

# Ageing And Women: A Study Of Rural Women In Dibrugarh District Of Assam

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**Abstract:** This paper is an attempt to explore the plight of aged women along with other problems related to ageing in rural areas of Assam. Specifically, the focus is on the socio- economic background, nature of ageing among rural aged women and vulnerabilities and problems that marginalised them. The study reveals that the aged women are not ignored by the family members up to a mark and though ageing is a problem in the human society.

**Index Terms:** Ageing, Perception, Problems, Rural Women, Vulnerabilities

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ageing of populations has increasingly become a significant social phenomenon in 21<sup>st</sup> century throughout the world. Since a large majority of older Indians live in rural areas, discussion of ageing in India is essentially a discussion of ageing in rural areas. India is currently going through the initial stage of the ageing of its population, a phenomenon that started decades ago in developed countries (Bhat and Dhruvarajan, 2015: p. 334). The ageing of a population establishes various new challenges that range from social security to health care facilities. The age group of 60 plus in India is projected to increase from current level of 7 percent to nearly 9 percent by 2016 and 21 percent by 2050 (Sharma, 2007: p.ix). However both men and women experience old age differently. There are various factors responsible for this difference. Women tend to live longer than men is one of the commonly cited factor. The longevity of women as compared to men is a global phenomenon (Devi, & Bagga, 2006). As women live longer than men, they are left alone to live their later lives in isolation and widowhood and they are also likely to live more years in ill health (WHO, 2003: p.4), poverty, financial insecurity, high levels of dependency and gender-based discriminatory practices. This longevity of women's lives than men also creates disadvantages for women in Indian context. Women in India usually lives their lives as an integral part of the family and most often they dependent upon their husband and other male members of the family throughout their lives in access to education, economic resources, social standing and political power. Under these circumstances, after the death of their husbands they are deprived of this source of support, and will have to turn to their children or provide for themselves without any ability or skills to fulfil their needs. Indian society has been dominated by patriarchal system which keeps women subjugated and in a subordinate position in comparison to men throughout their lives has a major impact on their health and well- being as they go through the process of ageing. Hence, this study aims at understanding the plight of aged women in rural areas of Assam by covering three villages of Dibrugarh district of Assam.

## 2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The Gerontological studies were almost an untouched part of social science research until late 1960s. However, after this period, quite a good number of works have been conducted by various researchers in some perspectives in different parts of India. But unfortunately, in Assam, the number of studies made on this problem is very limited and the efforts have been sporadic and scanty. Hence, the status of the 'aged women' in Assam is very slightly known to all of us especially in Assamese society. More specifically the changing social status of the aged women, particularly living in the rural areas of Assam is quite unknown and no significant work has yet been done to show as to how modern life style among the younger generation affects the social, economic and cultural aspects of the aged women living in rural areas of Assam. So the present study has been made an attempt to addressing the problems and issues of the rural aged women. Hence, this study will be a useful secondary source for those who are interested in the welfare of the rural aged women in the state or in the country.

## 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following specific objectives were adopted for the present study. These are

1. To know the socio -economic background of the rural aged women.
2. To examine the nature of ageing among the rural aged women.
3. To understand the vulnerabilities and problems of the rural aged women.

## 4. FIELD OF STUDY AND APPLICATION OF METHODOLOGY

The universe of the present study comprises three villages namely Kapahua, Na- Khangia Bangali and Barbam No. 1 villages of Tengakhat circle located in Dibrugarh district of Assam. Tengakhat is a circle under Dibrugarh sub-division of Dibrugarh district of Assam. Tengakhat is a historical and small place in Dibrugarh district. It is located 29km towards East from district headquarters. As per 2011 census, total population of Tengakhat is 220,478 (male 112,046 and female 108,432). The majority of the population, nearly 83% population of Tengakhat lives in rural areas and 17% live in urban areas. Kapahua village is located in Tengakhat circle of Dibrugarh district of Assam. It comes under the Tengakhat development block. The northern boundary of the village is identified by the Chakolibhuriya village, southern by the Choyang village, eastern by the Tengakhat block development

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office, western by the Nakhangia village. Kapahua is known as a sonowal kachari village because of predominance of sonowal kachari population. Assamese is the local language in this village. The village has population of 1129 of which 574(51%) are males while 555 (49%) are females as per population census 2011. Population density of the village is 559 persons per sq.km. In 2011, literacy rate of Kapahua village was 90.20%. In Kapahua village male literacy stands at 94.64% while female literacy rate was 85.45. Na-khangia bangali village is located in Tengakhat circle of Dibrugarh district of Assam. The village has population of 674 of which 333 (49%) are males while 341 (51%) are females as per population census of 2011. It comes under the Tengakhat development block. The northern boundary of the village is identified by the Chenibil village, southern by the Hatibondha village, eastern by the Ghumtal village, western by the Belbari village. Population density of the village is 441 persons per sq km. 60.53% Of the whole population of Na-khangia bangali village are from schedule tribe and 39.47% are other backward class. All schedule tribe people are belonging to Sonowal Kachari. Literacy rate of Na- Khangia Bongali village is 83%. 91% of male and 75% of female population is literate here. Barbam no. 1 is one of the village located in Tengakhat circle of Dibrugarh district of Assam. The village comes under the Tengakhat development block. The northern boundary of the village is identified by the Chenibill village, southern by the Telpani village, eastern by the Hatibondha village, western by the Belbari village. Population density of the village is 384 persons per sq km. The Barbam no.1 village has population of 1197 of which 612 (52%) are male while 585 (49%) are females as per population census of 2011. 99% of the whole population are from other backward class (OBC), and 1% is scheduled tribes (ST). In 2011, literacy rate of Barbam no.1 village was 74.68%. In Barbam no. 1 village male literacy rate stands at 83.88% while female literacy rate was 65.17%. Assamese is the local language in all this three villages. For this study 120 respondents were taken who crossed the age of 60 years, out of which 40 respondents from Kapahua village, 40 respondents from Na-khangia bangali village and 40 respondents from Barbam no.1 village by employing purposive sampling method. The data of this study have been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected with the help of interview schedule, field observation and case studies. On the other hand secondary data were collected from census report, various books, journals, official reports and records, newspapers and internet etc. The design of the research was explorative and no hypothesis was formulated to examine the problem under study.

## 5. SOCIO -ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE RURAL AGED WOMEN

Socio-economic background of the individual plays a very significant role in the formulation of an individual personality in every society. In this study, the general information and the socio- economic characteristics of the respondents, such as age, marital status, educational status, income etc. of the 120 respondents have been examined. In this study out of the total number of 120 aged women, majority of them, i.e., 47.5 percent belonged to the age group of 60-65 years followed by the age group of 66-71 with 21.7 percent and 15 percent from the age- group of 72-77 years. As many as 9 respondents, i.e., (7.5 percent) are from the age- group of 78-83 years, 7 respondents, i.e., (5.8 percent) are from the age- group of 84-

89 years and only 3 respondents i.e., (2.5 percent) are from the 90 and above age. The findings show that majority of the respondents i.e., 51.7 percent were enjoying married life, while the 5 percent of them unmarried, 42.5 percent widow and the rest 0.83 percent were separated. The study reveals that 100 percent of the sample cases were Hindus. The study reveals that 73.33 percent respondents live in joint families followed by 24.17 percent in nuclear and 2.5 percent in extended families. So far as the family members by exact relationship are concerned, highest percentage i.e., 70 percent of the aged women live with their married son. They are followed by 10.83 percent who live only with husband, 5.83 percent who live with unmarried sons, 5 percent who live alone, 4.17 percent live with unmarried daughter, 3.33 percent live with siblings, and 0.83 percent live with unmarried sister. The study reveals that the highest number, i.e., 62.5 percent are illiterate. Educational level of the literate respondents was highest amongst the group of primary level with 21.67 percent followed by H.S.L.C level with 10.83 percent and graduate level with 0.83 percent of the total sample. In this study it is found that out of 120 aged women, 52 aged women (43.33 percent) were engaged in own household work, followed by pensioner with 26.67 percent, poultry for business purpose with 9.17, Non-agricultural labour with 8.33 percent, respectively. There are 9 or 7.5 percent aged women who were unable to work and only 3 or 2.5 percent aged women who were no need to work respectively. An equal number of aged women are there who were doing some business like piggery (1 or 0.83 percent), and similarly one or 0.83 percent aged women who works as an agricultural labour. As such their income is very meagre. However, from these 32 pension holders aged women, only 26 or 81.25 percent are now getting old age pension from the state government, 4 or 12.05 percent are family pension holders and 2 or 6.25 percent are gets widow pension from the state government.

## 6. OPINION OF RESPONDENTS REGARDING THE NATURE OF OLD AGE

This study is an attempt to explore how they perceive ageing as a process and old age as a stage of human life, in light of their beliefs, life experiences and attitudes. It is, therefore, necessary to enquire into the self experiences and self perception of elderly women so as to see how they themselves feel and lead their lives. The findings reveal that for majority of the respondents (61.67 percent) the increase in chronological age is an indicator of old age. According to 52.5 percent of respondent old age is characterised by reduced physical capabilities. The study found that majority (51.67 percent) of respondents had agreed with the statement that reduced mental capabilities are natural to old age. Previous study have also addressed majority of the sample population rated their mental health as normal and natural to old age (Sati, 1988: p. 195). The large number of respondents (83.33percent) expressed that getting daughter- in- law for the first son leads to the onset of old age, while 15percent were in disagreement with the statement. Again, 79.16 percent of the total sample studied reported that birth of a grandchild is natural to old age. The findings also reveal that majority of the respondents i.e., 57.5 percent were in agreed with the statement that peace of mind is the nature of old age. The study found that only 48.33 percent had agreed with the statement that freedom from all kinds of responsibilities is natural to old age. When the respondents were exposed to the

statement, namely, 'lacking roles', 54.17 percent answered that they had agreed with the statement that lacking roles is the natural to old age. Of total sample studied 45.83 percent responded by saying that old age is characterised by loss in memories, again 78.33 percent reported that physical immobility and confinement is natural to old age. 59.17 percent respondents believed that increased religious activity as natural to old age. The findings about their opinion on 'retirement from job/ work' as the nature of old age all of them i.e., 100 percent responded by saying that they disagree with the statement that retirement from job/work is the nature of old age. Of the total number of 120 respondents, 100 percent believed that old age is characterized by stopping of menstrual cycle. The study also reveals that the highest percentage i.e., 60 percent of respondents has disagreed with the opinion that loneliness is natural of old age. Again, the large proportion 68.33 percent of the sample studied disagreed to the statement that helplessness is natural to old age. The study found that only 38.33 percent of the total respondents had agreed that fear of impending death is the nature of old age, while majority 60 percent of the sample population was in disagreement with the statement. The study also reveals that majority of the respondents i.e., 69.70 percent were in agreed with the statement that with the increase of age they have become wiser. Though most of the respondent is dependent on others for their living arrangements but they are not treated as dependent individual. They themselves feel they still live with the responsibilities of giving directions, instructions, advice and supervision in important family matter. They are respected by their near and dear. They expressed that the elderly should be the treasure house of wisdom and knowledge for younger generation. The findings regarding experience of elderly women of being aged, the highest percentage i.e., 91.67 percent have expressed that they feel good being elderly. They revealed that being elderly means increasing social respects towards them and is also increasing day by day. Overall results indicate that majority of the respondents did not show negative perception towards ageing. The findings of the study present study by and large reveal a positive self perception of aged women. The findings of the study are corroborated by the findings of Hasnain and Kapoor (1997: p.122) and Sati (1988; p.196).

## 7. VULNERABILITIES AND PROBLEMS FACED BY THE RURAL AGED WOMEN

Women amongst the aged are the worst victims of apathy and neglect. The aged women are more vulnerable than the aged men. There are several reports of elderly abuse and especially so of the 'single' and more so for women. This study is also an attempt to understand the vulnerabilities and problems of the rural aged women. The study found that majority of the respondents i.e., 73.33 percent was satisfied with the care taken by the family members with whom they are living. Their medical needs are not ignored by the family members. The study reveals that majority (95 percent) of the respondents have not any experience of abuse by their family members. Again, the study show that a vast majority 87.5 percent of the sample population reporting that they do not feel neglected in terms of clothing. An equal number of the respondents i.e., 91.67 percent reported that they are not feeling neglected about their leisure time and opportunity to take rest by their family members. Of the total number of 120 respondents, 91.67 percent feel that their medical needs are not ignored by

the family members. On the other hand, a very meagre percentage of 6.67 percent and 1.67 percent who reported that they were feel neglected in terms of going to visit relatives/ friends/ neighbours and to religious activities respectively. The various problems face by the aged women is discussed below.

## 8. HEALTH PROBLEM

Health is the first and most important concern when we talk about the old age. The nature of physical health differs from one person to another. In a study conducted by Chandha and Sinha (1997: p.157) found that the most problematic areas of aged is health, followed by psychological, financial and social problems. Studies have shown that more women report poor health status as compared to males, and yet a far greater proportion of men are hospitalized as compared to females (87 versus 67 per 1,000 aged persons) (Rajan and Sreerupa, 2008: p. 375). In this study it is found that of the total number of 120 aged women who are suffering from at least one disease. But the most significant disease from which the highest percentage of aged women i.e., 66.67 percent are suffering from weak eye sight problem. The same findings have also been observed by other researchers (Behura and Mohanty, 2005: p.61). They are followed by waist/back pain 38.33 percent, hearing problem 32.5 percent, forgetfulness 25 percent, high blood pressure 22.5 percent, rheumatism 18.33 percent, stomach problem 10.83 percent, gastric 7.5 percent, cough 5.83 percent, asthma 5 percent, giddiness 5 percent, low blood pressure 4.17 percent, dental problem 3.33 percent, nervous problem 3.33 percent, heart problem 2.5 percent, skin disorders 2.5 percent, fever 1.67 percent, and 0.83 percent suffer from urinary problem. In the present study it was found that so far as the type of treatment concerned, highest percentage (50.83) of aged women use allopathic medicine that is followed by 36.67 percent respondents who use traditional indigenous medicine and 12.5 percent respondents use homoeopathic medicine. Significantly in most of the cases (61 or 50.83 percent) the respondents themselves bear the cost of medicine. In 45 percent of cases, the cost is met by both the aged women and their sons and in 4.17 percent of cases, the cost is met the family members. The findings of the study are corroborated by the findings of Behura and Mohanty (2005: p.64). In this study it is also found that 59 (49.17 percent) respondents are fully satisfied with the treatment they are undergoing. Again 54 (45percent) respondents who are partially satisfied and a very meagre percentage of (5.83 percent) respondents are not at all satisfied with the treatment they are undergoing. In this study, maximum number of respondents expressed (59 or 49.17 percent) that they are accompanied by their family members to visit physician's place. This findings is contradictory to the findings of the other investigators who mention that the elderly sick lack proper familial care, and that at the same time, public health services are insufficient to meet the health needs of the aged (Nair, 1989: p.190; Nair and Ramana, 1989: p.190; Nair, 1991: p.190 and Vijayakumar, 1991: p.190). In the earlier study by Acharya and Das (1989: p.308) observed that the health care facilities to the aged are hardly availed of due to utter ignorance, rampant poverty and the belief that the falling of health is a normal occurrence of life. The study reveals that highest number of respondents, i.e., 93.33 percent and 5 percent of the aged women were reported to chewing betel nut and leave regularly and occasionally, respectively. On the other hand 95 percent responded to chewing betel nut and leaves with

tobacco regularly. Only a very meagre percentage (3.33%) of the elderly women was reported to chewing betel nut and leaves occasionally. It shows that chewing betel nut and leaves with tobacco regularly is more common among the rural aged women. The same findings have also been observed by other researchers (Behura and Mohanty, 2005; p.62).

## 9. ADJUSTMENT PROBLEM

The adjustment of the aged persons depends upon the degree to which his personal and environmental circumstances offer opportunities or pose a threat to the satisfaction of his needs (Kuhlen, 1959). In this study it is observed that majority of the respondents, i.e., 52.55 spend their leisure time in doing household works. 16.67 percent of the aged women spend their leisure time in visiting neighbours/ friends and 10 percent watching TV, 8.33 percent reading religious books, 5.83 percent of aged spend their leisure time doing nothing, 3.33 percent visiting relatives, 1.67 percent spend their leisure time in playing with grandchildren, 0.83 percent spend their leisure time in doing social works and 0.83 percent looking after grandchildren. None of them spend their leisure time in doing unproductive works like playing cards etc. In the earlier study by Kaur and Kaur (1987) mentioned that the younger generation treats the aged people as a burden and their presence in the family irks most of the family members. Results found in the present study however indicate that the aged women are not ignored by the younger generation and majority of respondents opined that they are treated by young members in their families as friend. Significantly this study reveals that majority of the respondents, i.e., 87.5 percent respondents expressed that they got complete cooperation from young generation of their families and they have not feel generation gap between them.

## 10. ECONOMIC PROBLEM

Economic problem is the other most important problem faced by the aged women in our society. Economy plays a major role in the life of an aged person. Inadequate income is a major problem of aged in India (Siva Raju, 2002). A study by Kabir (1992) also observed that majority of the aged, covered under his study, and faced acute financial problems. In this study it is found that majority, i.e., 83.33 percent respondents was reported that they are not contributing money for their household expenses. They are dependent another family members. Only a very meagre percentage of 16.67 percent contribute money for their household expenses. It further reflected that majority of the aged women were in unorganised sector so they didn't get good amount of income and their monthly income is less than required expenditure. It is also found that 80 percent of respondents were dependent on their children, 11.67 percent on husband, and 3.33 percent on other family members whenever they were in need of financial help. Only 5 percent of respondents were not dependent on others.

## 11. SOCIAL PROBLEM

The problem of old age has become a social problem due to the increasing population of aged people and their declining roles and status in the present society. The study reveals that majority, i.e., 68.33 percent respondents were interact with the family members half of the day followed by the 31.67 percent of the respondents were interact with the family members most of the day, respectively. Again, the study found that majority of

the respondents i.e., 93.33 percent expressed that their children were not staying away from them and only 6.67 percent of them expressed that their children were staying away from them. The study found that majority, i.e., 95 percent respondents evaluate their relationship with husband, children living with them, children living separate, friends, neighbours and with relatives as satisfactory and only a very meagre percentage of respondents with 5 percent were evaluated their relationship with them as unsatisfactory. In a study Mishra (1987; p.126) examined that majority of the respondents have evaluate their relationship with the family members living with them as good, and a smaller portion of them are having conflicts quite often with their family members and differences of opinion and financial problems are the most prevalent reasons for the conflict. The findings of the study also reveal that a very meagre percentage of respondents were experiencing conflict quite often in their relationship with husband (7.5 percent), unmarried children (5 percent), married children (4.17 percent), and daughter in law (3.33 percent) respectively. Significantly among them majority of the respondents were reported that indiscipline as the main reason of conflict quite often among the aged women.

## 12. CONCLUSION

Most of the time the aged parents are left behind to live alone in present day society. On the other hand many of the aged women are compelled to sacrifice self interests and like to adjust with the minimum foodstuff, clothing etc., for the well being of the whole family members though they are discriminated by their family members in comparison to aged men in many aspects. It has a major impact on their health and well-being as they grow through the process of ageing. But this study significantly depicts that the aged women are not ignored by the family members up to a mark and though ageing is a problem in the human society. In this study it is also found that though majority of the aged women are not contribute money for well being of whole families, they are well behaved by their family members, particularly sons and daughter-in-law. They are active and able to render their advice and expertise in important family matters. In this study it is found that most of the aged woman suffers from various age-related diseases. Most of the diseased aged women visit hospital and are consulted to doctor for treatment and their medical needs are not ignored and they are given full co-operation by their family members. The findings of the present study by and large reveals a positive self perception of aged women and present a picture of adjusted, satisfied and socially aware and responsible picture of aged women as perceived by themselves. Therefore from this study it is clear that though the aged women have economic hardship but they are respected as an aged person within the family, community and society.

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