

## **Geriatric Care Through Life Long Learning: A Humanistic Approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Objectives:** This working paper is a modest attempt to associate Lifelong Learning process with geriatric care i.e. the physical and mental well-being of the elderly people of India.

**Methods and Materials:** The present study utilised data from Census of India, National Sample Survey Organisation and Sample registration system for reviewing the relevant issues like who are the old, what are their problems and why do they need care or why society should at all bother for their care?

**Results:** The present study humbly proposes the introduction of folk games or traditional games for identifying psychological / psychiatric disorders of elderly people. Another fruitful learning experience may be the learning of a new language in a later age. The post retirement period may be the fertile ground for hobby and experience sharing. All these proposed schemes of learning for aged people demand an infrastructure. This is the responsibility of the government and society as a whole.

**Conclusion:** This study does not demand credit for any innovative schemes of learning. The present study only proposes a few new contexts for these processes. It is sincerely expected that the use of Life-long Learning as a medium for the physical and mental upliftment of this esteemed section of the society would give the 'concept of learning' it's much needed humanistic approach.

**Key words:** lifelong learning, geriatric care, humanistic approach.

## Introduction

Lifelong Learning is a process where one can participate in the learning process throughout ones' whole life which implies that it is never too soon or too late to learn. One should always be open to new ideas and learning. So it can be summarised that Lifelong Learning is a practice which starts even before schooling and never ever stops (even after the accomplishment of formal education).

The notion of Lifelong Learning evolved in the early twentieth century, particularly after the First World War and gained worldwide popularity in the mid 90's just after international bodies like UNESCO began to popularise the idea. Actually, the idea of Lifelong Learning germinated in a government report of Britain published in 1919 which expressed that adult education...is a permanent national necessity...and therefore should be both universal and lifelong. (1) The urge for an all embracing education system can be understood in the context of the post World War scenario when the whole of Europe was handicapped by the atrocities of the War. The situation became graver after the Second World War. There was an increasing demand for skilled labour force for the purpose of post war reconstruction and as the conventional education system proved inadequate to produce as much skilful workers, hence there surfaced the demand of an alternative education to cope with the situation. The concept of lifelong learning became an international agenda with the active participation of world bodies like UNESCO, European Union (EU), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and many others. While, as an intellectual body UNESCO's primary concern was to achieve all around development through learning and to pay as much heed to human development as to purely material progress (2), the focus of organizations like EU and OECD remained static with the notion of growth, competitiveness and employment.(3) It is seen that in a changing world UNESCO's

slogan of learning to be has been overrode by the more alluring 'economistic' paradigm of knowledge economy.

The foregoing discussion leads us to the conclusion that the concept of Lifelong Learning emerged as an aide of the contemporary perception of 'knowledge economy' and thus facilitating learning as a tool to create a highly skilled and a adaptable workforce for the global market economy. Thus Lifelong Learning, from its very inception was imbibed with an economic undertone. Recently attempts are being made to free this idea from the stigma of being a hand maid of the global economy. In this attempt some scholars try to give Lifelong Learning process a pedagogic sugar-coat.

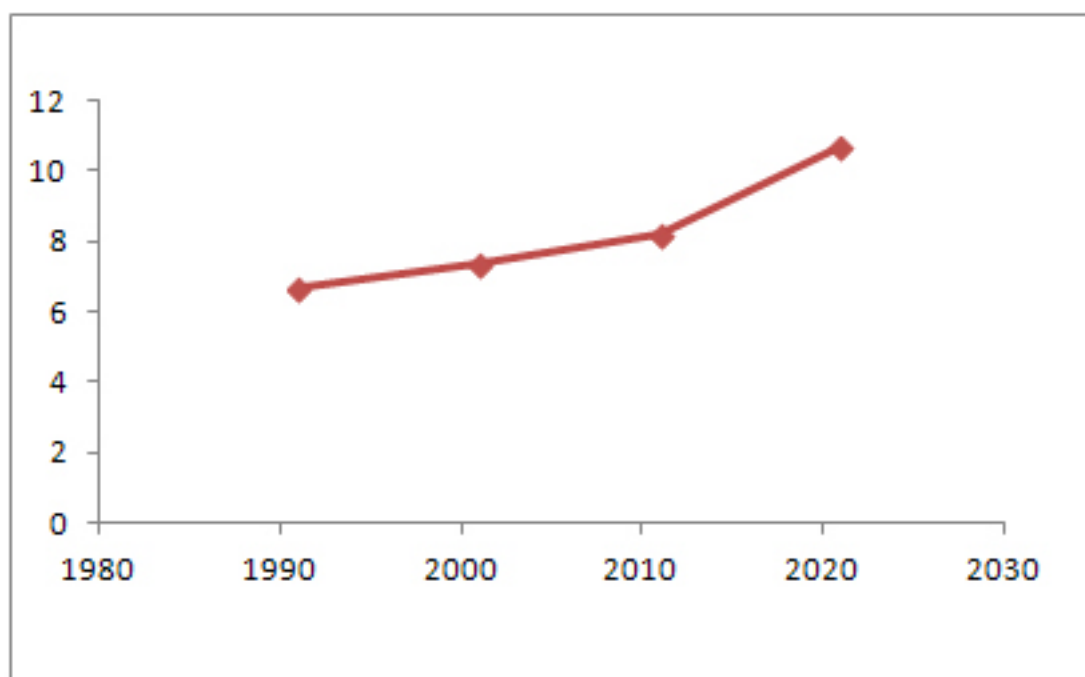
The present study, however, will not try to justify or to explain either of these explanations. On the other hand, it attempts to suggest another approach for lifelong learning process, which is more humanistic in its essence. The proposed approach would link Lifelong Learning with geriatric care which means the wellbeing of the aged people, a very significant section of Indian society.

## Methods and Materials

Before moving towards the main context of this study i.e. linking up lifelong learning with geriatric care, let us have a brief look into the relevant issues like, who are the old, what are their problems and why do they need care or why society should at all bother for their care?

Old age or ageing is an inevitable component of all living beings. It is a reflection of physical, psychological and social change. The definition of old age is not rigid since the meaning of old age varies among the different people of the world. In some societies people are considered old due to alteration in their social position and restricted regenerative capability as

**Figure: 1 Percentage of 60+ aged population of India, 1991-2021**



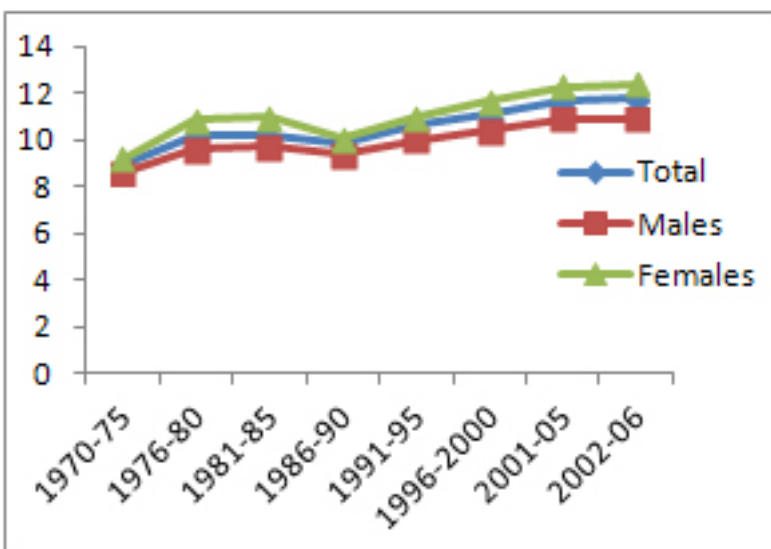
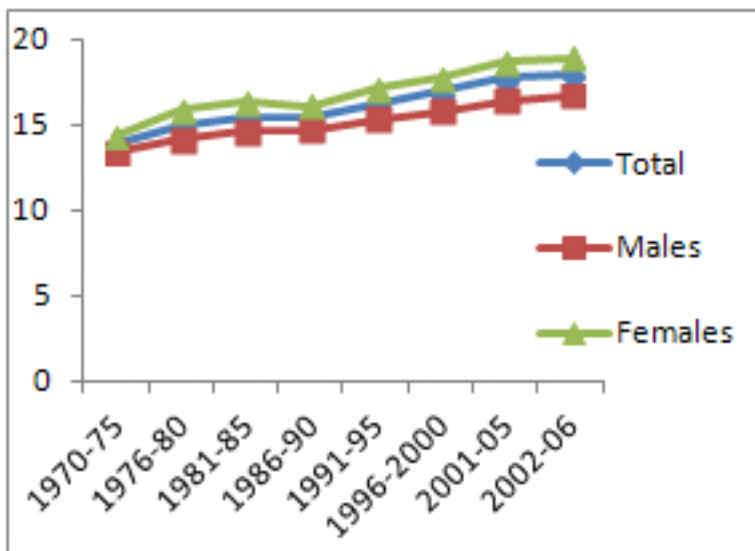
Source: Census of India, 1991,2001,2011,2021\*(projection)

Figure: 2 Percentage of population aged 60 and above to general population by sex, India, 1901-2001

Year	Persons	Males	Females
1901	5.06	4.55	5.59
1911	5.22	4.81	5.65
1921	5.37	5.04	5.70
1931	5.09	4.86	5.35
1941	5.66	5.43	5.91
1951	5.43	5.21	5.66
1961	5.63	5.46	5.80
1971	5.97	5.94	5.99
1981	6.42	6.35	6.50
1991	6.55	6.45	6.66
2001	7.70	7.55	7.86

Source: Sharma, S.P. & Peter Xenos. 'Ageing in India: Demographic background and analysis based on census materials' Occasional paper No. 2 of 1992, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, New Delhi, 1992

Figure: 3 Expectation of life at age 60 and 70+ by sex over time of India



Source: Sample Registration System (SRS) Office of the Registrar General, India.

**Figure 4: Old age dependency ratio by sex for India, 1961-2001**

Year	All	Male	Female
1961	10.9	10.9	10.9
1971	11.5	11.4	11.6
1981	12	11.8	12.2
1991	12.2	12.2	12.2
2001	13.1	12.5	13.8

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India

**Figure 5: Per 1000 Distribution of aged persons living alone for each sex and residence, India**

Living Alone	Rural male	Rural female	Rural Persons	Urban male	Urban female	Urban Persons
1995-96	25	61	43	30	60	45
2004-05	28	76	58	21	65	43

Source: NSS 52nd round (1995-96), NSS 60th round (2004-05).

compared to other adults. According to the Government of India's definition on old age, adopted in 'National Policy on Older Persons' (1999), an 'elderly' or a 'senior citizen' is a person who is 60 years of age or above. (4) Although 60 years is a too young age to be old, here in this study, we shall take the Government of India's yardstick to gauge the age of the old people of this country.

Major increase in life expectancy and a host of other reasons brings a rapid demographic transition in India since the last quarter of the preceding century. This demographic change specifically highlights the massive increase in older population and ageing people, which in turn, poses to be a grave concern for the health planners of India. The following figures will show the increasing scenario of the senior citizens of India across the years.

The above figures clearly indicate the steady growth of the elderly people in recent years. If demographic projections are to be believed, the proportion of elderly people would increase into an insurmountable amount amount up to 360 per cent by 2050.(5) Therefore, it is high time to sensitively chalk out adequate and effective strategies to address the physical and mental wellbeing of this sizeable section of the society.

Normally in our country, people retire from active working life between the age group of 60-65. At this age a man usually finds himself in a sufficiently healthy and active position. However, as a result of rise of expectancy of life over the years, a person generally lives for another 20 to 25 years even after his retirement from formal and informal working life. At this age group, a man suddenly discovers that the periphery of his activity has been rapidly shrinking with his growing age. This discovery brings a negative sense of emptiness and void to the mind of the concerned person which consequently paves the way for numerous mental and physical ailments. At this critical

juncture persons need care and support from the immediate family, society and government.

Unfortunately care for the aged is not yet been in the priority list of the health policies of this country. Further, the enormity of the situation confirms that it is not only the responsibility of the government and other stakeholders, but society as a whole should come forward to tackle this issue with care and consideration. In this regard, this study attempts to explore the various avenues of using Lifelong Learning as a tool for geriatric care.

## Results and Discussion

Because of its much needed flexible format, the process of lifelong learning is the best alternative for geriatric care. Learning is a lifelong exercise and new learning experiences in a later phase of life may provide newer meaning of life to the senior members of our society. In this context, the present study humbly proposes the following avenues of learning which may positively affect the mental and physical wellbeing of the elderly people.

It is a fact that games, particularly folk games, carry with them a psychological significance of practical application. (6) Thus these games are evidently therapeutic in stress-management and can also be utilized as a diagnostic tool in identifying psychological / psychiatric disorders. Some of these games can be used as remedial tools for senior citizens of our society.

As a result of invention of modern medicines and for many other reasons there has been a considerable increase in the life expectancy of the people, but unfortunately this longevity does not tally with health expectancy. In other words, people now-a-days are living a longer life than their predecessors but are prone to various ailments - both mental and physical.

Subsequently, the society is experiencing an increase in the population of senior citizens. These people, now in their old age, are sometimes confronted with the feeling of isolation and neglect from their own family members.

It is seen that traditional games, particularly, board games, are likely to be useful for the elderly people. Traditional games are associated with the roots of one's culture and learning these games will give the elderly people the pleasure of rediscovering their childhood and will preoccupy them in some leisurely activities. The involvement in these games would also increase their physical dynamism.

Board games can be beneficial to these people as they assist the participants with regular mental exercise which will effectively help them to prevent or minimize mental diseases like insomnia, depression, Alzheimer's disease etc. Medical reports say that the risk of dreaded Alzheimer's disease can be minimized by involving in regular mental exercise like playing board games.(7) The senior members of the family can play these games with their grand-children and such involvement in traditional activities may resurrect the family ties which are otherwise on the wane.

Another fruitful learning experience may be the learning a new language in a later age. Language learning at any age can unlock new avenues. It is proved to be very beneficial to the elderly learners too. Research shows that mature learners have more advantage in mastering new language as they can cast aside the hassles of everyday life and devote more time in study than their younger counterparts. Further, the informal approach of this new learning process gives the mature students respite from the stress and anxiety usually associated with formal education's examination and evaluation process.

Learning a second language has immense cognitive benefits. Frequent learning and review of a new language s invigorates the brain to react faster. A 2012 article in the UK's "Telegraph" suggests that studying a second language "rewires" the brain, and could help delay the onset of dementia for years.(8) To be precise, it is purely a refreshing learning experience which may provide the senior learners with much needed self-confidence and help them to come out of negativity.

In the prime time of life people have had many dreams and desires most of which have remained unfulfilled. One might have been a promising poet, artist, actor or a violin player in his/her youth. But the busy schedule of his/her professional life hardly spared any time for participation in these hobbies. The post retirement period may be the fertile ground for satisfying such long cherished desires. Similarly hobby and experience sharing may be a very constructive way of passing time. The senior members of the society are the live treasure house of varied experiences. By sharing their firsthand experiences with the listeners (or learners) of heterogeneous age they can impart their contemporary knowledge to the generation next and make society enriched.

All these proposed schemes of learning for the aged people demands an infrastructure. These people at least need a premise where they can sit and learn and play one or two new

games, practise newly learned language and share hobbies and experiences with others. Here comes the responsibility of the government and society as a whole. Government should construct halls in the model of community centres where all necessary amenities for elderly people should be readily available. There should be provision for staff like caretakers instructors etc. Another plausible alternative may be the educational institutions like schools and colleges which may easily arrange such community hall for the elders as they have the necessary infrastructure. Funding should not be a very big issue as the University Grants Commission and other funding agencies would not object in funding such extension activities. The urgent need at this moment is a responsible, compassionate and humanistic approach towards the elderly members of our society.

## Conclusion

This study does not demand credit for any innovative schemes of learning. All the aforementioned schemes already exist. The present study only proposes a few new contexts for these processes. It is sincerely expected that the use of Lifelong Learning as a medium for the physical and mental uplifting of this esteemed section of the society would give the 'concept of learning' it's much needed humanistic approach.

## Footnotes

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