Presence of Elderly in Urban Indian Families: Conflict and Resolution of Family Members

The family is made up of individuals, but it is also a social unit and has a very central position in the society. In all kinds of families, the prominent feature is the interrelationships between the family members. But the traditional roles and functions of the family are changing. One of the functional roles of the family has been care of the elderly. With modernization and urbanization, it is becoming increasingly difficult to give care and attention to the elderly, as there are fewer family members who can act as caregivers. With the changing roles of family members, relationships are also undergoing change. This results in conflicting situations in the family.

The number of people aged 60 and older in the world is projected to more than triple in the next half century, from 593 million to 1.97 billion, increasing the share of older people in the population from 10 to 22 per cent. In Asia, the number of older persons aged 60 and over will more than double from 322 million in 2000 to about 705 million in 2025, and their proportion of the total population of Asia will increase from 8.7 per cent to 14.9 per cent. India's older population is expected to grow from 77 million in 2000 to about 141 million by 2020. This means that the population of the country will have a greater older component and so the problems or issues concerning the elderly are of greater significance.

Traditionally, in India, the most common form of family structure was the joint family. The extended family consisted of at least two generations living together and this arrangement was usually to the advantage of the elderly as they enjoyed a special status and power. But with growing urbanization and depending on the availability of jobs, children are moving out of the extended family set-up, leaving the 'empty nest' and establishing their own nuclear families.

In the coming years the elderly population will phenomenally grow in numbers and at the same time the family size is reducing, more so in the urban areas. In the absence of traditional caregivers, due to the disintegration of the joint family and women moving out of the household, the elderly have become a vulnerable group, needing care and attention. Under these circumstances, family relationships are affected and it calls for adjustments from family members, which may or may not be to the liking of all members. This gives rise to conflict situations in the family, some even acquiring a serious and unresolvable nature. The present paper focuses on the problem arising from the elderly people's presence in urban families causing conflict among other family members and between the elderly and other members.

One of the most studied and discussed subjects in the area of family communication has been 'Conflict'. But studies on family conflict have tended to concentrate more on the marital relationships and the conflicts arising from them. Whatever literature is available on family conflicts involving the elderly is in the Western context. There are hardly any studies on the subject related to the Indian sub-continent. Hence the present paper

assumes relevance as it analyses family relationships and conflict management in urban families in India.

Social conflicts can be intergroup as well as intragroup. In the conflicts involving the elderly, these groups belong to either different or same generation, as the family may comprise of members from different generations. Thus, these conflicts can be broadly classified as occurring either between different generations, Intergenerational, or within members of the same generation, Intragenerational. Intergenerational conflicts can occur between an elderly parent and his/her son/daughter/daughter-in-law or between grandparents and grandchildren. The conflicts occurring between young parents and their children, where the influence of the elderly or their presence in the family affects the conflict, also belong to this category. Intragenerational conflicts, on the other hand, occur between two elderly members (usually spouses) or between other family members belonging to the same generation e.g. son-his spouse, son-his sibling, and grandchildren dyads. In all these conflicts, the elderly have a crucial role to play, either being the cause of the conflict or one of the conflicting parties.

Since conflicts which are based on financial reasons sideline other types of conflict occurring in families, this research has examined conflict situations in urban families that are non economic in nature. To analyse the conflicts in these families without financial problems, it was considered best to choose the sample from a universe of government employees who would have a steady income in the form of pension when they became elderly. This would provide the necessary homogeneity to the group. New Delhi, being the capital of India, is an example of a typical urban Indian city. Since the maximum number of government employees reside here and the sample was to be selected from this group it was considered the ideal choice. The locality from where the sample has been drawn is Janakpuri, situated in the western part of New Delhi. Janakpuri is one of the largest colonies in Asia and houses private bungalows built in the 1970s by government employees who could obtain housing loans from the government.

A total of 85 interviews were conducted – 72 with elderly (34 male and 38 female) and 13 with other members of the family from October 2002 to March 2003. In-depth interviews was considered the best research tool for this study as, unlike structured questionnaires, it has the ability to provide insights into and understanding of the context in which behaviour occurs and the broader structural determinants (e.g. power relations) of behaviour. This study too required a deep understanding of the behaviour patterns of the elderly and their family members and the context and reasons for the occurrence of conflicts in their families.

There was a separate set of issues on which the elderly were probed and a different set for the other family members. The elderly were questioned on their age, education, religion, work status (current and past), number of children and the children's marital status. They were also asked about the details of the co residents in the house, their own source of income, activities they engaged in, the kind of food they ate, any health problems they had faced/ were facing and who took care of them. Depending on who resided in the house alongwith the elderly, questions were asked accordingly and varied from case to

case. For example, if there were unmarried or unemployed children in the family the probing was done in a subtle way so that the respondents would talk about their conflicts unhesitatingly. Similarly, information on relations with the daughter-in-law, relationship between the elderly couple and decision making in the family was elicited from the respondents after understanding the family background which was made possible through the initial set of general questions. The elderly were also questioned on the attitude of their children, especially sons, after marriage and whether there was a marked difference in the same.

Other family members were questioned on how much time they were required to spend in caregiving of the elderly and whether there was a conflict of time i.e. did they have to ignore their other duties (e.g. towards children etc.) or forego some time which they wanted to devote for themselves. Again, depending on the background of the case they were asked whether the temporary absence of the elderly affected their lives in any way or were there lesser conflicts at that time and whether life had changed after the presence of the elderly in the family (if they were not already living with them). The daughters-in-law were asked if they had any differences or conflicts with their husbands over issues related to their mothers-in-law. The sons/ daughters were questioned about the evolution of their relationship with their elderly parents and whether they were spending enough time with their parents.

The ages of the interviewed elderly varied from 60 to 84 years. Their mean age was 68 years. Forty seven percent of the elderly respondents were men; 53 percent were women. Age-sex distribution of the elderly showed an equal number of men and women in the 80-84 age category. Educational background was as low as primary and as high as Phd and professional courses but none of the respondents were illiterate. Eight percent had completed primary education, 10 percent were educated upto middle school, 18 percent were matriculate, 13 percent had studied till the intermediate level, 22 percent were graduates and 29 percent were postgraduates or higher. Majority of the elderly in the sample are Hindus (90 percent) and the remaining 10 percent are Sikhs. Regarding the work status of the elderly, 62 percent have ever worked (out of which 8 percent are currently working and are all privately employed or doing their own business) and 38 percent have never worked.

Using the data collected from the study, taxonomy of conflicts taking place in urban families between different family members due to presence of elderly has been developed on the basis of different dyadic interactions occurring in the family where elderly are also residing. Due to intergenerational exchanges, conflicts can occur either between elderly and adult children or between elderly and other family members. The issues of conflict in the former case is one of the following: adult child's job, adult child's marriage, conflicts concerning grandchildren or other issues e.g. when the elderly have to take care of their children. In the latter case, the issues revolve around caregiving, conflicting personalities or other issues.

In the present study, some conflicts that existed earlier have been resolved and the others have not been resolved. Depending upon their resolvability, the conflicts emerging from

the study that have been resolved and those that have not been resolved have been differentiated and each of them has been subdivided according to how they are resolved and why they are not resolved. The resolved conflicts are either ad hoc resolutions, resolved with time, resolved by adjustment or non-interference or on their own. Unresolved conflicts are caused either by circumstances beyond control or due to irrecociliable differences, dependence on one family member or the lack of initiative to resolve conflicts.

Though a multigeneration family enjoys many advantages in terms of increased intergenerational understanding, emotional exchange and reciprocity; increased solidarity (in various forms like interdependence, coresidence and frequent interaction) increases the chances of conflict. This has been proved by the very occurrence of different types of conflict in families with members belonging to different generations staying under the same roof. Social structural positions are important in understanding relationships especially interpersonal relations. Some of the social structural variables, which have been the determinants of conflict in elderly-other family member dyads, are employment, marital status, family member's position in the family. The unemployed status of an adult child is one of the reasons for conflict as is the marital status. Usually, it has been noted that unmarried sons/ daughters of 'marriageable' age are a cause of concern for older parents. The family member's position in the family plays an important role in the occurrence of conflicts. There may be many reasons for mother-in-law-daughter-in-law conflicts but they occur primarily because of the relative positioning of both in the family power structure and the mother-in-law-daughter-in-law-son triad. The elderly, who are sole decision makers (causing conflict due to unequal distribution of power and authority) in the family, do so on the basis of their financial and emotional control of family matters/ members.

The parent-adult child interaction patterns can either be related to contact, exchange, assistance or support. But where the filial expectations are not met with then conflicts are bound to follow. It has been observed that time plays the role of a catalyst in creating conflicting situations and it is also the resolver of conflicts. When the caregiver has to forego the needs of one care receiver in preference over another, then 'Conflict of Time' comes into play. This conflict may also require the caregiver to sacrifice some of his/ her needs in favour of the care receiver. All the conflicts cited here are not resolved. Some have ended in resolution either due to the initiative of at least one of the conflicting members or due to favourable circumstances. The rest have not been resolved, also for the lack of the very same reasons.

This paper has examined a new dimension to the problem of aging i.e. intergenerational exchanges resulting in various conflicting situations among urban family members in India and their consequent resolution or non-resolution. The studies on intergenerational conflicts are vital for improving the living conditions of the elderly. Hence there is a need for more such studies emphasizing on qualitative aspects, as family interactions are essentially qualitative by nature. Also these studies should broaden their scope to include the resolution of conflicts, as conflicts, if studied in isolation, are incomplete.