

Book Reviews

***Ageing in North-East India: Manipur Perspective, Vol. 5*, edited by Sheikhoao Kipgen and Benjamin Nattar, 2009, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 142p, Rs. 400/-, ISBN 978-81-8370-174-7.**

***Ageing in Meghalaya, Vol. 6*, by C. Joshua Thomas and Fiasta T. Diengdoh, 2009, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 162p, Rs. 400/-, ISBN 978-81-8370-175-4.**

Few areas of research in social sciences, particularly in demography, have received as much attention in recent years as ageing. The subject is attracting increasing attention from Indian social scientists, too. This is not surprising considering the phenomenal increase in the proportion of the aged population as noticed since the results of Census of India 1991 was made public. More and more books and articles are coming out on longevity and ageing. Some of these books have useful information and great ideas, whereas others are less than routine.

The term “ageing” is somewhat ambiguous. Chronological ageing, referring to how old a person is, is perhaps the most straightforward definition of ageing and is often distinguished from “social ageing” (society’s expectations of how people should act as they grow older) and “biological ageing” (an organism’s physical state as it ages). In any case old age is a cultural construction, in much the same way as are the other phases (‘vocations’) of life. Concepts like chronological age, biological age, psychic or mental age, social age, and many others are frequently encountered in literature pertaining to ageing. Since these are our constructions, each of them is used separately in specific disciplines. Old age is also culturally constituted; its connotation in a simple society may be qualitatively different from that in a complex modern society.

Perhaps a more definitive connotation of the term ageing has begun to appear in demographic literature which stands apart from chronological ageing or a mere increase in the number or proportion of old population as a consequence of increased life expectancy. Population ageing refers to shifts in the age distribution of the population in which the relative share of persons at older ages increases, and the share at younger ages decreases. This is

distinct from absolute increases in the number of older persons that can occur even if their share does not increase (Leete and Jacobs 2002). Demographers thus view ageing as a process inextricably linked to ‘demographic transition’ or ‘fertility transition’ leading to slow but a definite change from more youthful societies in many countries to more demographically mature populations. In strict demographic terms, the nations states witnessing these transitions will be relieved of child dependency to a great extent while they will have to face a greater burden of old-age dependency. This shift of dependency as reflected in the changing age-structure of such nations may be similar in quantity - decrease in child dependency compensated by increase in old age dependency - but not in quality. It may be noted that the increase in life expectancy is not only due to greater life expectancy among the younger age-group but also rising life expectancy of the older segment.

While ageing research is fairly well developed and well documented in Europe and other developed countries including Japan not much interest in the past was shown by scholars and policy makers in most Asian countries including India. The reasons are not far to seek. This lack of research on ageing in Asia relates to the firm belief that the robustness and continuance of the family system ‘is and will continue to be a full proof insurance against all problems faced during old age’ (Dhar Chakraborty 2004: 26). But we are now slowly waking up to the reality that joint family, long held as our answer to the problems of ageing, is neither as widespread as popularly believed, nor does it seem capable of accommodating pressures created by demands of a modern urban and industrialized lifestyle.

Initially observed in the more developed countries, the process of ageing is now rapidly approaching the developing world. Although not a global phenomenon yet, various predictions indicate that population ageing is going to become a major global issue in years to come. Virtually all countries will face population ageing, albeit with varying intensity and at different points of time. The inter-generational balance seen today may not be observed in future. The changing balance between age groups would make the aged more of a burden on society and as resources are diverted from the young to the old, the world may experience unpleasant inter-generational conflicts and tensions. With improvements in life expectancy (and these improvements will take place at a faster rate for females than for males) there is, and will be, a progressive ageing of the older population, and interestingly a majority of them will be females.

The issues that are likely to be confronted by all developing nation-states include the implications of an ageing population for socio-economic development programmes, health care, savings, investments, consumption patterns, work force participation, migration and social security. It may also include the role of the family in supporting the aged. According to Dhar Chakraborty, ‘...when the Western world is reshaping the world for the elderly, in order to contain costs as well as to mitigate the inter generational conflict, many Asian countries have barely begun to think about their elderly, and given the pace of population ageing in Asia and the corresponding lack of adjustment mechanism, a “time bomb” and “agequake” may not be very far’ (2004: 27).

Given the seriousness of the problem of ageing and the challenges ahead, the two books under review are timely addition to the body of steadily growing literature on ageing in India. The authors of these books should be commended for providing vital statistical data and an overview of the elderly population in two Northeastern states of India.

Unfortunately, the titles of the two books appear to be somewhat misleading. A careful reading of the contents does not show the correctness of such a title if one goes by the connotation of the term ‘ageing’ discussed at length in the beginning of this review. Ageing is primarily viewed as a demographic process characterized by shifts in the age distribution of the population in which the relative share of persons at older ages increases, and the share at younger ages decreases. Neither of these two features seems to have manifested in either Meghalaya or in Manipur – the two federal states covered by these books. Marginal increase in the number of the elderly or their share in the total population does not herald a demographic transformation that qualifies to be called ageing. There is hardly any evidence of a significant alteration in the age structure of the population in these two states of India - a fact clearly brought out by the authors of these two books. Nor is there any long term indication of the process taking some shape in the near future. As has been noted by various scholars, the process of ageing in India is characterized by enormous regional variation. The areas which have experienced a demographic transition are already experiencing a significant alteration in the age structure that contains a sizeable proportion of aged people and declining proportion of child population. The case of Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and a few states in South India can be cited as examples of such transition. But this is not true of Northeast India where the fertility rate continues to be high despite a significant decline in mortality. Recent

survey data indicate that mortality level has improved in all the states following better health facilities and longer life expectancy. The decline in mortality rate has been a response to improved medical facilities and better spatial coverage in the provision of health care. But the fertility rate has not responded adequately to these improvements and continues to be extremely high in areas that sport a sizeable tribal population. Declining mortality rate coupled with a relatively longer life expectancy has certainly increased the number of elderly population in the states of Northeast India, but when compared with the resistant fertility level, the elderly population continues to be a small proportion of the total population and continues to remain more or less constant over the past three decades or more. Interestingly, the proportion of the aged (60+) population in the total has marginally declined in both Meghalaya and Manipur in the year 1991 compared to what was their proportion in 1961. The proportion of the elderly in Meghalaya in 2001 is also lower than the proportion recorded in 1961 though it is marginally higher than the figure in 1991. It is evident that both the populations in question do not show any indication towards ageing in strict demographic sense.

Perhaps the authors (and the editors) have used the term ‘ageing’ in a loose sense without caring for the technical usage of the term. As the contents would reveal, the real issue addressed in the two books is ‘aged’ rather than ‘ageing’. The books certainly provide useful information about the status of the elderly population in two important states of India located in Northeastern region and merit a review in this context rather than looking forward to an understanding of the ageing process as it is unfolding itself at a micro level. In fact, the authors painstakingly justify the ageing process in the two states by simply providing statistics for one or two decades and merely stating that the growth rate of the elderly population exceeds that of the general population. Ageing indeed is a long drawn process and is not a result of changes taking place within a decade or two.

The book on ageing in Meghalaya is a product of a project sponsored by the Government of Meghalaya on ‘the magnitude of the problems of elderly persons in Meghalaya’. The study is based on personal interview of 221 elderly persons above 60 years of age distributed in all the seven districts of the state but confined only to district headquarters. The status of the elderly population has been assessed in respect of health, financial security, psychological problems, informal care giving, dependency etc. A series of recommendations follow the broad conclusions regarding the status of the elderly. The book begins with some details pertaining to the trends of ageing

at global level and the situation prevailing in Indian context. The next section is devoted to a demographic analysis of the ageing process in Meghalaya. However, the conclusions drawn with regard to the trends and identification of areas of concern for the elderly suffer from analytical aridity. The study concludes that the elderly population is concentrated in a few districts which have only experienced an increase in the proportion of the elderly during 1991-2001 decade. Likewise, to say that the rural areas bear much of the burden of the elderly population is to state the obvious, as bulk of the population in the state is concentrated in rural areas in a state where the level of urbanization is relatively low. Information pertaining to a number of variables concerned with the status of the elderly is presented in absolute figures rendering the analysis far less intelligible than if they were shown in ratio. Many of the conclusions lack a clear theoretical perspective and hence are presented as mere generalizations without questioning the sample or method of data collection. Some of the information has been presented as findings when these are indeed part of the sample design. For example, it is mentioned that the elderly people belonged to different communities (p.40). There is also a lack of professionalism as evident from the fact that Tables 3.1 and Table 3.2, referred to in the text (p.37) are missing in the chapter. When only 5 of the 231 elderly persons were found to be unmarried, it has been noted with concern that many elderly were found to be unmarried (p.38). The fact that the study finds an inverse relation between education and income on the one hand and health problems suffered by the elderly people in Meghalaya on the other appears to be unacceptable and only reveals inadequacy of the analytical tools applied.

The section on informal care givers and financial dependency of the elderly provides some respite from a highly empiricist method that characterized the analysis in the earlier section. The section contains valuable information pertaining to the family support frame, manner of dependency, working status of the elderly themselves, contacts with the children if living separately, attitude of the members of the family to the elderly person and reasons for loneliness if any. However, the presentation lacks synthesis as each aspect has been mentioned separately as subheadings and as they were asked to the respondents. This seriously undermines the quality of presentation.

Health-related problems of the elderly population receive considerable attention in the following section. But here too the presentation follows a similar pattern. While the study finds the status of the elderly males poorer than their female counterparts in Section III, it is contradicted in Section V,

where the females are found to have suffered from more health problems. The next section examines the policies and programmes of the government towards the welfare of the elderly and contrasts it with the views of key informants regarding the efficacy of these policies. The final section contains a series of recommendations for the improvement of the status of the elderly.

In spite of serious limitations inherent in the study, the book serves a useful purpose in creating awareness regarding the problems of the aged.

The book on Manipur is a collection of essays on the magnitude of the problems of the elderly. It is largely an outcome of a series of state-level seminar organized by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, North-Eastern Regional Centre on the theme. The book contains seven papers on diverse themes concerning the elderly apart from a keynote address. Most of the papers included in the volume cannot be considered as well-researched as they often express mere concerns for the elderly people.

Based on an in-depth analysis of the trends available in successive census enumeration, M. Manimohan Meitei provides a demographic background to the status of the elderly population in Manipur with regard to their growth, distribution, marital status, migration, work participation rate, literacy rate etc. Though commendable in providing very important information on demographic characteristics of the elderly, the paper suffers from poor analytical insights and problems of language that undermine the quality of an otherwise fine paper. H. Diwakar Sharma, in his paper on the 'Social and Economic Status of the Elders: Issues and Challenges' blames the rise of individualism and nuclear families for the growing plight of the elderly in Manipur society. Linus Neli's paper on 'Nuances on the Elderly People among the Tribes of Manipur' and S. Saratkumar Sharma's on 'Care for the Elderly: A Social Concern' merely provide suggestions for enhancement of the quality of life of the ageing people. R.K. Lenin's paper on psycho-social issues of the elderly persons is a simple listing of the problems to be found in any textbook dealing with such problems. S. Kunjabihari Singh writes about the elderly in very general terms and the paper by Th. Achouba Singh only lists major health problems among the elderly copied from ICMR report.

The editors of the book have hardly taken any effort to present a concise and coherent picture of the status of the elderly and have miserably failed to provide a semblance of quality. Most of the papers included are journalistic and a few do not even care to provide references. The book may safely be ignored by anyone looking for a serious contribution to the body of literature

on ageing or related issues.

References

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Ch. Priyoranjan Singh (ed.) 2009. *Tribalism and the Tragedy of the Commons – Land, Identity and Development: The Manipur Experience*. New Delhi: Akanksha Publishing House, 382p, Rs.1195, Hardbound.

Northeast India and particularly the tribes of this region have never ceased to draw the attention of the government and the people at large. The book is an exploration of the underlying causes for the unrest in Manipur — one of the seven states that together form the Northeastern region of the country. There has been no dearth of plans and programmes made for the development of the region and for the amelioration of its problems, yet these have mostly failed to bear fruits. The different articles in the book explore the root causes behind the failure of the developmental schemes.

The book contains three sections. The first deals with the politics of identity and contains six papers including the introduction. The second section comprises six articles grouped together to explain the intricate relation between history, politics and development. The third section includes eight articles on land systems of the tribes of Manipur and their quest for identity and change. Before embarking upon the description of the socio-political scenario of the state of unrest in Northeast India and the reasons behind that, Ch. Priyoranjan Singh introduces the reader to the view which the rest of India has for the region - as an area of movement for separate states, homelands and even cessation from the country. Dissatisfaction leads to disruption, dispute and

discord. The book explains how the issues of land and identity are the chief factors responsible for unrest in the region.

Samir Kumar Das writes at length about the demands for homeland from different pockets of the region which keep clashing with each other for want of power, in particular, political power. He compares this to the peeling of the onion that ends only with the end of the onion itself. He explains in detail the difference between territory and land against the backdrop of these conflicts and points out that territory is an object of ownership while land is not; land is shared among the members of a community but not the territory. This notion forms the plinth of conflict between 'we' and 'others'. Das further opines that civil societies in the Northeastern region play a pivotal role in addressing the issues of land, identity and developmental programmes in the area. Discussion on civil society goes a step further as Pradip Phanjoubam questions the role of civil society in Manipur, describes in detail how civil societies tend to become puppets or proxies of the parties in conflict rather than being the instrumental figures for drawing up and building agendas for peace and well being of all.

Prasenjit Biswas goes deeper into the land issue and reiterates that land for the community is just not a property. Rather it symbolizes the identity of the community and regulates social exchange, livelihood and power. Land-related conflicts among the Nagas and Kukis of Manipur is explained in the historical context by Bhabananda Takhellambam. S. Mangi locates the ongoing Kuki-Naga strife in electoral politics. The article by Gangumei Kamei brings to the fore yet another dimension of land-related conflict. A plethora of acts and regulations concerning the tribal land are made, but lacunae in their formulation, interpretation and their politicization have resulted in furthering land-related conflicts. He adds with an optimistic note that a change can be witnessed in the mindset of the intellectuals among the tribes. The emerging progressive leaders are questioning the existing land laws and are raising their voice for a suitable law for the tribal hill areas, a law that makes way for institutional finance and investments. E. Bijoy Kumar too explains in a rather simplistic manner that the hill regions of Manipur are well endowed with forest and land resources so the rampant poverty here cannot be attributed to the lack of resources. Rather the onus of the optimum utilization of these resources lies on good governance and motivating incentives. However the village chiefs and the elites of the area manipulate the property and land rights in their favour. As possessors of money power and muscle power they arrest the implementation of property/land rights in letter and spirit. As a result there is growing development disparity between the hills and the valley