



The Research Analytics

A Journal of Multidisciplinary Research for Advanced Studies

(A Peer Reviewed and Open Access)

Volume 1 Issue 1 (April 2025)

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Cultural Perceptions of Ageing: A Comparative Analysis of Indian and Western Societies

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Abstract

Cultural perceptions of ageing vary widely across societies, with some viewing old age as a time of wisdom and respect, while others associate it with decline and dependency. These perceptions are shaped by historical values, social norms, and intergenerational relationships that influence how elderly individuals are treated and regarded within their communities. The present research paper explores the cultural perceptions of ageing by conducting a comparative analysis between Indian and Western societies. It investigates how deeply rooted values, traditions, philosophical ideologies, and social structures shape attitudes toward the elderly in diverse cultural contexts. In many Eastern cultures, ageing is traditionally associated with wisdom, respect, and familial responsibility, whereas in several Western societies, it is often linked to independence, productivity, and individualism. The research highlights key differences in intergenerational relationships, the role of elderly people in community life, and societal responses to ageing, including care practices and policy frameworks. Through this cross-cultural lens, the paper aims to reveal both the commonalities and the divergences in how ageing is viewed and experienced globally. The findings underscore the need to acknowledge cultural variability when addressing the needs and rights of the elderly, and advocate for more inclusive, culturally sensitive approaches in social policy and elder care.

Keywords: Ageing, Elderly, Cultural Perceptions, East and West

Introduction

Ageing is a biological reality, but its social construction varies widely across cultures, influencing how societies perceive, treat, and support their elderly populations. While the physical process of growing old is universal, the meanings attached to ageing are shaped by cultural values, traditions, and social expectations. In India, ageing is traditionally viewed through a lens of reverence, where elders are considered sources of spiritual wisdom, life experience, and moral guidance. The joint family system has historically provided a strong support network, ensuring the inclusion and care of older adults within the household structure. In contrast, many Western societies tend to emphasize values such as youth, self-reliance, and individual autonomy, often leading to the marginalization of the elderly or their institutional care (Lamb, 2020).

These cultural differences are particularly relevant in today's context of rapid demographic change, with increasing life expectancy and shrinking family sizes presenting challenges to traditional caregiving systems. As societies evolve, so too do their responses to ageing—shaped by shifts in economic conditions, social policies, and intergenerational

dynamics. Understanding these diverse cultural perspectives is not only academically significant but also essential for informing inclusive and effective elder care practices.

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of perceptions of ageing in India and the West, examining key themes such as familial roles, societal attitudes, and policy implications. By exploring both traditional and modern views, it aims to highlight the cultural foundations of elder care and advocate for models that respect cultural identity while addressing the practical needs of ageing populations.

Objectives

1. To examine cultural attitudes toward ageing in Indian and Western societies.
2. To analyze the role of family structures and societal values in elder care.
3. To compare policy approaches to ageing in India and the West.
4. To discuss the impact of modernization on traditional ageing perceptions.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach to examine cultural perceptions of ageing in India and Western societies. The research methodology is based on an extensive review of existing literature, allowing for a thematic analysis of cultural attitudes, caregiving structures, and social roles attributed to the elderly. The study draws primarily from three categories of sources: scholarly articles, government and institutional reports, and cross-cultural studies. Academic literature on ageing in the Indian context includes explorations of Hindu traditions, the importance of intergenerational ties within joint families, and the shifting dynamics in modern urban settings. In contrast, Western gerontology studies focus on individualism, autonomy in old age, and the increasing prevalence of institutional care facilities for the elderly.

To ensure comprehensive and credible insights, data was gathered from reputable academic databases such as PubMed, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, along with books, policy documents, and global reports, particularly from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and India's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Notably, India's National Policy on Senior Citizens served as a key document to understand government responses to the needs of the elderly population.

Specific inclusion criteria were followed to maintain the focus and relevance of the study. Selected sources were limited to those published between 2010 and 2024 to reflect contemporary trends and current perspectives. Furthermore, only studies emphasizing cultural, social, or psychological dimensions of ageing were included, while literature limited to medical or biological aspects was excluded. A strong emphasis was placed on works that offered comparative insights between Eastern and Western perspectives, ensuring that the analysis captured both cultural specificity and broader global patterns related to ageing.

Discussion and Findings

Cultural Attitudes Toward Ageing

Ageing is not merely a biological process but a deeply cultural experience shaped by societal values, religious beliefs, and familial structures. A comparative exploration of India and Western societies reveals significant differences in how ageing is perceived and how the elderly are treated within these cultural frameworks.

In the Indian context, ageing is traditionally associated with reverence, wisdom, and spiritual progress. Rooted in Hindu philosophical stages of life, particularly *vana prastha* (withdrawal from material life) and *sannyasa* (renunciation), old age is seen as a time for reflection, spiritual elevation, and respect (Cohen, 2021, p. 78). Social customs reinforce this outlook. For instance, the practice of touching elders' feet (*pranam*) symbolizes deep respect, while *filial piety* dictates that sons are morally and culturally obligated to care for ageing parents (Dandekar, 2019). The joint family system has historically served as the cornerstone of

elder care, with recent reports indicating that approximately 60% of Indian elders continue to live with their children (UNFPA India, 2022). This arrangement not only ensures physical support but also emotional and social integration for the elderly.

However, this traditional model is undergoing transformation. Rapid urbanization, migration for work, and the rise of nuclear families are weakening the cultural fabric that once upheld elder care. As Patel (2023) notes, younger generations in urban areas are increasingly adopting Western lifestyles, leading to reduced cohabitation with parents and a growing sense of isolation among older adults. These shifts challenge the sustainability of traditional elder care practices and necessitate culturally adaptive solutions.

In contrast, Western societies often emphasize autonomy and individualism, which profoundly influence their attitudes toward ageing. Ageing in the West is frequently associated with decline, dependency, and diminished social value. Media representations commonly portray older adults as frail or burdensome, contributing to negative stereotypes and societal ageism. Levy (2022) asserts that "Western media portrays ageing as a loss of productivity and beauty" (p. 112), reinforcing these ageist attitudes. The value placed on independence is reflected in the preference of many elderly individuals to live alone or in retirement communities (AARP, 2021). Additionally, a significant portion—approximately 25%—of older adults in the United States reside in institutional care facilities (WHO, 2023), a practice that often distances the elderly from familial settings.

Ageism is a particularly concerning trend in Western societies, manifesting in both subtle and overt forms of discrimination, especially in workplaces. Older adults may face challenges in employment, healthcare access, and social participation (Albert & Cattell, 2020). These structural barriers further alienate the ageing population and contribute to social exclusion.

Taken together, these findings reveal a cultural divide in how societies frame the experience of ageing. While India continues to uphold certain traditional values of reverence and familial responsibility—albeit under pressure—Western societies prioritize independence and institutional care, often at the cost of social connection. Recognizing these differences is essential for developing elder care strategies that are not only effective but also culturally sensitive and socially inclusive.

2. Policy and Societal Support

Comparative Aspects of Elder Care in India and the West

A closer examination of elder care across India and Western countries such as the U.S. and the UK reveals striking differences in familial roles, governmental support, and emerging challenges. In India, family continues to play a central role in caregiving, with nearly 90% of elder care being provided by family members. The joint family system and strong cultural norms of filial duty reinforce this caregiving structure. In contrast, Western societies rely heavily on formal care systems, including nursing homes and assisted living facilities, where a significant portion of elderly care is institutionalized.

Governmental support mechanisms also vary markedly. In India, social welfare provisions for the elderly are minimal, often limited to modest pensions and schemes that assume continued familial support. Conversely, countries like the U.S. and UK provide more structured and extensive public assistance through systems such as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, which offer financial and medical support to ageing populations.

Despite these systemic differences, both regions face distinct challenges. In India, urbanization and the rise of nuclear families are eroding traditional caregiving norms, leading to increased vulnerability among older adults. Meanwhile, in the West, the primary challenge lies in the high cost of elderly care, which can place a significant financial burden on individuals and families. These contrasts underscore the need for culturally contextualized

elder care models that respond to both traditional values and contemporary socio-economic realities.

3. Modernization and Changing Perceptions

Modernization is significantly reshaping traditional perceptions of ageing across both Eastern and Western societies. In India, the younger generations are increasingly embracing urban lifestyles and nuclear family structures, which often reduce the scope of direct elder support. As Patel (2023) notes, this shift has led to a growing disconnect between the elderly and their children, particularly in metropolitan areas where mobility and employment demands limit intergenerational cohabitation. This transition challenges the deeply rooted cultural norm of filial duty and is gradually transforming ageing from a shared familial responsibility to a social concern requiring policy intervention.

In contrast, Western societies are witnessing a counter-movement to long-standing ageist attitudes through initiatives that promote "positive ageing." This concept, which emphasizes active, healthy, and socially engaged ageing, seeks to combat stereotypes that associate old age with decline and dependency. Levy (2022) highlights the role of media, advocacy, and public health campaigns in redefining the narrative around ageing, encouraging society to view older adults as valuable contributors rather than passive dependents. These evolving perspectives in both contexts indicate a complex interplay between tradition, modernization, and emerging global influences that are reshaping how ageing is experienced and managed.

Conclusion

India's cultural reverence for ageing, rooted in familial duty and spiritual traditions, stands in marked contrast to the Western emphasis on independence and institutional care. While Indian society traditionally places the responsibility of elder care on family members, Western nations rely more on structured support systems such as nursing homes and social welfare programs. However, the boundaries between these models are becoming increasingly fluid. Globalization, urbanization, and cross-cultural exchange are contributing to a gradual convergence in caregiving practices, challenging conventional binaries.

This evolving landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, India faces the erosion of its joint family system, while on the other, the West is re-evaluating its institutional care models through the lens of dignity and inclusion. Policymakers in both regions must recognize the value of blending traditional values with contemporary care solutions. Developing hybrid elder care models that integrate emotional, social, and medical support will be crucial in addressing the diverse needs of ageing populations in the 21st century. Future research should continue to explore these hybrid approaches, particularly within multicultural societies, to create care systems that are both culturally sensitive and practically sustainable.

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