



Issue of policy and planning for elderly in India

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(MainsGS1 & 2 : Population and associated issues, poverty and developmental issues & Government policies and interventions aimed at development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation.)

Context:

According to the Longitudinal Aging Study of India (LASI), there will be over 319 million elderly by 2050, threefold the number identified by the Census in 2011.

Elderly homes:

- India becomes increasingly urbanised and families break up into smaller units; thus, homes for the elderly have risen up rapidly in urban and semi-urban India.
- The care of elderly people is managed by a set of professionals or voluntary organisations interested in geriatric services who provide accommodation, timely care, and a sense of security for their residents.
- These homes are either paid for, or offer free or subsidised services which are mostly run by NGOs, religious or voluntary organisations with support from the government, or by local philanthropists.
- However, the quality of service varies as these homes lack regulatory oversight and many homes lack clearly established standard operating procedures.

Quality of life :

- There is an urgent need to understand the quality of life at such institutions, including the impact of these homes on the mental health of their residents.
- Thus a formal approach to homes for the elderly is an important policy and planning issue for India.
- The UN World Population Ageing Report notes that India's ageing population (those aged 60 and above) is projected to increase to nearly 20% by 2050 from about 8% now.
- By 2050, the percentage of elderly people will increase by 326%, with those aged 80 years and above set to increase by 700%, making them the fastest-growing age group in India.
- With this future in mind, it is essential that our policy framework and social responses are geared to meet this reality.

Addressing the issue:

- Despite focusing on the quality of health in homes for the elderly the fact remains that good intentions and a sense of charity are often inadequate when it comes to addressing the basic health needs of elderly residents.
- The state of homes for the elderly today offers us some low-hanging fruit we can address easily, like building formal pathways for basic health screening between such homes and public health facilities.
- This can include screenings for blood sugar, blood pressure, periodic vision and hearing screening, and a simple questionnaire to assess mental health.
- Such interventions are inexpensive and could go a long way in identifying health issues and offering support.

Prioritise approach:

- The success of the COVID-19 vaccination strategy gives hope to India about taking care of its aging population as a seniors-first approach led to over 73% of elderly population receiving at least one dose and around 40% being doubly vaccinated by October 2021.
- Considering the demographic trends, India should reimagine its entire health-care policy for the next few decades, with an elderly prioritised approach.
- As senior citizens require the most diverse array of health-care services, the creation of adequate services for them will benefit all other age-groups.

Robust public policy:

- The need is to build a robust public policy to support homes for the elderly and health institutions which will offer a comprehensive set of packages that are tailored for the elderly.
- Homes for the elderly must be guided, again by policy, to make their facilities, buildings and social environment elderly- and disabled-friendly.

- Design, architecture and civic facilities must be thought from the ground up and these innovations must be available for all residents, not just those living in expensive ones.

Conclusion:

- The proof of a truly evolved and caring nation lies in the way it not only nurtures its young but also how it cares for its aging population.
- Thus, taking essential steps will help to convert elders into a massive resource for socio-cultural and economic development, giving an altogether different perspective to “demographic dividend”.

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