

Garimella Giridhar, K. M. Sathyanarayana, Sanjay Kumar, K. S. James and Moneer Alam (eds.) (2014). *Population Ageing in India*. Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 250 pp. ISBN 978 1 1070 7332 6 (hardback)

*REVIEWED by VALERIE LIPMAN**

As a consequence of a falling birth rate and improved health care, more people in India are both reaching old age and living a longer old age. According to the 2011 India census, 104 million people living in India (8.6% of the population) are over 60 years of age. By 2050, this is expected to reach nearly 20% of the population. Life expectancy in India is now 78 years for women and 76 years for men. Such increases pose huge challenges in a country where there is no universal old age pension, where nearly 80% of the population subsist on or below two dollars a day, where the public health system is extremely limited, and where 75% of the population live in rural areas with an inadequate infrastructure.

Awareness of the rising numbers of older people in India and their implications have been subject to government interest since the 1990s, but as this collection of papers shows over and over again, there is little evidence that planners, policy makers, and practitioners have grasped the enormity of the changes coming their way.

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Population Ageing in India presents the results of the first phase of a large research study "Building Knowledge Base on Ageing in India" (BKBAI). The purpose of the book is to inform local, national, and international planners and policymakers in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors of the implications of India's ageing population, and to encourage them to develop policies and take action that will benefit both older people and India's ageing society as a whole. With the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) India, new research was undertaken in seven Indian states across the country. This has been combined with existing datasets about life in India, to create a systematic knowledge base that is exclusively about India's older population and ageing society. Seven working papers were commissioned, each of which provides the basis of a separate chapter in this book. While this results in some overlap and factual inconsistencies, it provides a useful means for reinforcing what are essential messages for all those working in India.

The first four chapters address the major socio-economic factors facing India's ageing population. Starting with a solid baseline chapter on the huge demographic shifts taking place, Chapter 1, "Demographics of Population in Ageing," provides substantial tables and diagrams illustrating population changes nationally and by state. Chapter 2 addresses both the economic value of and the continuing need for older people's participation in the workforce, in the absence of universal benefits, pensions and low family income. As the author notes, the increasing numbers of the very old who will be unable to work, will require other means of support. It is in Chapter 3, "Living Arrangements of Elderly in India: Policy and Programmatic Implications," that some of the very practical difficulties facing India are confronted. Sathyanarayana et al. expose the myth of the "traditional" familial support mechanisms supporting the older population: not only are these breaking down, but they would be insufficient for providing adequate support to an increasingly, physically and mentally frail segment of the elderly population. On average around 20% of elderly live alone or with a spouse only. In some areas this is as high as 45%. "A combination of declining fertility, migration and nuclearization (sic) of families are three possible reasons for . . . ensuring appropriate systems to address the declining support base" (p. 86). As the writers state,

further research is required to understand the impact of this on the lives of older people living alone.

Chapter 4 addresses the health status of the older population. It presents an interesting sweep of the main illnesses experienced by ageing Indians and discusses the socio-economic and life-course approach to ageing. While acknowledging how the accumulation of socio-economic deprivations, intense poverty, high levels of illiteracy, gender and caste inequalities contribute to health outcomes, it reinforces the inadequacy of the current health care system to face these challenges. It is welcome that the authors note the paucity of studies on disability. And yet, in the section about "Planning for Old Age Health Care Services in India" (p. 122), they fail to mention the rising incidence of dementia. A study in 2010 noted there were 3.7 million Indians with dementia, a number expected to double by 2030 (Shaji et al. 2010). The study further notes that the costs to and for the community and family affected by dementia will rise exponentially.

The last three chapters focus on policy and practice initiatives in both India and a selection of Asian countries, for comparative and learning purposes, and offer a review of the status of research on population ageing in India. Together, these chapters provide more of an on-the-ground feel of how the issues need to be addressed for the individual, as distinct from the "what needs to be addressed" for society as a whole, provided in the earlier part of the book. The last chapter in particular gives an almost whistle stop tour of anything and everything that might concern an older person, offering an assemblage of policy and practice areas for further exploration on such topics as spirituality, how older people will manage, palliative care, elder abuse and dementia. These "nudges" are interesting but insufficient to be of use to planners and provider of services for older people who will, for example, need to consider how and who is going to care for frail older people. There is little here about formal care structures and community support, or about the need to train more social workers and support staff. Raju touches on this in the last chapter and the big unanswered question of how a country with the low per capita GDP of India will manage to provide adequate care and support to this fast ageing population.

The information contained in this short book nonetheless provides a good starting point for anyone wanting to know about India's changing demographics and the broader implications for an ageing society. It exposes some common myths about older people in general, such as they all need help, to those imagining an India in which older people do not have support needs because they can rely on their kin. It further succeeds in conveying two very important cross-cutting themes. First, it gives special attention to gender issues, recognising that women live longer and in India are more likely to be living on their own in old age and dependent on others for basic maintenance. And second, it furthers the position that older people are contributors to the family and economy, and should be included in formulating programmes that concern them rather than their being framed as dependents and passive recipients of care.

For the international bodies working in India, the UNFPA has provided much stimulus and concomitant resources for new research (2012). It is a little curious though that UNDP, the largest global agency working in development, is not mentioned in the book as a player in India's future. This is disappointing as the book presents many of the points from the 2002 World Assembly on Ageing conferences and how these are being taken forward in other regions of the globe (UNDAF 2012).

As the preface states, this first stage of BKBAI draws solely on secondary research. Phase two will include primary research. This will hopefully flesh out the issues raised in the final chapter and will seek to identify from older people what they want, in the likely absence of extensive state support. Hopefully, it will also provide insights beyond the health and care fields, such as public infrastructure programmes whose activities impact on the lives of older people too. The World Health Organisation (WHO) provides an exemplar of this with its Age Friendly Cities programme. In the absence of blueprints and theories on ageing and international development, I would recommend this book as a taster, particularly for those sceptical about the size and scale of the current and growing ageing population. Basic statistics are always useful to have and will at least address the ubiquitous "we don't know enough" excuse for doing nothing.

References

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