. Each religion has its own principles and ideas regarding family, the dignity of human being and role of family. In order to understand the great potentials of the elderly it is good to see the message in the Holy Scriptures like the Bible, the Quran and the Vedas. Only in the light of this, we can fathom the spiritual and moral dimensions of this stage of life.

The present study intends to understand the role played by different religions in caring the elderly in India.

Keywords: Ageing, dignity, commandment

1. Introduction

Ageing is an inescapable reality of human existence. It is considered second childhood of a person. Aged people provide a link between the past and the future. They help in keeping alive the traditions of the community. They have an important role to perform in the society. They are not liabilities but assets to community. Every society has developed its own system of caring of the aged based on its own culture and tradition.

However, the advancement in science and technology due to modernization, urbanization and migration, the aged do not get proper care and protection from their children. They pushed down the elderly into a state of loneliness, insecurity, helplessness, frustration and meaninglessness. The present study intends to understand the role played by different religions in caring the Elderly.

2. Ageing a Natural Phenomenon

Ageing is a natural and universal phenomenon. It is a process of life and it starts from birth and covers the whole life span of a person. It is a normal part of our life span. It is an inevitable, ubiquitous and universal phenomenon of human life and a natural biological process. Since time immemorial, the aged have been accorded a place of honour in society. Ancient literature is replete with recurrent references to the aged.

In the joint family system, opinion of old persons on social, economic and religious matters are generally considered and valued. They also play a key role in socializations of their children and grand children. They show affection, cultivate good habits and enforce social norms. On the other hand, family and society look after them irrespective of their productive capacity. However, the social situation has undergone a perceptible change. The joint family system is now disintegrating under the influence of industrialization, modernization and urbanization. All these have affected adversely the situation of senior citizens in the family and society. In most of the cases they suffer from the feelings of alienation, loneliness, insecurity and worthlessness.

3. Dignity and Grace of Old Age

Life is meaningful at any stage. Religion plays a great role in the formation of conscience of people. In fact, up to a certain extent, it regulates the life of the people. Each religion has its own principle and ideas regarding family, the dignity of human being and role of family.

Old age has its own dignity and reverence. There are people who can grasp the significance of old age and can confront it with serenity and dignity, while others see old age with a traumatic experience and confront it with rebellion and despair. For some, the presence of the elderly is a blessing but some consider it as a burden. In order to understand the great potentials of the elderly, it is good to see the message in the Holy Scriptures. Only in the light of this, we can fathom the spiritual and moral dimensions of this stage of life.

4. The Elderly in the Bible

To grasp the full meaning and value of old age we need to take recourse to the Bible (both the Old Testament and the New Testament). Only in the light of the Word of God, we can fathom the spiritual, moral and theological dimension of this stage of life. For the Biblical writers this earthly life, despite its many inevitable sorrows and sufferings, is so essentially good that the length of days is accounted a blessing¹. The elderly in the scripture are so highly esteemed that long life is seen as a sign of God's favour (Gen. 11: 10 – 32). With Abraham this favour took the form of a promise (Gen 12:3). Abraham's wife, Sarah, experience in her aging flesh, God's power and promise.

5. The Elderly in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament we see that the respect for the elder person is a command of Yahweh given to Moses to be given to the Israelites: "You will stand up in the presence of grey hair, you will honour the person of the aged and fear your God" (Lev 19:32). In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read: "Honour your father and your mother" (Deut. 5: 16). We can understand this command of God when we read in the Book of Ecclesiastics about parents in general and especially in their old age (Eccles. 3: 1- 16). We must strive to counter the widespread contemporary tendency to ignore and marginalize older people. We need to educate and help the younger generation to show love and concern to people in their old age. Among other examples of elderly people in the Bible, Tobit, who humbly and courageously resolved to keep God's Law, to help the needy and to endure blindness patiently, until the angel of God intervened to set his situation aright (Tob. 3: 16 – 17). There is also Eleazar, whose martyrdom bore witness to an exceptional generosity and strength (2 Macc. 6: 18 – 31)².

The book of Sirach offers this advice: "Do not disregard what older people say because they too have learned from their parents" (8:9). "Attend the meetings with older people, spend time with them" (Sir. 6:34), for wisdom comes from the elderly. Rich experience is the crown of the aged. (Sir.25:5,6).

In the Book of Ruth, the devoted daughter-in-law said, "Do not press me to leave you turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, there will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death part me from you" (1:16-17). It is a very good example of the care of the elderly in the Bible. Ruth, the daughter-in-law, was ready to serve Navomi, her mother- in- law. It is the unselfish self donation of the people in the communion of the family. The threefold duties to honour the old is accomplished here. Ruth welcomed Navomi to her life. Secondly she helped her and saved her throughout her life. In her later life being submissive and obedient to Navomi, she received many blessings. Ruth listened to the council of the mother- in- law and she was blessed with a loving husband and good fortune.

In the Book of Tobit there is an exhortation that the first duty towards the ancestors is to give them an honourable burial (12: 12-14). In the Book of Genesis, we see Abraham giving an honourable burial to Sarah, his wife, after paying four hundred shekels for the burial land. Abraham also was buried by his people in the same land honourably (23, 1. ff).

The Book of Tobit emphatically says, God will reward those who honour the old. Tobit and Sarah received blessing from the Lord. Similarly, prayer for the dead also is a service rendering to the ancestors. It is the duty of the children to pay homage to the ancestors and hence respect. The ultimate promise given is 'long life'. The whole teachings of Christianity respect the basic dignity of human being (image and likeness) through serving, caring and loving them from womb to tomb and even transcendentally.

6. The Elderly in the New Testament

The first elder we find in the New Testament is the father of a prodigal son (Lk. 15: 25). Here we see a loving, kind and merciful father. In the letter to the Hebrews, the author appreciates the faith of the ancestors, because by faith they received the approval of God (Heb. 11:12). Though the Jewish elders were not holding any office they enjoyed seats of honour at the synagogue assemblies, because elders were considered as wise and experienced. It was believed that the elders possessed the spiritual gift of prophesy and teaching³.

Again in the New Testament we see Zachariah and Elizabeth received favour from the Lord in their old age. Simeon and Anna in the temple (Lk.2: 29- 38), Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin (Jn. 3: 1 – 21) were old people among others whom the Lord favoured. St. Paul says, "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world" (1 Cor.1:27-28). The whole elderly in the scripture found favour in the eyes of the Lord. All these instances say life is more meaningful in the old age.

The Bible depicts the story of many elderlies who proved themselves that their old age is neither useless nor meaningless, rather exorbitant and valuable. It is they who schooled by the experiences, understand the meaning of the saying of great sage: 'vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities all is vanity' (Ecc. 1:2). St. Jerome observes, 'with the quieting of the passions, old age it increases wisdom, and brings more mature counsels'⁴. Old age is the season for that wisdom which generally comes from experience since 'time is a great teacher'.

¹. James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol.9, Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1994, pp.458 – 459.

². Pope John Paul II, "Letter to the Elderly", p. 90.

³. Buttrick George Arther et al (edit), *The interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, p.75.

⁴. *Letter of Pope John Paul II to the Elderly*, No.6, Pauline Pub, Boston, 2000, p.16.

Thus both Old Testament and New Testament present old age as a 'favourable time' for bringing life to its fulfillment. It is a duty of every child to look after his parents extending due respect and reverence in old age.

7. The Commandment of God

Christians all over the world believe in the Ten Commandments of God. The fourth commandment opens the second table of the Decalogue. God has willed that after him we should honour our parents to whom we owe lives and who have handed on to us the knowledge of God. So the fourth commandment unequivocally states "Honour your father and mother" (Ex. 20:12). We are obliged to honour and respect all those whom God, for our good, has vested with authority. Parents are the people who became instruments in the hands of God to shape us. As human beings our first vocation is to life and humanity. This is the first reason why we should honour our parents. Secondly, they are the people who imparted the knowledge of God to us. This is the second vocation that we received. Parents are the assurance and guarantee for their children in front of God and Church that they may inculcate faith through baptism and nurture that faith while they grow. In this way parents become the 'signboard' for children so that they may reach God and find fulfillment in their lives. They are the connecting link between the past and present and again further to the future. Forgetting them means forgetting the history, the rich traditions they handed over to the present generation, and its unfaithfulness.

Throughout the Bible and the teachings of the church, the utmost emphasis is given to the elderly and their services to community. It is the duty of every child to look after his parents, to make them live in dignity, respect and in peace. And thus spent rests of their lives in pray fullness and serenity.

8. Care of elderly in Hindu Religion

The Hindu families are built on the solid foundation of mutual consideration and duty. The reason for the exceptional harmony in a Hindu family lies in the fact that the couple enter into wed lock not as independent whose sole commitment lies towards each other but as members of a family who are responsible for the welfare of the entire family. The commitment towards the family become intense when it is a matter of faith that relates to eternity. Sama Veda says, husband and wife should always be generous and charitable, benevolent. That should be the motto of their life. (Sam. 287) Old relatives, small children, sick members etc, are the beneficiaries of the generous hearts of the couples. Parents are always considered as integral part of the family unit and never left uncared for.

Atharveda emphasis the communion aspect in the family when the younger generations are asked to serve the elders. The idea of common purpose and goal are stressed for the fulfillment of duties. Be respectful to elders, have a magnanimous heart, march ahead and progress with common aim and goal. Be not separated from one another and talk to each other sweet words. (Atharveda 3.30.5)

A religion based on Vedas are directed by the same. It promises reward as well as punishment for the deeds of the Hindus. The dharma principle must be kept well in the life of the people. It has to motivate the youngsters to take care of the elderly. Rigveda says, He whose mother and father are not properly served and honoured, meet with worries and woes, while he whose mother and father are held in high esteem, achieves bliss and wins admiration among his friends and virtuous people. (Rig. 4.6.7)

A joint family was a shelter for the elderly in their need. The characteristics and the merits of joint family that we discussed were actually both the duties of the youngsters and the benefits of the elderly. The old were not only well cared in the family but they had a very important say in the lives of the young generation. The debt one incurs to one's parent is so great that one can never be free from it. Parents therefore deserve lifelong service and obedience.

Difference from the other stages of life, the householders (Grahastashrama) were conceived in a thoroughly social context. A house holder was expected to provide not only for his family, but also for all who needed food and succor. They are supposed to support even people who belong to other stages of life. Householder is the life sustaining air (Pranavayu) according to Manu Smriti. He must be charitable. The man who distributes his wealth amongst others is blessed by God. One who does not share his possessions with other can make no friends. (Rig. 10.117.1)

Parents are the one among the three set of people who must be respected as gods. Hinduism strictly stresses the people to give respect and reverence to the ancestors by doing homage and sacrifices for them. The second way to respect elderly is continuing the family line through procreation. In short, according to Vedas it is the duty of the householders to serve the elderly while they live and after their death and by continuing the line of family through procreation. Thus in Hinduism, parents are almost equal to God. So it is a sin and grave crime not to respect the elderly. According to Hindu Philosophy, reach Moksha easily is to look after the aged and elderly and the destitute.

9. Care of elderly in Islam

Islam gives the elderly a special status as there are texts which urge Muslim to respect and honour them. It is true that the formation of a family starts with marriage and prayer for the unborn off-springs, even before the couples physically contact with each other. Still love for parents and the duty owed to them stands higher than the love of children and the duty owed to them. The Holy Quran has put the duty owed to parents in close juxta positions to the duty to God. "Your lord has commanded that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age with you, do not say to them any word of disrespect, or scold them but say a generous word to them. Address them with kindly words, and shower to them the wing of humility and tenderness, and pray my lord, have mercy on them, since they cared for me when I was small. (Quran 17: 23-25). In these verses, kindness towards parents is mentioned along with believe in one God. It reflects the compassion, respect and sense of responsibility that Islam requires the believers to have towards their parents.

The extension of the individual family spirit, which is the essence of the Islamic married life, to neighbours is expressing in another way in the following words of the holy interpreter. Abusing one parent is one of the major sin. When one abuses the father of another man who in turn abuses his father and mother. The friend or contemporary of one's parent must be considered as ones' own parents. The obligations to the elderly in this world continues even after the death. You should pray for your parents after their death, ask for their forgiveness, honour their commandments after them, meet the relatives with whom their relationship is because of them and show respect to their friends.

Why the elderlies are taken care in Islam? The reasons other than we have seen above are based on certain focal points which follows.

9.1. *Man Is an Honoured Creature and Has an Honourable Status in Islam*

Allah says and indeed we have honoured the children of Adam, and we have carried them on land and sea and have provided them with At- Tayyibaat (lawfaul good things) and have preferred them above many of those whom, we have created with a marked preferment (Al. Israr. 17: 70)

9.2. *Muslim Society Is the Society of Mutual Compassion*

Allah says "Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. And those who are with him are severe against disbelievers and merciful among themselves. Prophet says, the likeness of the believers in their mutual love, mercy and compassions is that of the body, if one part of it complains the rest of the body joins it in staying awake and suffering fever." (al-fath 48)

9.3. *Muslim Society Is a Society of Co – Operation and Mutual Support*

Prophet Muhammed make a list of virtuous acts which are close to Allah. They are: the one who brings most benefit to people, one who relieves the hardships of other, the one who is paying off the debt of others and the one who is warding off hunger from someone. These are more important and dearer than observing I tikaat in the mosque. Allah will make these people stand firm on the Day when all feet will slip.

9.4. *Care of Elderly Is the Characteristics of Islam*

Prophet said, Part of glorifying Allah is honouring the grey – haired Muslim The care of elderly is the outcome and fruit of the whole teaching of Islam, not something added. For a muslim, taking care of elderly is a joyful act not a burden. The list of parents extends from one's own parents to all the elderlies in Islam religion. Mothers are given special reverence. Prophet said, paradise lies at the feet of your mothers. It is considered as a fortunate occasion to serve the elders. Based on the view of universal family, all have the duty to take care of the older members of Islam. And this is a way to please Allah.

Thus, in Islam the aged are placed next to God. Islam philosophy insist on the fundamental duty of every person to look after his aged parents. Those who look after the aged are more important and dearer than the one who observe tikaat in the Mosque. They will attain Jannathul Firdouse (heaven) in the other world.

10. Conclusion

The elderly has a tendency to consider that they are not important to the society. Moreover, it is the attitude of the younger generation too. The old age homes are not a solution for the problems that elders face. Healthy life of the elders depends on the close relationship and their interaction with their children and grand children in the family. Elders should not be neglected due to the busy schedule of the other members of the family. Whatever functions occur in the family the elders have to be given due respect and involve them in decision making, giving advice, planning of the family affairs and all other functions in the family which are mentioned in each and every religious texts.

Children should know physiological, psychological incapacibilities and limitations of the old age. Considering the problems and their incapacibilities the children should show kindness and love and should take care of them in a proper manner. All religions accord due respect, reverence and acceptances to the old people. Heaven, Moksha or Jannathul Firdouse is the greatest reward for those who take care of the aged, elderly, the marginalized, the downtrodden and destitute. No religion permits any kind of insult and negligence to elderly in words or deeds. The youngsters are to be sensitized to this situation and realized that Old Age Homes are not a 'dumping place' for the aged and are no substitute for families.

11. References

- i. James Hastings, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol.9, Edinburgh: T& T Clark, 1994, pp.458 – 459.
- ii. Pope John Paul II, "Letter to the Elderly", p. 90.
- iii. Buttrick George Arther et al (edit), The interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, An Illustrated Encyclopedia, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996, p.75.
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