

Ageing and End of Life Spiritual Needs

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1. Introduction

Our passport to life on Planet Earth comes from God Almighty with an inbuilt visa stamp for death. With the advancement in medicine, improvements in hygiene and sanitation, and economic growth, most people at least in the developed countries reach a ripe old age before dying. The issues related to the end of life are hence faced even in many developing nations mostly by people who are fairly advanced in years. It is generally believed that such issues assume importance for all aged usually defined as those above the age of 60. There is no doubt that these become overridingly so in the case of the oldest old above the age of 80 many of whom find the performance even of even basic activities of daily living (ADL) quite difficult if not impossible. The fact that it is this oldest old segment that will grow faster than the population of the aged, which itself will be growing much faster than the population as a whole due to world population ageing fast, makes it quite imperative that this vital matter engages our serious attention at the earliest.

The paper here hence examines end of life spiritual needs with the oldest old in mind and is split into ten parts, including this introductory one. Part two goes into the definition of spirituality which is to be adopted in the paper. Parts three and four put the issues to be discussed in their proper setting. Part three clearly indicates the fact that there is compression of morbidity among the aged. Part four shows that the segment of the aged for whom end of life issues are likely to be most imminent -the oldest old aged 80 years or above – is one which is growing very rapidly both in absolute and relative terms in world population. Part five enumerates the major issues that the oldest old, who are the very end of their lives, are likely to face. Parts six to nine to eight examine the spiritual dimension of all these issues – fear of death, dread of inability to perform ADL and hence continuation of life in old age as living vegetables, ageist attitude of rest of society and the growing feeling that there may not be adequate resources to spare to take proper care of the oldest old. The concluding part brings together the main findings of the paper and stresses the need for a spiritual perspective in this regard from all – the aged themselves, the care-givers, the society in general and even the corporates in terms of the discharge of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) .

2. Spirituality defined

It is not the intention here to start a battle of religions by indulging in semantic acrobatics of a metaphysical nature about the approaches to spirituality contained in the different religions of the world. Such an effort would be both redundant and superfluous because as pointed out by Rev Marcus Barrybrooke, basic concepts of God and spirituality are present in all religions¹.

¹ Of the United Religions Initiative in the USA

Instead, a commonsense definition of the concept will be adopted for the purposes of analysis in this paper.

It is usual to contrast the spiritual aspect with the material and physical aspects of human beings. It is stressed that there is a distinction between the material biological organism that constitutes the human body and its soul. The soul or the spirit is looked upon as the connection of the humankind with the ultimate metaphysical reality which is much greater and far beyond the bodily senses, time and the material world. It is considered related to God and hence deemed holy or divine. It is therefore put at a much more elevated pedestal than the material, physical, short-term and mundane aspects. It is also often pointed out that spiritual practices by human beings lead to the development of their basic or inner life resulting in their long-term liberation or salvation, making spirituality thereby the personal and subjective dimension of religion.

The gist of all these seemingly different and vivid descriptions of spirituality is that it lies at a realm that is not only much deeper and higher but also of a much longer term and more permanent than the material, the physical and the mundane. For a spiritually inclined person, there is thus the realization that there are many more important things for long term happiness and peace of mind than merely taking proper care of one's human form and making adequate provision for material comforts in life for oneself. Such a person will look upon death as a necessary consequence of birth and will hence have no fear of the human form decaying and therefore disappearing after death. A spiritualist will adopt a detached or "Nishkam Karma" attitude to life and do all that is morally correct and humanly possible on any issue without worrying any further on that count leaving the result to forces beyond one's control since in any case nothing further can be done². There will be considerable social concern guiding the actions of such an individual whose motto in life will be the Indian adage "Vasudhaiva Kudumbakam" which implies that the whole world is one family. According to many, including Swami Vivekananda, unselfish love for God and for God's creations – all human beings, flora and fauna, environment and all things around in this universe - is the hallmark of a spiritually aroused human being³.

3. Compression of morbidity in old age

The general practice the world over is to consider those whose age is 60 years or above as the aged. With improvements in general sanitation and hygiene, medical facilities and other conditions of life leading to considerable decline in infant mortality rates and in the prevalence of communicable diseases, the adage that you grow old and die seems valid in most parts of the world. Fries (1980) had found considerable evidence to support the view that there has been a rectangularisation of the survival curves particularly in the industrialized countries in the 20th century. It is however one thing to be alive and quite another to be kicking too. Fries(1980) had in fact also pointed out that this compression of mortality will be accompanied by a similar

² In Indian Philosophy, Karma or action is of three categories according to their basic qualities and the best of these is satvik karma which adds to mental calmness and peace. Nishkam karma is deemed satvik karma

³ For a very good exposition of these ideas, see among others, Swami Vivekananda's address at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and Chopra et.al (2008)

compression also of morbidity. Though a few including Kalache et al (2002) dispute some of the finer details contained in Fries(1980), there is considerable evidence now of such compression of morbidity the world over. One can of course get a detailed disaggregated picture in this regard by looking at the prevalence and severity of the different diseases in the various age-groups of the population. But thanks to the path-breaking effort by Mathers et al (2000) and the subsequent regular working out by the World Health Organization of healthy life expectancy defined as the number of years expected to be lived in full health, it is possible to get an aggregative picture too in this regard now⁴.

This is presented in table 1 which gives the figures of the years lost due to disability as % of the expectation of life at birth as well as at the age of 60 for the different regions of the world. The years lost due to disability is defined as the difference between the expectation of life and healthy life expectancy. A perusal of the table clearly indicates the compression of morbidity among the aged. It is true that there is the prevalence of morbidity throughout life. But the extent of morbidity as indicated by these figures is very much higher at age sixty than at birth. In fact it is more than double in the case of all the regions of the world, with the condition in this regard of the African region being particularly pathetic with the % reaching as high a figure of 40 for aged.

4. The oldest old

As the focus of the conference is on aging and end of life issues it is necessary also to identify at the very outset the age-segment of the population for which end of life issues become imminent and hence important. It is true that death can occur at any time during one's life. But if we leave aside premature deaths and consider people living up to, as they say, a ripe old age and then dying, an examination of the average expectation of life at birth of people in the different parts of the world is called for. Table 1 gives the latest details in this regard in the different regions of the world. An examination of the table clearly reveals that the best scenario on this front is in the high income countries of the world, where people born now can expect to live on the average till the age of 80 years, though the figure is slightly higher at 82 years in the case of females. It hence seems reasonable to assume that in all parts of the world persons aged 80 years or above are more likely to face end-of life issues sooner than the rest of the population belonging to lower ages. Attention will therefore be concentrated in this paper on persons aged 80 years or above – often referred to in aging research as the oldest old.

Table 3 gives the absolute number and the relative importance of the oldest old in world population over time⁵. The growing importance of this segment of population both in absolute and relative terms is clearly brought out in the table. Their number was as small as 14 million constituting just 0.5% of the world population of 2.5 billion in 1950. In five decades their number became five-fold to 69 million and their relative importance in the world population of

⁴ Healthy life expectancy is these days considered to be the best available summary measure of population health statistics since it is sensitive not only to the probability of survival, but also to the prevalence and severity of health states among the population.

⁵ For a recent country-wise description of the picture in this regard, see among others, Nayar (2009)

6 billion more than doubled to become 1.1%. It is estimated that in another five decades by 2050, their number will again become five-fold to reach 379 million and their relative importance in world population will increase phenomenally to become as high as 4.1% in comparison to the mere 0.5% a century back. It is also necessary to note two more aspects regarding of the oldest old. Firstly the oldest old age segment has grown and is expected to grow much faster than the population as whole or the population of the aged. Secondly more than 60% of the oldest old are women⁶. Enough evidence has thus been produced here to show that the oldest old whose end of life needs are most imminent constitute an important and growing segment not only of the world population but also of the population of the aged.

5. End of life concerns of the oldest old

Some of the most important causes of concern for the oldest old, for whom end of life issues are quite imminent, can now be deciphered, under the assumption that their mental faculties are intact. Before proceeding further it has however to be stated that such an assumption is a highly questionable one. This is so because as pointed out by many including Attens(2007), while the risk of being demented is as low as .0.4% at the age of 65, it becomes as high as 50% by the time one reaches the age of 95, with the incidence and prevalence of Alzheimer's disease rising in an approximately exponential fashion between these two ages and actually doubling every five years. Be that as it may, if that assumption is made, a certain blunt fact regarding the attitude to death has to be recognized. While it is universally accepted that all those who are born have to die some day, there is a lurking fear of death in all human beings possibly because it is still a mystery though we know about what happens to the human body after death. Added to this is the fact that even the healthiest of the oldest old often have recurring nightmares of being reduced to living vegetables for considerable periods of time before they actually pass away. It has also to be borne in mind that quite often by the time one reaches such a ripe old age, one would have already reached a situation of what Laslett (1999) terms as incapacity and dependence making one extremely vulnerable and calling for affectionate and selfless care-giving by the rest of society as a sine qua non even for one's mere existence. As against this, there are indications that societies in all parts of the world – in developed countries, developing countries and transition economies – are becoming increasingly ageist and hence discriminating against the aged⁷. On top of all this, much before the present global meltdown set in, there have been serious fears of a severe inter-generational conflict emerging over time because world population ageing may lead, with scarce resources, to building more old age homes and less nursery schools the world over.

6. Fear of death

Spirituality can allay human fear of death to great extent. The spiritual view that there are things beyond human form and material conditions will lessen the horror of visualizing one's mortal remains decay after death. Since death and the reduction to dust of the human body

⁶ The exact percentages are 62,65 and 62 for the years 1950, 2000 and 2050 respectively

⁷ For a good discussion of the concept and of the prevalence of this, see among others Patri(2009), Sinigoj et.al(2007) and Ramamurti and Jamuna(2004)

will be treated as one of the many aspects of life by a spiritualist, there will not be undue emphasis on the human body and hence an important reason for fear of death will disappear. A spiritualist having a long-term and Nishkam Karma perception of life will be able to appreciate the fact that there is nothing that can be done to perpetuate life in human form. Such a person, having accepted the inevitability of death, will hence have no qualms or fears about undergoing whatever process death involves, since it has in any case to be gone through by all. A spiritual perception of this kind will also enable one to have no regrets on one's death-bed at a ripe old age. Since material desires will not rank high in priorities, unfulfilled needs of that kind will not be a source of bother. It is true that though death does loom large as writing on the wall for all humans, since the exact time of the occurrence is seldom known correctly, there is a possibility that there may be some unfinished tasks which have already been begun by the person but have to be left incomplete because of death intervening. A spiritually inclined person will try to minimize such eventualities by planning activities over lifetime in such a way that there is synchronization between one's span of life left and the plan-horizon⁸. If despite all such care, something like that does happen, a spiritual person will take it in his/her stride and not be lose peace of mind since in the perspective that the person has, the effort itself is the reward and the fruits of the effort are not entirely in the control of the person putting in the effort. Belief in things beyond the physical, material and the mundane will lessen the sadness from the thought that one has to go away from one's near and dear ones on one's death, bearable⁹. Further the spiritualist's faith in God will help lessen the concern if there are still responsibilities to be discharged towards the members of the family and other near and dear ones.

7. Dread of becoming living vegetables

Everyone wants to lead a normal and healthy life and this applies to the aged too. By simply lingering on for many years as a living vegetable, the aged person will undergo considerable suffering and will also cause a lot of difficulty and inconvenience to the rest of the society. It is hence natural for the oldest old to dread the very thought of being reduced to living vegetables for years before one's call finally comes. The oft-repeated prayer of the oldest old is hence to be spared this agony and to pass away peacefully.

As pointed out by many including Ramamurti (2009) the adoption of a spiritual attitude to life from much earlier years can at least postpone if not prevent such an eventuality. This is for the obvious reason that with communicable diseases well under control in most parts of the world, it is life-style related diseases that are becoming more important causes of ill health. It has been proved beyond doubt that excessive pursuit of many of the things that produce immediate

⁸ This seems to be the one of the reasons behind the concept of different aashramas or stages of life corresponding to different ages for spiritually inclined persons in Indian scriptures. According to this concept, with age one is supposed to become less and less materially inclined. Between the ages 50 and 75, one is supposed to enter Vaanaprastha aashrama one begins the gradual withdrawal from material pursuits. After the age of 75, one enters the Sanyasa aashrama which implies total renunciation of material pursuits and concentration on spiritual matters. It is interesting to note that behind such a view is also an attempt to prevent internecine inter-generational conflict. For an interesting discussion in this regard, see among others Nair(2008)

⁹ Such beliefs are also of great help in consoling the members of the bereaved family and other friends of the deceased.

physical and material gratification like smoking, drinking, eating of junk food etc result in such diseases which can cause serious damage to health in the long run. Further without getting into controversies regarding the exact definition of death, euthanasia etc, two additional points in this regard need stressing. Firstly a person who is keen to prevent the eventuality of survival as a living vegetable can declare well in advance in life refusal to be put on life support systems. Secondly some spiritualists make a distinction between atmahatya or suicide and ichhamrityu or voluntary surrender of life by a human being. The logic here is that it is good to go when the going is good instead of waiting to become a living vegetable and then suffer and die. There is also the additional point made by some spiritualists that after death the soul becomes one with God, which is much better proposition than being in a human body. In fact among the Jains such a death is termed “Santara” or “Sanlekhna” and people who do so are worshipped and given special and honored funerals¹⁰. In any case, at least for those who believe in the efficacy of prayers, there is nothing to prevent them from praying to God to take them near Him and away from the human form

8. Societal Attitude

It is rare to come across a member of the oldest old “Magi” who does not suffer at least from some form of disability- be it regarding vision, hearing or dentures. Due to this and also because of the fact as pointed out by many including Nayar (2009) that they are often already afflicted by multiple diseases, at least instrumental activities of daily life and maybe even ADL are well-nigh impossible to perform. Further it is just a matter of time before their mental and physical conditions deteriorate so much as to reduce them many a time to living vegetables in dire need of love and care from the rest of the society for their mere existence.

For the oldest old therefore the attitude of the society towards them is of vital importance. The indications in this regard are however far from encouraging. The developing nations, which will have more than 70% share of the oldest old in the world by 2050, are witnessing a widespread breakdown of traditional family structure, which was the mainstay for the care of the elderly. The developed nations have of course been depending for decades on trained age-care givers to look after their elderly. The net result is that there is already a big excess of demand over supply of trained care-givers the world over and this excess demand is likely to increase by leaps and bounds in the coming years. It is of course true that the free play of market forces will with suitable adjustments in salary structures of care-givers and also through international migration both of care-givers and of the elderly themselves lead to reduction of this excess¹¹.

A few more drops of spiritualism in this otherwise vast materially guided and market – oriented ocean of human existence will make a qualitative difference in this regard on many counts. Firstly it will help increase the supply of care-givers. A larger number imbued by the spirit of selfless service to this vulnerable group will join the profession even if the pay-scales offered are not attractive compared to other professions. More members of the family in all parts of

¹⁰ Care of course has to be taken to see that such provisions are not misused by the powerful in society to promote their own vested interests. The same is also true of euthanasia

¹¹ For a god discussion in this regard, see the many interesting relevant contributions in Sinigoj et al(2007mi

the world will be motivated to provide age-care to their near ones even if there is a trade-off of such action with higher earnings. Secondly a spiritual orientation will make the care-giver realize that the oldest old needing age-care have become dependent and vulnerable not by their own actions, but involuntarily. This will lead more sincere and maybe even more efficient discharge of care-giving duties. Thirdly in to-day's world where there are no free lunches and transfer payments of all kinds are looked upon as unproductive waste with the aged being in some sense considered as drones and parasites on society, a ray of light of spirituality into all members of society is one of the very few hopes to prevent impending and internecine inter-generational conflict due to world population ageing fast.

9. Need for Corporate Spiritualism

One can easily extend this logic to include also the corporate world in the argument. This need not lead to any raised eyebrows because Hopkins (2008) has already shown how, on the basis of a broader perception of CSR, corporates can successfully help in the promotion of economic development in the world and thus fill in the gap left by the failure of governments and international agencies in this regard. One may not of course entirely agree with all his arguments. It has also to be admitted that that he was not talking of spirituality nor was he addressing the issues of the oldest old.

It is quite true that the business of business is business. Moreover there is considerable social opprobrium against business persons because of the thoroughly unethical business dealings indulged in by some of them¹². But it is also true that some of the most successful corporations in the world are also the most loved ones by people. This is not entirely surprising because the objectives of maximizing long and short-term profitabilities do not always coincide. Further as against profit-maximisation per se, there are strong arguments and there is evidence too that long-term survival, image in society, striking a balance between the conflicting interests of the different stakeholders and growth of the company are to be the objectives pursued by many corporates. This being so, companies having long-term objectives may follow short-term "penny-foolish" policies that might not affect their material and immediate profits in the most favorable manner. In the process they will gain many intangible benefits the acquisition of which may be at least one of their objectives. Such a policy will thus be "pound-wise" not only in attaining their goals and will also in yielding resultant profits in the longer term. One may describe a perspective of this kind by a company as corporate spirituality. Hopkins (2008) seems to have a concept of this kind at the back of his mind when he envisions a broader perspective on concept of CSR.

One way in which corporate spirituality can help in alleviating human misery is by chipping in to fill the huge resource gap that already exists and is bound to increase phenomenally with world population aging very rapidly. An easy and simple way of doing so would be to meet the

¹² One can think of umpteen number of instances of such skeletons in the cupboard appearing particularly after the recent and disastrous global economic meltdown. India has also had its share of these though these have not emerged in a big way after the global meltdown. An interesting case of this kind, not directly related to the global meltdown has been the case of a major information technology firm which has, for the pun of it, a brand name Satyam meaning truth

deficits in resources for programmes that are being planned or are already ongoing. A better and more innovative way would be to set up and run in their names age-care training centres, geriatric wards, palliative care centres, old age homes etc on a charitable or highly subsidized basis particularly for women in developing nations.

10. Main Findings

The study here has clearly shown that in the foreseeable future, with world population ageing fast leading to compression of both mortality and morbidity in later years, end of life issues become most imminent for those aged 80 years or above and termed the oldest old. Evidence has also been produced to show that this segment of the population which was extremely small both in absolute and relative terms in the middle of the last century is increasing very rapidly and is expected to reach a mind-boggling figure of 379 million constituting 4.1% of the world population by the year 2050. End of life concerns for this group have been identified as fear of death, dread of being reduced to living vegetables and societal prejudice against them. Adopting a commonsense definition of spirituality and on the basis of detailed discussion of each of these concerns, the paper highlights the fact that a spiritual perception by the aged themselves and also by the rest of society will considerably mitigate these concerns. The paper extends the concept of spirituality also to corporate entities and shows how the corporate can lend a big hand in addressing these concerns and thereby prevent impending and internecine intergenerational conflict.

Table 1:- Years lost to disability as % of expectation of life in the different regions of the world

S.No	Region	Years lost to disability as % of expectation of life at	
		Birth	age 60
1	Africa	18.9	39.5
2	America	10.4	21.7
3	South East Asia	11.9	24.7
4	Europe	8.8	19.4
5	East Meditter anean	12	27.2
6	Western Pacific	10.2	23.9
	Global	11.9	24.7

* The data are for the year 1999 and the source is Mathers et.al(2000)

Table 2 Life Expectancy at birth,2006 in the regions of the world*

S.No	Region			Life Expectancy at birth		
				males	females	Total
	India			62	64	63
1	Africa			50	52	51
2	America			72	78	75
3	South	East	Asia	63	65	64
4	Europe			70	78	74
5	East	Mediterranean		63	66	64
	Western	Pacific		72	76	74
	New	Zealand		78	82	80
(a)	Lower	Income		58	60	59
(b)	Lower	middle	income	69	73	71
(c)	Upper	middle	income	66	73	69
(d)	High	Income		77	82	80
	Global			65	69	67

*Source: World Health Statistics 2008 WHO

Table 3:- Persons aged 80 and above in world population in millions, 1950,2000 and 2050

gender	Age		1950	2000	2050
females	80+		8.5	45.2	235.8
	80+ as %	of total	0.7	1.5	5
	Total		1262.1	3005.6	4669.6
males	80+		5.2	24	143.2
	80+ as %	of total	0.4	0.8	3.1
	Total		1257.4	3051.1	4652.7
total	80+		13.8	69.2	379
	80+ as %	of total	0.5	1.1	4.1
	Total		2519.5	6056.7	9322.3
*Source	of data	UN(2002)			

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