

Lifelong learning for senior citizens in India: needs and possibilities

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning has been widely regarded as one of the most useful activities which benefit the senior citizens in term of their psychological, mental, physical and cognitive well-being. Lifelong learning is needed for senior citizens, to deal with the practical life skills and adjustments to changing living situations. Lifelong learning has been seen as a vital tool: to involve education, businessman, public organization, youths in educational work with senior citizens; to create system of work with the senior citizens studying their needs; and to develop and implement the innovative projects for the learning of senior citizens. Extending these arguments, present paper details about the lifelong learning needs of senior citizens and delves about the possibilities to meet lifelong learning needs of senior citizens in India.

Keywords: *Lifelong learning; Senior citizens; Needs; Possibilities.*

Population ageing is becoming a major concern for both developed and emerging countries. India is also not immune to this demographic change. The changing demographic profile has thrown many new challenges in the social, economic and political domains. The proportion of the world's older adults is estimated to almost double from about 12% to 22% between 2015 and 2050. In absolute terms, this is an expected increase from 900 million to 2 billion people over the age of 60. These people are often called as 'senior'. According to Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, Senior citizen means any person who attained the age of 60 years or above. In legislation, this term applies to the age at which pensions, social security or medical benefits for the elderly become available. From societal perspective, senior citizens are those who became free from their responsibilities up to some extent and are not engaged in any obligatory work. These senior citizens are not supposed to do strenuous work but society needs that they must remain active throughout their lives. Let's have a look on status and life of senior citizen in India.

Status and Life of Senior citizens in India

Both the share and size of elderly population is increasing over time in India. According to a 2016 report by the Ministry for Statistics and Program Implementation, there are nearly 104 million senior citizens (aged 60 years or above) in India; 53 million females and 51 million males. This number is going to rise in coming years as a report by the United Nations

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Population Fund and Help Age India suggests that the number of senior citizens is expected to grow to 173 million by 2026. As regards rural and urban areas, 71% of senior citizens reside in rural areas while 29% is in urban areas. In rural areas, 66% of elderly men and 28% of elderly women were working, while in urban areas only 46% of elderly men and about 11% of elderly women were working. The percent of literates among senior citizens increased from 27% in 1991 to 44% in 2011. The literacy rates among elderly females (28%) is less than half of the literacy rate among elderly males (59%).

Thus, we can see there are so many people in India who falls in the category of senior citizens. It is often believed that age tends to disconnect and isolate seniors from society, and it is mostly this disengagement that leads to their cognitive decline and other health detriments. It has also been observed that withdrawal from the daily activities, such as workplace, resulting in the different psycho-social problems among senior citizens. Common psychological issues affecting senior citizens mainly include, but are not limited to, anxiety, depression, delirium, dementia, personality disorders, and substance abuse. Common social and emotional issues mainly involve loss of autonomy, grief, fear, loneliness, financial constraints, and lack of social networks. Psycho-social issues affecting senior citizens are complex in nature and are often intertwined with physical ailments. Social determinants of health can include socioeconomic status, physical environment, living conditions, family and social networks, lifestyle and behavior.

Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies have shown that healthy senior citizens are as happy or happier and have an equal quality of life as they age, as compared to younger employed adult. The stage pertaining to senior citizens is ego integrity versus despair. The work of this stage is to accept one's life as meaningful. The older person who reaches ego integrity looks back with satisfaction, and has an acceptance of life and death. Death is seen as a part of life. If this stage is not adequately bridged, the person is in a state of despair, which is failure to accept the meaningfulness of one's life. When one is in despair, there are feelings of anger, bitterness, depression, inadequacy, failure and fear of death (Erikson, 1963). Thus, we can see that there are so many psycho-social challenges in the life of senior citizens. To lead a happy and healthy life, senior citizens need solutions to address these psycho-social challenges. Continuous engagement in lifelong learning is one such viable solution for senior citizens to maintain a higher quality of life.

Senior Citizens and Lifelong learning

In the past, society believed that learning is simply a privilege belonging to youth and senior citizens are not fit for learning as they had lost their learning abilities. This concept has gradually been eliminated, and the contention that older adults possess the ability to learn had been widely accepted (Moon, 2011; Peterson, 1983; Wolf, 1998; Williamson, 2000). Therefore, senior citizens are very much part of a society named 'learning society'. The learning society is the vision of a society where there are recognized opportunities for learning for every person wherever they are and however old they should be (Green, 2002). As Walters (2010) claims: our planet would not survive, if it is not a learning planet and sustainable development will be achieved by learning through life. So, the concept of lifelong learning is most favorable for the human beings from birth till death. Lifelong learning is the path of reaching towards their goals of the life and getting happiness. Woodrow (1999) defined lifelong learning as "learning which has been acquired from cradle to tomb." It emphasized empowering people, expanding their capabilities and choices in life and enabling individuals and societies to cope with the new challenges of the 21st century (Singh, 2002).

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Lifelong learning refers to the activities people perform throughout their life to improve their knowledge, skills and competence in a particular field, given some personal, societal or employment related motives (Field, 2001; Aspin, & Chapman, 2000). Lifelong learning is about acquiring skills that enable us to survive (continue to live or exist). This may sound a bit dramatic, but it is about learning to help us through our daily lives (Lewis-Fitzgerald, 2005). Lifelong learning is, simply put, learning all the time without restriction of age. Imagining that learning stops after school or college is incorrect. It happens all the time in invisible ways. As far as senior citizens are concerned, we are thinking of learning for learning sake. No certificate, no monetary gain or employment is expected. It is purposeful organized learning. It may be informal, online, or typical classroom sessions. In the present scenario, when the condition of senior citizens are getting affected in India due to nuclear families and many other reasons, one solution of improving their own quality of life is to learn: to learn for pacing with this changing time, to learn for coping with new technology, and to learn for their own day to day life survival. Lifelong learning is supposed to offer multiple benefits for senior citizens in India:

1. Helping them to make new friends and establishing valuable relationships through which senior citizens can enjoy an active social life.
2. Keeping senior citizens involved as active contributors to society by taking part in educational programs, community programs and offering their expertise to society.
3. Helping them in adapting the change especially the technological ones.
4. Creating a curious, hungry mind which keeps their drive and desire to learn going.
5. Free exchange of ideas and viewpoints among senior citizens, listening to or taking part in stimulating discussions helps to see the other side of an issue.
6. Helping them fully develop those natural abilities which they were not able to develop earlier due to their busy schedules.
7. Eradicating the age related myth of learning of senior citizens.
8. Giving purpose to life, and motivating them to live healthier and happier life.
9. Improving cognitive skills and prevent or delay the onset of Dementia or Alzheimer's disease.
10. Helping to get rid of boredom, loneliness and depression.
11. Improving self confidence and usefulness to self or others by advancement of career.

Lifelong learning needs of senior citizens

In the 21st century, we all need to be lifelong learners. Our world is changing around us in such a frantic pace that if we do not continue to grow and develop; we will soon be left behind. We need to continually keep our skills sharp and up to date so that we have an edge in all we do (Eggelmeyer, 2010). Just as children and adolescents have developmental needs which are learning needs, so too do old people. Needs mean to have something or to want something very much. Therefore, lifelong learning needs of senior citizens are requirements, the attitudes, the expectations, and the interest in context of life related activities. There are many challenges and obstacles in the journey of life as the people ages. As the age increases, dependency on the others also increases due to various reasons, so the needs also increase. These needs can be fulfilled by learning only since it is necessary to cop up with time which is changing drastically due to advanced technology and so there is an evolution of lifelong learning needs of senior citizens. This is very important and necessary to know that what do senior citizens want and what are their needs in context of lifelong learning. Some of the lifelong learning needs of seniors as discussed in table 1.

Table-1: Lifelong Learning Needs of Senior Citizens

1. Maintaining a good and regular lifestyle.
2. Keeping active their mind, body and spirit.
3. Using free time in a productive manner
4. Engaging themselves in social activities via social media or by getting formal education.
5. Participating in volunteer services to manifest the meaning and value of the later life, and reaching successful aging (Lin, 2006).
6. Getting knowledge related to chronic illness.
7. Planning their financial management for security of their retirement life (Chung 1998; Leung & Earl, 2012)
8. Knowing the new technology for pacing themselves with the changing time.
9. Knowing the common crime and fraud which happen generally with older people.
10. Maintaining interpersonal and social interaction.
11. Satisfying the desire of contribution in feelings, thoughts and services of their family members and with nation also.

Furthermore, the social roles and lifestyles of the senior citizens change a lot as their age increases. Through participating in learning activities, senior citizens may expect to acquire the up-to-date knowledge to face the rapid changes of aging, obtain opportunities and connections to maintain their social and interpersonal interaction, and carry out periodic tasks in this stage of life.

Possibilities to Meet Lifelong Learning Needs of Senior Citizens

Senior citizens are the world's most untapped resources. Therefore, it is the great responsibility of the society and respective governments to make some strategies for lifelong learning for these valuable people, so that they could accept learning with interest and understand the benefits of lifelong learning for their later life. This will be beneficial for our nation also, since the active participation of senior citizens in society, which will be full of their lifelong experiences will support the progress of our country and of our young generations. Here is a great need of fulfilling the requirements of senior citizens towards the lifelong learning. Education opportunities are abundant in India yet the elderly need to be part of this trend and be educated to advantage. Non-Governmental Organizations can play a vital role in advocacy and in formation of senior citizen groups for better access to services and different schemes regulated by Government of India for fulfilling the lifelong learning needs of seniors. The courses regarding pension planning, health, new knowledge of technological devices, and volunteer training, are the most interesting and demanding subjects for the senior citizens. However, the majority of the programs of the senior learning centers focus mainly on the types of leisure or recreation (Wei, Hu, & Chen, 2012), indicating that current course contents are planned based on what the older adults "want," not what they "need" (Wei, Chen, & Lee, 2014).

Life expectancy has been increasing up to 80-90 years old or more and the percentage of young generations has been decreasing day by day. The only way of keeping the quantity and quality of active labourship is to establish lifelong learning system for senior citizens. Considering that population of senior citizens is increasing in India, it is most desirable to pay attention to their lifelong learning needs. Senior citizens are generally looked as persons contributing nothing and need investment. But policymakers have to realize that the benefits of education can better be reaped if we have a support of educated forefathers with us. Significance of education and health mixed with right and healthy human values will make

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this human capital more productive. It will result in high national income, higher consumption and higher standard of living also. Due to right and healthy human values provided by senior citizens, our country will be able to make a society with more tolerance, patience and perseverance. It will become a cycle which will yield positive outcomes socially and economically as well. From the perspective of active aging, the goal of education should be, to provide senior citizens the knowledge and the skills related to active older life, physical health, and safety, all of which are what senior citizens “need” to learn.

Table-2: Meeting Lifelong Learning Needs of Senior Citizens

1. Provide an appropriate space for senior citizens for the interchange of knowledge and experiences.
2. Provide a forum for finding solutions that promotes successful inter-generational relationships.
3. Offer services to satisfy their curiosity and opportunities to acquiring new skills like florist, data entry, call centre job skill, book writing, consultancy, networking and marketing, child care, baby-sitting, art and crafts, travel tour guiding, event planning, online tutoring, knitting, alteration, services, small repairing services etc.
4. Ensure their active participation in society e.g. in book clubs, laughter clubs, art classes, events with guest speakers, any contest, group discussions on any new topic, game zones, etc.
5. Provide the lifelong learning institutions with more and more flexibility and at low cost.
6. Provide a comfortable learning environment that should be free from all the pressures of traditional education. They also want relevant handouts, reading lists, websites, and/or practice exercises to enable them to pursue additional study on their own, if desired (Hiemstra, 1975; Roberson & Merriam, 2005; Sears, 1989).
7. Make senior citizens ready to come out from the shell and to share, to communicate and opening their minds for learning new things around them.
8. Engage them in intellectual stimulation task to cure their mental declination, such as Sudoku, Documentaries, Audio visual aids, Word puzzles.
9. Initiate partnership with NGOs, Government and private sector for providing good community programs keeping in view of the needs of senior citizens.
10. Inform them about all government policies and programs for the welfare and lifelong learning of seniors.
11. Sensitize children and youths towards the lifelong learning issues for seniors to be enhanced by adopting suitable programs and strategies.
12. Promote E-learning among senior citizens, for example learning through MOOC (Massive open online courses), a big platform of extension of any individual's knowledge without going anywhere.
13. Offer work based learning to engage the senior citizens and offering them financial security.
14. Engage them in volunteering activities to improve their social networking, as well as meeting the full obligations of grandparenthood to solidify further their familial relationships (Falk & Falk, 2002; Hank & Erlinghagen, 2009).
15. Train them for use of technology like electronic gadgets, laptop, smart phone and most important internet.

CONCLUSION

Senior citizens are a treasure to our society. They are experienced in various walks of life but many seniors have been subjected to impoverished living conditions in India. States like

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Kerala, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh (high dependency rates) with high populations of senior citizens leaving alone must contemplate their lifelong learning needs as high priority. This can be done through the involvement of local NGOs, State Universities and religious bodies. There is a dire need for 'the senior citizens' to be looked after with care and warmth, and lifelong learning is a very significant vehicle to help achieve this objective. In a nut shell there is a strong need of 'successful as well as productive ageing'. Today in India many senior citizens are proving that they are not a strain on society, they are an incredible asset and evolution of Greypreneures, and lifelong learning can be a valuable asset for them to maximize their potential further.

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Conflict of Interest

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