

# Autonomy and Independence in India

Autonomy and Independence are universal concepts. Their meaning varies with the social structure, culture and traditional beliefs. Autonomy and independence are primarily western concepts and more individualistic in nature. In India majority of parents and children living together, have more of a communitarian social structure. In India, the society is more community oriented, however, globalization and change in social and value structure has led to a mix of cultures and the Indian community too has started to incorporate western methods of Palliative care.

This abstract intends to address this “Indian approach” towards Autonomy and Independence of Senior Citizens in India and the role of family, society and the state towards the same.

The need to make senior citizens autonomous is increasing in India. One of the major reasons attributed to this is the changing social and value structure of the society. Children leave their homes and migrate for economic gains, nationally or internationally, leaving behind ailing / elderly parents. The elderly in the country have functionality issue necessitating regular care and support. In the absence of informal Palliative care it has become necessary to provide formal and institutional Palliative care. Institutional Palliative care is present in India since the past 20 years. The Government, along with NGOs (such as Janaseva Foundation) and various Forums play a role in providing this institutional support to the elderly. However, Palliative care being a relatively new concept, needs to improve the quality.

We have to consider this issue in the rural and urban context where the social system and behavioural patterns are different. Urbanization and urbanism in India tends to become co-terminus with westernization. There are several western ideological behavioural patterns in urban areas where as in rural areas, the patterns are more traditional and socially regulated.

The key issues and challenges regarding autonomy and independence are related with health, security, financial independence, productive aging, housing, social inclusion and empowerment.

Issues related with health, financial independence are the core issues. Other issues are-

- Lack of infrastructure
- Changing family structure
- Lack of social support
- Social inequality faced by elderly women
- Availability, accessibility and affordability of health care
- Economic dependency

Indian constitution has granted the right of equality as fundamental right and also insured the effective provisions for securing the rights of public assistance in case of old age. The

government also formulated 'National policy on senior citizens' which covers all the issues related to the welfare of elderly.

Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, government of India announced a National Policy on Older Persons in January 1999 which provides broad framework for inter-sectoral collaboration and co-operation within the government as well as between government and NGOs. In particular, policy has identified areas of intervention, financial security, health care and nutrition, shelter, education, welfare, protection of life and property etc.

Recognizing the need for promoting productive ageing, the policy emphasizes the importance of family in providing vital non formal social security for older persons.

The existing mechanism and system is not sufficient to meet the challenges, there are legal provisions and national policy is in place but, the implementation and enforcement of rules and regulations is not enough.

Apart from the government, the NGOs, charitable, philanthropic, social organizations and society as a whole are playing an important role by extending support and working on grass root level to ensure the autonomy and independence in the life of elderly people. Autonomy and Independence should be treated as a Human Rights issue and consider the formation of law on the promotion of personal autonomy and care for dependent persons. Such legislation can be instrumental in achieving a deep reform which will reinforce social rights and social protection system in general.

The general feeling remains that, the financial independence and empowerment will be most effective instrument to maintain the autonomy of elderly people, especially for the females by encouraging and promoting in developing the cottage industry which can provide opportunity of using their expertise in developing traditional culinary to generate extra income generation. Elderly people should get opportunity for reemployment to channelize their experience and skills so that they become an asset to the nation and the liability.

Janaseva Foundation is taking a lead in creating a database for elderly people who are seeking re-employment and keen to engage themselves in useful creative activities and play active part in national and social development.

Charitable and philanthropic organizations can be a source of financial support and in developing institutional structural framework in order to provide platform and opportunity to work towards autonomy and independence for elderly population. There should be collective responsibility of creating a system which can provide long term sustainable solution and efforts from all stake holders including central & state govts., NGOs, society and elderly people themselves.