

## *Book Review*

**Ramesh Sharma and C. Joshua Thomas (eds), *Ageism-Problems and Prospects*, New Delhi: Akanksha Publishing House, 2010, 441p, Rs.1200, Hardbound.**

*How we wish to live happily ever after  
To grow old with joy and laughter  
To look back at the years gone by  
With a smile and a sparkle in the wrinkled eye*  
[By the reviewer]

The present volume is an attempt to call attention to the problems of the aged. Twenty two chapters categorized in three sections along with the inaugural address form the content of the book. The articles in the first section throw light on the bio-medical aspects of ageing. Subbulakshami Jagadeesan (inaugural address) and Kalluri Subba Rao, in their respective papers, mention at the outset that India has a large population of aged people and the latter goes on to say that “India can be proud” of the “grand parents’ boom”, which is the outcome of improved medicare and increased health awareness. Proud we want to be but are forced to take a pause before deciding to be actually happy about it or not. Longevity of life has to be coupled with quality of living. Rao clearly states that India has failed in implementing programmes to control population and is now failing to make the elderly population assets for the nation. This is a vital point, as both ‘ailing’ and ‘aged’ are, in common parlance, taken as dependents, to be provided for. The general attitude is more about “doing things” for the aged. We need to ask and challenge ourselves to research further about how to convert the aged into national assets and not to take them as a burden. The article by Ramesh Sharma elaborates on the dietary restriction as one of the intervention strategies to avoid and cure age-related health problems. M.K.Thakur provides a detailed account of the implications of the Alzheimer’s disease, not any less known problem of the old age. In this informative write up he elucidates on the types of dementia, its symptoms and cure. Arun P. Bali adds a new dimension to the deliberations on the issue. He emphasizes that gender issues do not diminish with age and that elderly women have less access to health care. They face specific health

problems like arthritis, osteoporosis, cervical and breast cancer and most of all depression. Indira Jai Prakash further calls attention towards “feminization of poverty” (p.107) with older women being poorer.

Section II of the book focusses on socio-psychological aspects of ageism. Indira Jai Prakash discusses at length the “Agequake” phenomenon. She makes a comparative study of the decadal growth, fertility rate, crude birth rate etc between India and Meghalaya. She provides quantitative data on the health and well being of older persons in Northeast and rest of India and writes that “a planning commission report states that rural poverty in Meghalaya has worsened over the last decade”. However she does not throw light on the causes responsible for the same. Further requirement of the paper was to give the rationale of comparing the health status of the elderly in Northeast India with the rest of the country. In fact, the heading of Table 2 (p.109) “Health and well being of older persons in India and North East” can rake up a stormy debate if one reads between the lines. “North east and the mainland” or “north east and India’ is commonly used by all and sundry, but their usage by scholars, intellectuals and the like is definitely not excusable. One needs to exercise prudence prior to using such labels. The article by Indrani Chakravarty and S.K.Chakravarty make an interesting read as they address some age related issues in the region against the backdrop of the current age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). A geographer’s input in the life of the old takes the discussion of the latter to yet another level. Debendra Kumar Nayak correlates geography with aging. He draws attention to the fact that Northeast India witnesses a unique demographic situation, one marked by high fertility rate along with an increase in life expectancy. As a result of this the number of elderly people has increased considerably. However this pattern is not uniform in the whole region. Variation in different geographical pockets within the region has been taken into account to understand the variation in demography.

Despite the fact that India is being recognized as a power to reckon with bulk of the Indians live in villages and any discussion on ageing is incomplete without adequate coverage of the aged in the rural areas. The urban-rural dichotomy carries with it differing notions of life styles or ways of life. K.L. Sharma, while writing about the rural elderly of India, not only presents the urban-rural divide pertaining to ageing but also extends the comparison to the global canvass by elucidating the worldwide trend of 60 plus population between 1980 and 2020. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 seems to be a bright ray of hope for

the elderly in India. It is ironical that the state has to intervene to ensure that parents and senior citizens are decently treated and cared for. Sharma, while detailing about the government schemes for care and support of the aged, draws attention to some lacuna in the Act. The article by G.S. Saun titled "Psychological Wellbeing and Elderly" is a well-penned work, succeeding in touching the emotional and psychological chord. He subtly weaves the specific and technical meanings of commonly and mechanically used terms like 'aging', 'wellbeing' and 'adjustment' in such a way as to make a fabric of warmth and concern for the aged. It is absolutely pertinent to be sensitive to the psychology of the elderly to ensure that they truly enjoy overall good health. A deliberate effort is required to walk that extra mile to make them feel special, for it does not take them long to succumb to a gnawing feeling of loneliness, to the feeling of being at the fag end of their journey and being no longer 'needed'.

Section III of the book brings together papers which focus on the socioeconomic aspects of ageism. In his article K.K.Lakshaman draws attention to the sidelining of human values with the implementation of the new Indian economic policy, 1991 and its chief components – liberalization and privatization. This has further quickened the pace of the disintegration of the joint family. He writes: "The grandparents guiding, helping the young in household duties, sharing their experience on health, family budgeting, children education and all such activities became commercialized. As a result more income is required and the younger generations start leaving home for work with elders left alone." (p.215). The author points out that the aged people in India do not form a homogeneous group and that older people in lower classes of the society are biologically older than those in the upper strata. He enumerates various problems faced by the elderly, ranging from ill health to the gruesome murders and robberies of old people living alone in cities.

A considerable number of pages of the book are devoted to understanding old age issues in Northeast Indian states. Chandana Sarmah discusses the socioeconomic condition of the Assamese elderly of Guwahati. She highlights a rather common phenomenon of the present times of the elderly living in urban areas in connection with their occupation or their children. They look back at their original home with a lot of nostalgia and longing to return to their villages. One witnesses that there has been a growing trend of the parents wanting to live independently in their old age and not with their sons' families. There is a popular saying, "A son is a son till he gets a wife but a daughter is a daughter for the whole life". The present volume falls short

of any discussion on gender behaviour towards the aged.

Linus Neli and Ch. Priyoranjan Singh, in their respective articles, write about aging scenario in Manipur. Neli concentrates on the hill people (*Chingmi*) of Manipur. He points out that the ethnic turmoil in Manipur has a traumatic impact on the elderly people there leading to psychological depression. C.J. Thomas and F.T. Diengdoh discuss issues pertaining to aging in Meghalaya and highlight the trends in the growth of elderly population, in old age financial security, in status of health of the elderly etc. Writing about the trends in informal care given to the elderly, the authors discuss the matrilineal social system in Meghalaya. They make some much needed recommendations and suggestions to address the problems of the aged in Meghalaya. Lianzela and Vanlalchhawna's article focusses on aging in Mizoram and the trends of aging in Nagaland have been covered by A. Lanunungsang and Visielie. The issue of aging in Tripura is taken up by Manoshi Das, Paramita Saha and Jayantha Choudhury in their respective articles. Manoshi Das's study focusses on aging among tribes in Tripura and concludes with a hard hitting line, "The aged and elderly are not afraid of death, but are afraid of life". Many papers in the book provide a detailed description of government programmes and policies for the welfare of the aged. There is no dearth of such schemes but Jayanta Choudhury and Elizabeth Sangliana write in their article that the success of any programme depends "mainly upon the implementation which revolves around a strong awareness campaign, strong monitoring structure and active participation of the people."

Finally, the title of the book *Ageism* calls for some comments. The word 'ageism' signifies discrimination or prejudice towards the aged. The articles in the book deal basically with 'ageing' rather than with 'ageism'. There is less scope of giving the benefit of doubt by bringing 'ageism' within the purview of 'aging' or 'problems of the aged' as the term "ageism" has a very specific connotation. The title of the book and the contents within are hence not in synchrony with each other. This is a major flaw as "ageism" sets the mood of the reader to read about something which he/she does not actually find in the book. Despite this shortcoming this volume is a commendable attempt to bring in various interrelated dimensions of ageing under one canopy. It sensitizes the readers on problems of the aged and appeals to make this world a better place to live in for our senior citizens.

Who is this old man at the bent of the road?  
It's you and it's me in the years to unfold,  
Hold his hand today, for he is our tomorrow,  
Looking back and calling us to follow.  
[By the reviewer]

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