

## Towards Need-Based Care at Old Age Homes in India

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### Abstract

The Maintenance and Welfare of Senior Citizens and Parents Act 2007 of India considers the legal age for the elderly to be 60 years and above. The elderly constitute about 11–12% of India's total population. This percentage is projected to increase to 15% and 20% in 2030 and 2050 respectively. Interestingly, although India shows a strong preference for male children overall, women far outnumber men among the elderly, making up roughly 58% of senior citizens. According to an India Aging Report, approximately 72.45% of the elderly reside in rural India.

There has been significant increase in life expectancy in our country in recent times, from 69.4 in 2014–18 to 69.7 in 2015–19 and 72.48 in 2019–23. The notable reasons for increased life expectancy among the aged include improved healthcare, better nutrition, reduced infant mortality, greater access to education, changes in lifestyles, among others. Data for (2021–24) has shown that, Kerala (16.5) has the highest percentage of elderly people, followed by Tamil Nadu (13.6), Himachal Pradesh (13.1), Punjab (12.6), and Andhra Pradesh (12.4). In the northern states, Uttar Pradesh (8.1) and Bihar (7.7) are showing a slow rise. Kerala, Punjab and Tamil Nadu are front runner states as far as health indicators are concerned and Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are aspirants or Empowered Action Group (EAG) states. There is a suggestion that better health facilities result in higher life expectancy and a greater aging population

This rapid growth of the ageing population brings with it several challenges, including increased vulnerability to elder abuse and a rising burden of mental health issues among older adults. Data has shown that depression (30%), anxiety disorder (18.7%) and dementia (7.4%) are quite prevalent among the aged. Elder abuse is a serious concern, aggravating psychological distress among senior citizens. Many of them experience isolation, neglect and abuse, which aggravate psychological distress. According to the data available to NCRB for 2023, the state which reported the highest number of elder abuse cases was Madhya Pradesh, followed closely by Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Among the UTs, Delhi topped the list. The most common forms of abuse against the elderly are psychological/emotional abuse and financial abuse, followed by neglect, physical abuse and rarely sexual abuse.

Another recently conducted study by Help Age India reported that cities with the highest number of elder abuse are Mangalore, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Bhopal, and Amritsar. The lowest were reported in these regions – JK, Mumbai, Visakhapatnam, Kochi and Guwahati. (2024)

The emergence of old age homes (OAHs) in recent times could be because of a multitude of reasons. The migration of younger members of the family for better education, work opportunities, and comfortable life styles, movement away from joint family to nuclear family set up, demographical changes (improved life expectancy). The migration of younger members of the family means that senior citizens are often left alone at home, making them vulnerable to crime. The idea of OLH, though promoted for elders, does not have support from the projected beneficiaries. The aged people also wish to stay at the same place where they have been staying for long, where they have their own social circle, where they are familiar with their neighbours and are relatively safe, among other things. In some cases, the elderly resist the idea of shifting to the OLH because they fear being uprooted. In other words, they fear an alien environment.

In the given scenario, OAHs are a logical solution where family/community care is substituted by paid institutional care devoid of any emotional support. OAHs have their own pros and cons. One positive aspect is that they provide elderly people with the opportunity to live and interact with others belonging to the same age group. They provide a life full of dignity, free from abuse, neglect, and isolation. OAHs also allow elders to laugh out with their hearts without being judged. In some cases, they are located away from hustle and bustle of modern life, more suitable for retired life in more salubrious surroundings. One negative aspect of OAHs is that they lead to a feeling of abandonment by the family, a poor quality of care, health risks, adjustment issues, among others.

There are two types of OAHs in India, paid and government funded. Free or charitable OAHs, are basically those run by NGOs, trusts, and religious groups. These types of OAHs provide basic facilities, including food, shelter, and medical assistance. These OAHs are free of cost for the inmates. Charitable OAHs are ideal for those aged people who don't have any other family member to take care of them or are not financially sound. These homes also provide community and emotional support which are essential for the well-being of the elderly. Paid OAHs, are those which are run by private institutions. These OAHs include a comfortable and spacious living space, personalized diet, access to recreational activities, and good healthcare facilities. Here the older person stays in a hygienic environment and have their own private space as well. It is important to note that not every elderly person can afford to stay at a paid OAH in our country due to high cost involved, and lack of support from family.