



Beyond Economics: Noneconomic Contributions of Elderly

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Abstract

Realizing the worthy contributions by the elderly helps to construct a society for all ages. Engagement of elder generation in multiple activities not only benefit the elderly but also others. But most of the contributions made by the elderly in the family space and in the community go as invisible just because there is no monetary value attached to the same. Drawing on quantitative data from BKPAI (Building Knowledge Base on Population Ageing in India, 2011) and qualitative data from field studies, this chapter tries to examine the ways in which older people are involved in various activities through which they benefit others in their household. Many elderly persons actively engage in caregiving, household-based tasks, and volunteering. Involvement as grandparents and helps in household matters and as volunteers ensure solidarity between generations and help to fight against the negative stereotypes associated with old age. This means that when older generation caters to the needs of the younger generation. Acknowledging the contributions of elder generation would help to make a more age-inclusive humanity that does not pit one generation against the other.

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1 Introduction

The elderly are often cited as passive recipients of care and dependent on others (Wiles & Jayasinha, 2013). This very stereotype-based thought itself neglects that group of elderly people who are active and contribute to both their family and community. Scholarships in the arena of positive aging, successful aging, active aging, etc. take into consideration the meaningful roles played by the elderly by making various contributions (Chong et al., 2006; Thiamwong et al., 2013). Understanding the valuable contributions made by elder generation helps to build a society for all ages (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2009). This further helps to reduce the problems faced by older generation when elderly population in this era face several problems like abuse, neglect, abandonment, etc. (HelpAge International, 2017; Rajan & Arya, 2018). With ever rising numbers and lifespan of older people, aspects like these gain importance to take a balanced approach by considering not only burdens associated with aging but also contributions made by the elderly (Hoyer, 2008).

It could be seen that though a large segment of the elderly population are healthy and are interested in engaging in the labor force even after retirement and engage in searching of effective and gainful jobs, they find difficulties on their way due to limited job opportunities and perception in the job market that the elderly are not fit for jobs, especially complex ones (Agewell, 2017).

In the context of India, when only a minimal share of the elderly are involved in the labor force participation (Census, 2011), this too pushes one to conclude that the elderly are good for nothing. It is in this scenario the so-called noneconomic contributions made by the elderly come into play. For instance, older persons can contribute to society through discussion and influencing actions that can be taken for the good of their social group, neighborhood, and community (Gonzales et al., 2015). Considering the contributions made by the elderly helps to portray a positive picture of aging. This further helps to consider elderly as human resource rather than a burden.

Looking into the cross-country experiences, when in the United States, China, and Australia, elderly actively participate in social and volunteer activities, in nations such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jamaica, Mexico, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe, more than 50% of all elderly men engage in agricultural sector (Bharati & Singh, 2013). In India too, a considerable share of elderly engages not only in labor force but also in many nonremunerative works (Building Knowledge Base on Population Ageing in India, 2011).

A large number of the elderly involve as caregivers/helpers in household-based tasks and volunteers despite their ailing health situations, and here too, there exist differences based on gender, area of residence, living arrangement, geographical

proximity of children, and other parameters (Building Knowledge Base on Population Ageing in India, 2011). It has been recognized that discovering ways to contribute can give seniors a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives (Endeavor, 2018).

Involvement of elder generation in multiple activities benefits not only others but also the elderly. For instance, when elderly persons engage in a wider society by taking different roles, they themselves would benefit by attaining improved physical, psychological, and social well-being. Employment of older persons helps in maintaining health, social roles, networks, and social integration, and also contributes to national economic growth (Ozanne, 2010). Grandparenting promotes better health for older people through greater support and interactions with children and grandchildren (Samanta et al., 2015). When it comes to social activities, it promotes better health status, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction and builds social capital, promotes social engagement, and enhances socialization, social integration, and self-worth (Ozanne, 2010; Tang, 2012). Also, if older people are able enough to engage in their personal care by themselves, this itself can be considered as a positive aspect because this reduces the burden of others.

In this chapter, we seek to explore the contributions made by older people toward their family. Drawing on quantitative data from BKPAI (Building Knowledge Base on Population Ageing in India, 2011) and qualitative data from field studies, we try to examine the ways in which older people are involved in various activities through which they benefit others in their household. BKPAI Survey covers seven selected states in India. BKPAI is a cross-sectional dataset of 8329 households across Himachal Pradesh and Punjab in the north, West Bengal and Odisha in the east, Maharashtra in west-central India, and Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the south—selected on the basis of regional representation as well as their relatively more advanced stage of demographic transition and higher proportion of older people in the population compared to the Indian average (UNFPA, 2012). Samples for case studies are selected, following snowball sampling. We use both bivariate analysis and explanatory analysis to build this research.

2 Contribution of the Elderly in India Through Their Engagement in Activities

As mentioned above, most of the contributions made by the elderly in the family space and in the community go as invisible just because there is no monetary value attached to the same. Table 1 shows the various ways through which the older generation in India turns their liability part into asset part by engaging in diverse tasks.

When in general many older people play a vital role in providing unpaid care for spouses, grandchildren, and other relatives, including those with disabilities (UNFPA and HelpAge International, 2012), in the context of India too, a lot many elderly persons participate in the arena of caregiving by assuming their responsibility as grandparents, advisors, dispute settlers, and visitors to near and dear ones. With

Table 1 Participation rate in different activities by the elderly

Activities	Participation rate	
Caregiving-	Grandparenting	40.3
	Visiting family and friends	47.5
	Advising	74.4
	Settling disputes	71.0
Household-based help	Shopping for the household	48.5
	Cooking, cleaning, and washing	38.8
	Fuel collection	15.4
	Bill payment and other financial activities	22.6
	Assisting agriculture	13.4
	Assisting business	6.8
	Domesticating	12.4
Social -cum-voluntary involvement	Attending public meeting to discuss local, community, or political affairs	26.1
	Attending group, club, society, union, or organizational meeting	23.6
	Working with people in your neighborhood to fix or improve something	27.2
	Attending religious programs/services	62.5

Source: Computed by the Authors using BKPAI (2011)

their experience and wisdom, elderly can mentor children and young adults. By sharing their unique perspective, elders can carve out a good character in younger generation. When 74.4% and 71% of the elderly in India take up their roles as advisors and dispute settlers, respectively, these show the way in which India is blessed with elderly population who are beneficial to others. Also, when 40.3% take part in grandparenting and 47.5% involve in visiting family and friends, these give a clue regarding the shares of the older generation whose contributions benefit not only the care receivers but also the other members in the family.

Elderly persons in India also engage in household-based duties, and their share varies from task to task. Here too, there exist state-wise differences and differences based on gender, area of residence, etc., depending upon the kind of the tasks and responsibilities pertaining to household-related matters taken up by the elderly. This kind of unpaid household contribution ranges from 48.5% in shopping to 6.8% in assisting business.

It is seen that volunteers experience less disability than those who do not volunteer (Endeavor, 2018). On the front of volunteering too, elderly persons make their valuable contribution as active volunteers. Here too, depending upon the discouraging and encouraging factors, the elderly take part in diverse responsibilities. In many countries, financial support to volunteers is provided by the government (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2009). Policy integration and participation of older persons in society plays a very important role in helping them to make contributions. In India, 62.5% of elderly are engaged in

religious services which benefit the whole neighborhood. Also, a considerable share of elder generation people are active as volunteers in which they discuss neighborhood issues, public matters, and union-based matters, all ultimately aiming at common good.

3 Understanding Noneconomic Contributions of Older Generation from Field Studies

In this section, we use case studies by going for the use of primary data. Samples were selected from Kerala, the leading state in aging in India. From Kerala, the district with highest share of elderly participants in productive aging activities is taken. Here, Thiruvananthapuram district leads in overall participation rate, and hence, the same is selected for the study. The household members of all the 40 participants were interviewed using unstructured questionnaire. The first question to every respondent was “Do you think that you benefit from the participation of your father/mother/father-in-law/mother-in-law/grandparent?” The sample covers mostly women in terms of gender and rural residents in terms of area of residence. For the sake of convenience, we have categorized all the activities covered in Table 1 under three different heads—Caregiving-based tasks, Household help-based tasks, and involvement in voluntary-based duties. We use two excerpts each for each of these contributions made by the elderly by taking evidences from the field to deal with the same.

3.1 Caregiving

It is well accepted all over the world that providing care for grandchildren is a duty of grandparents (Mehta & Thang, 2012). In India, too, providing care for grandchildren is a responsibility of older persons, especially when the majority of older people live in multigenerational families (Lamb, 2014).

Mrs. Thanku is an 85-year-old retired bank employee. She lives with her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren in her rural residence. She suffers from ailments such as joint pain and walking-related issues, and she takes neuro medicines too. But she teaches her twin grandchildren who both are in the kindergarten. This is what her daughter-in-law, a government servant, says about the way through which the whole family benefits from the involvement of Mrs. Thanku in grandparenting.

My Mother-in-law is really a help for me and my husband, especially when both of us are employed and find difficulties in dealing with caring for our kids. Though she is cared by a paid caregiver and we have another maid to take care of the kitchen-based responsibilities, her involvement in child care cannot be replaced by anyone else.

She further says:

She teaches the kids, helps them to do their home works, tells them moral stories, scolds them if they quarrel, etc. She makes them eat in front of her to ensure that they finish the content on their plate. She sings with them and plays with them. As a result of her presence we are happy that our children are taken care of even in our absence.

In this case, involvement of Mrs. Thanku in grandparenting plays an inevitable role in molding not only the academics but also the character of the kids. Thus, even though Mrs. Thanku suffers from several problems when it comes to health, she is active as a good caregiver and a mentor to her grandchildren. Here, the beneficiaries of the act of caregiving by Mrs. Thanku are not only the kids but also her son and daughter-in-law who are busy with their workplace-related responsibilities.

Having discussed the case of Mrs. Thanku, the following excerpt shows the way in which Mrs. Rambha, a 75-year-old homemaker, who resides in rural area with her spouse cares for her bed-ridden husband. Her husband is an 80-year-old retired private employee who has been on the bed for the past four months after a fall. All the four children of Mrs. Rambha and her husband work abroad. Mrs. Rambha's husband says:

I got my left leg broken and had to undergo a surgery. Though our children have arranged helpers in home, the care provided to me by my wife is beyond words. She knows all my likes and dislikes. She reads for me. She gives me medicines and food on time. We sit together to watch TV. She understands me and behaves accordingly. She comes to meet my needs even before my second call.

Though Mrs. Rambha's husband identifies that his children have arranged caretakers for him at home, the kind of mental satisfaction he receives from the care given by his wife is incomparable to everything else as per his words.

3.2 Help Given on Household-Based Matters

Assistance given by the elderly in terms of family maintenance is the least recognized arena of activity participation by the elderly. This is not only due to the exclusion of these unpaid activities from the computation of National Income. This is so but also as a result of the preconceived notions of the inability associated with old age. In contrast to these misconceptions, a large share of the elderly takes part in taking care of household responsibilities.

Mr. Prassannan, a 70-year-old person, lives with his wife in urban area. He was a daily wage worker in a hospital. All his children are settled in different areas of the state. It is he who helps his wife in almost all household-based tasks irrespective of whether it is carried out inside his house or outside his house. This is what his wife, a 57-year-old homemaker who is a patient of a chronic disease, says about the way in which she benefits from the involvement of her husband in dealing with household responsibilities of varying nature.

He never allows me to take any burden. He has his hands everywhere- in cooking, cleaning house, washing, taking care of the pet etc. Even if I am lazy to go for shopping for the house, he does it all. He goes to bank and does every finance related matters by himself. He takes care of our agricultural land. So I am relaxed and I need not take strain. I am fully satisfied for the way in which he does everything.

For Mrs. Prassannan, involvement of her husband in most of the household-based matters, appears to be shifting of responsibilities rather than sharing the same to a large extent. This is a relief for Mrs. Prassannan especially when she suffers from chronic disease. The kinds of help provided to the wife by the husband in the kitchen-related tasks and other household-related matters are thus very much valuable as far as Mrs. Prassannan is concerned.

Having heard Mrs. Prassannan, we can move on to Mrs. Shashi, a 67-year-old urban resident who lives with her husband, children, and grandchildren. This is what Mrs. Shashi tells about the involvement of her husband, a 70-year-old businessman, in the family business which deals with the running of a hotel.

His tea is famous in our area. Though all of us work in the same shop, he is the mastermind and his dishes are very popular in our area. People like that. This is why he works in the kitchen. It is his involvement in cooking that attract customers to our shop. If he is not involved in cooking means, there is no hotel.

The inevitable role of Mr. Shashi in leading the running of his family business becomes clear from the words of his wife. In an era when kitchen-based task of cooking is seen as a stereotypical role of women, what Mr. Shashi does for his family gains importance.

3.3 Involvement in Social Cum Voluntary Tasks

Engagement in social activities is considered as a key constituent of productive aging. The varied aspects of partaking in social activities influence older people and are considered as vital facets of aging in India (Vatuk, 1990, 1996).

Mr. Karunan, an urban resident of 78 years, is very active when it comes to residential association. He takes up many responsibilities such as visiting houses, collecting cash, organizing programs, etc. This is what Mr. Karunan's son, an employee in a private shop, tells about the kind of benefit his family derives as a result of the engagement of his father in the above-mentioned field.

As a result of his active engagement, all the members of my family are known to everyone. All are our friends. We do not have enemies in our neighbourhood. Instead, if we have any emergency, there would be people coming from diverse sides to provide us help. All these because of my father's involvement. Several times, I could understand this from my experience.

The experience of Mr. Karunan's son itself voices his hope and expectation for the future to derive help from his neighbors, if confronted with a need. As per him, all this is so just because of the involvement of his father in neighborhood affairs. In a world when people are driven by selfish motives, the benefit expected by his family out of the involvement of Mr. Karunan in neighborhood-related matters could be identified as a contribution to his family by Mr. Karunan.

When Mr. Karunan involves in neighborhood-based matters, Mrs. Komalam, a 60-year-old rural residing widow who lives with her children and grandchildren, is a political party member. It was Mrs. Komalam's son, a carpenter who most of the times would engage in works outside his village, who came forward to explain the contributions made by Mrs. Komalam to his family as a result of her political involvement. He says:

She engages in many charity-based activities. Since she is a social worker, everyone respects her. Even all our family members enjoy prestige related to that in the society. Everyone in our community views all of us with that tag. So if any one of us need any help, party is there to support us. All just because of her involvement. This itself gives us a sense of confidence and mental strength.

As a person who does not get time to deal with his community-based matters especially when he is busy with his own work, having a person at home to seal this gap is a blessing. This is what Mrs. Komalam's son has when Mrs. Komalam engages with the political party.

4 Conclusions

When the noneconomic contributions made by the elderly toward their families, communities, and neighborhoods by being active members of the places where they live cannot readily be quantified in cash terms, the very limitation acts as an excuse to stay as blind toward these nonfinancial contributions. At many times, value is not given to such efforts by older people out of the mentality that it is done by older generation. Here, it is important to understand that the skills and experience of elder generation add to their wisdom, and this would get reflected in each and every act and word of that generation. Mutual exchange and reciprocity build trust between people and create positive social relationship (Fenton & Draper, 2014).

Identification and recognition of the contributions made by the elder generation would help older generation to view them as self and needed. The value of the contributions by elderly persons at many times spreads beyond the immediate family as it benefits the wider economy and society. Involvement as grandparents and helps in household matters and as volunteers ensures solidarity between generations and helps to fight against the negative stereotypes associated with old age. This means that when older generation people cater to the needs of the younger generation, the latter too has a responsibility toward the former. This responsibility is mainly with respect to encouraging elderly people to engage by providing them opportunities so

as to make them contribute to family and community. When steps are taken in this direction, it is high time to ensure that the elderly are not exploited as a result of their involvement. Measures need to be implemented to ensure that too.

In short, with their personal and professional life, elderly has immense experience so the society at large needs to channelize the same for better tomorrow. Acknowledging the contributions of elder generation would help to make a more age-inclusive humanity that does not pit one generation against the other. Many nations like Australia have been increasing policy attention on maintaining productivity by enabling and supporting older generation to continue participation in productive activities as they age (Australian National University, 2021).

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