

**SOCIAL CHANGE AND PROBLEMS
OF THE OLDER PERSONS IN SRI LANKA
A SEARCH FOR NEW STRATEGIES TO MEET THE
CHALLENGES**

By

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The work described in this Thesis was carried out by me, under the supervision of Dr. K.A.P. Siddhisena, Professor, Department of Demography, University of Colombo and Professor B.A. Tennyson Perera, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Sri Jayewardenepura and a report on this has not been submitted in whole or in part to any university or any other institution for another Degree/Diploma.

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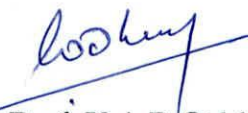
Social Change and Problems of the Older Persons in Sri Lanka
A Search for New Strategies


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We hereby certify that the above thesis of Mr. H.L. Gunasekera has been completed under our supervision. All the amendments suggested by the examiners were done in accordance with their suggestions and to our opinion it has all the values and qualities for accepting for Ph.D. degree in Sociology.




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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Pg. Nos.
Table of Contents		1 - 4
List of Tables		5 - 6
Acknowledgement		7
Chapter 1	Introduction	8 - 17
1.1	Introduction	8 - 10
1.2	The Research Problem	10 - 12
1.3	Significance of the Study	12 - 13
1.4	Main Objectives	13 - 14
1.5	Hypotheses	14
1.6	Definition of Ageing	14 - 15
1.7	Chapterization	16 - 17
Chapter 2	Literature Review	18 - 30
2.1	Introduction	18 - 19
2.2	Conceptual Background	19 - 21
2.3	New Concepts	21
2.4	Socio-Economic Status	22 - 23
2.5	Health	23 - 25
2.6	Care	25 - 26
2.7	Demography of Ageing	26 - 27
2.8	Classical References in Ageing	28 - 29
2.9	Current Researches	29 - 30
Chapter 3	Data and Methodology	31 - 37
3.1	Introduction	31 - 32
3.2	Data Collection	32 - 33
3.3	Primary Data	33 - 34
3.4	The Questionnaire	34 - 35
3.5	Opinion Survey	35
3.6	Secondary Data	35 - 36
3.7	Data Reliability	36 - 37

Chapter 4 Socio-Cultural Economic Situation and Ageing Trends in Sri Lanka : An Overview 38 - 57

4.1	Geographical and Physical Features	38 - 39
4.2	The Administration	39 - 40
4.3	Economic Situation and Trends	40 - 43
4.4	Socio-Cultural Impact	43 - 45
4.5	Demographic Situation and Social Development	46 - 47
4.6	Policy Consideration and Social Integration	48 - 49
4.7	Ageing Trends in Sri Lanka	49 - 57
4.7.1	Emerging Situation	49
4.7.2	Sri Lanka Ageing Trends in South Central Asian Perspectives	49 - 51
4.7.3	Growth Trends	51 - 53
4.7.4	Elderly Population Distribution	53 - 54
4.7.5	Dependency Ratio	55 - 56
4.7.6	Elderly Refugees	57

Chapter 5 Social Change and issue of Older Persons 58 - 85

5.1	Definitions	58
5.2	Social Change and Contributory Factors	59 - 62
5.3	Theories of Social Change	62 - 65
5.3.1	Evolutionary Theory	62
5.3.2	Cyclical Theories	63
5.3.3	Conflict Theory	63
5.3.4	Deterministic and Voluntaristic Theories	64
5.3.5	Theory of Engagement Vs Disengagement	64 - 65
5.4	Theoretical Base as applied to Sri Lanka Situation	66
5.5	Socio-Economic Development Since Independence	66
5.6	Social Change and the Aged	67 - 68
5.7	Major Issues Relating to Ageing	68 - 69
5.8	Social Position of Older Persons	69 - 70
5.9	Older Persons and the Family	70 - 73
5.10	Health and Nutrition	73 - 75
5.11	Housing and Living Arrangements	75
5.12	Older Persons as Consumers	76
5.13	Income Security and Employment	76 - 77
5.14	Social Services and the Community	77
5.15	National Infrastructure for Ageing and Older Persons	77 - 79
5.16	The Impirical Aspects	80 - 85

Chapter 6 Institutionalization Homes for Elders and the Daycare Centres

86 - 129

6.1	Institutionalization	86 - 87
6.2	Family Responsibility	87 - 88
6.3	Age Care Practice	88 - 89
6.4	Elders' Homes in Sri Lanka	89 - 91
6.5	Accommodation Situation	91 - 96
6.6	Community Support	96 - 98
6.7	Socio-Economic Implications	98
6.8	Intragenerational and Intergenerational Arrangements	98 - 99
6.9	Earliest Legislation and State Intervention	99 - 100
6.10	Migration of Women for Better Prospects	100
6.11	Institutionalization of Destitute (Beggars)	100 - 101
6.12	Changing Status of the Head of the Family	101 - 102
6.13	Erosion of the Cultural Value System	102 - 103
6.14	Social Implications of Ageing	103 - 104
6.15	Ageing and Family Support	104 - 105
6.16	Health Status of the Elderly	105 - 107
6.17	National Survey on Elders (2003-2004)	107 - 108
6.18	Health Issues	108 - 109
6.19	Elderly Women	110 - 111
6.20	Organization of Care	111 - 112
6.21	Intergenerational Reciprocity	112 - 117
6.22	Daycare Centres for the Elderly	117
6.22.1	Concept and Evolution	117
6.22.2	Definition	118
6.22.3	Recommendations of the United Nations	118
6.22.4	HelpAge Model Day Centre	118 - 119
6.22.5	Facilities and Activities	119
6.22.6	Management	120
6.22.7	Daycare Centre Programmes in Sri Lanka	120 - 121
6.22.8	Concept in Practice	121 - 122
6.22.9	Main Services	122 - 123
6.22.10	A Comparison of Elders' Homes with Daycare Centres for Elders	123 - 124
6.22.11	Restricted Freedom	124
6.22.12	Social Integration	124
6.22.13	Segregation	124 - 125
6.22.14	Social Security Nets	125
6.22.15	Present Situation of Elders' Homes	125 - 126
6.22.16	Supplementary and Complementary Services	127
6.22.17	Recommendations	127

6.22.18	Quality of Care Service	127
6.22.19	Training of Carers	127 - 128
6.22.20	Strengthening the Family Unit	128
6.22.21	Monitoring and Coordination of Activities	128
6.22.22	Traditional Safety Nets	128 - 129
Chapter 7	Policies and Programmes for the Elderly in Sri Lanka	130 - 172
7.1	Historical Perspective	130 - 132
7.2	Trends in 1900s	133
7.3	Social Services Commission	133 - 134
7.4	Policy on Institutional Support	134 - 135
7.5	Institutional Building	135 - 136
7.6	Post 1977-1994 Era of Liberation of the Economy	136 - 138
7.7	Plan of Action	138
7.8	Protection of the Rights	139 - 140
7.9	Historical Landmarks	140 - 141
7.10	Policy Formulation	141 - 142
7.11	International UN World Assembly on Ageing-1982	142 - 143
7.12	United Nations Principles for Older Persons	143
7.13	Sri Lanka Situation	143
7.14	ESCAP Advisory Mission on Elderly 1993	144
7.15	Revision of existing Policy	145
7.16	The Salient Aspects of the Policy	145 - 146
7.17	Act No. 9 of 2000 : Salient Features	146 - 147
7.18	Coordinated Effort to Promote Services	147 - 148
7.19	The Future	148
7.20	New Strategies to Meet the Challenges	148 - 151
7.21	Analysis of Strategies	151 - 163
7.22	Mechanisms Proposed by Act No. 9 of 2000 to Institutionalize the Strategies	163 - 172
Chapter 8	Summary, Conclusions, and Policy Implications	173 - 180
8.1	Summary	173 - 175
8.2	Conclusions	175 - 178
8.3	Policy Implications	178 - 180
References		181 - 186
Annex 1		187 - 211
Annex 2		212
Annex 3		213 - 214
Annex 4		215 - 218

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 4

4.1	Age composition & growth of the population, Sri Lanka, 1946-2041	47
4.2	Ageing in Sri Lanka in South Central Asian perspective, 2000-2030	50
4.3	The total population, percentage of population aged 60+ years and Growth rate, 1946-2031	51
4.4	Fertility & morality trend, 1946-1998	52
4.5	Percentages of old sex ratio of old and ageing index by districts, 1981	54
4.6	Dependency ratios, 1946-2031	55
4.7	Age composition & growth of the population in Sri Lanka, 1946-2031	56

Chapter 5

5.1	Age-sex distribution of the MRT sample population	81
5.2	Percentage of older people in paid employment by locality	81
5.3	Percentage distribution of the position as chief house holder	82
5.4	Living arrangements of older people in MRT areas (by percentage)	83
5.5	Percentage of elders with disability by location	84
5.6	Type of disability by sampled areas	84
5.7	Problems of the older people in sampled areas (percentage)	84

Chapter 6

6.1	The patterns of living arrangements & co-residence	105
6.2	Percentage distribution of respondents by perceived hearing ability And seeing ability	108
6.3	Number & proportion of elders who indicated that they suffer from Particular illnesses (multiple response)	109
6.4	Funded projects for elders under Youth Education Programme	116
6.5	Day Centre : details of cost, number of beneficiaries	120
6.6	Daycare Centres in Sri Lanka – location by provinces	121

Chapter 7

7.1	Number of elders admitted to Koggala Home	135
7.2	Funds provided by Department of Social Services for Institutions, 1943	135
7.3	Percentage distribution of the population	152
7.4	Labour force participation of elderly, (60+)	155
7.5	Homes for the aged by province	161
7.6	Demographic transition	168

CHAPTER I

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

In Sri Lankan society the elderly persons are held as a precious human resource. The traditional family gave expressions to this value system and the family and the community protected older people. Both Sinhala and Tamil cultures provided pride of place to the value of the wellbeing of the older persons. It is the duty of the young children to treat the older persons with respect and care ensuring that the children are nurtured to look up to older persons as guardians of cultural values and norms. As a result, older persons are protected through the extended family, which was well established in the self-sustained traditional society.

With the advent of the external influences, this in-built value system began to show signs of disintegration. Foreign invasions from the west commencing around the early 16th century disrupted the self-sufficient family system causing near destitution for majority of older persons. Economic depression along with the out break of malaria and other epidemics and temporary set back in the newly introduced plantations industry caused unprecedented hardships to force the colonial rulers to bring in statutory provisions to provide relief to the local poor and destitute. For the first time, the poor elders had to find refuge in asylums set up for vagrants under the Vagrancy Ordinance No. 5 of 1907 and the poor older people became recipients of charitable allowances paid through Kachcheries and village headmen. Thus it was during the colonial period that the poor older persons in Sri Lanka began to feel the pinch of losing traditional protection (Social Service Commission Report, 1948).

Thereafter, these older persons became dependent on poor relief and public assistance from the State. This situation was clearly borne out by the observation made by the Social Service Commission in 1944 with Sir Ivor Jennings as the Chairman. The Commission has pointed out that nearly 50 percent of the recipients under Poor Law Schemes and 37 percent of the Relief Assistance recipients were older persons.

While the recommendations of the Social Services Commission paved the way for minimum state protection for the older persons, their traditional place in the family and society came to be affected by modernization and development. Simultaneously decline in the birth rate and the death rate had resulted in the increase of the number of older persons in the population.

In the South-Asian context, Sri Lanka ranks high as a country with a rapidly ageing population. The projected elderly population 60 and above in Sri Lanka for between 2000 and 2030 is almost double any other country in the South Asian Region. By 2030 Sri Lanka is expected to have 22 per cent of its population where nearly one in 5 people will be elders whilst other countries in the region – eg. Afghanistan will have one in 18 people and in India one in 7 people will be old (Siddhisena, 2004:8). The continuous declining fertility and tremendous increasing trend of life expectancy caused mainly this situation. Life expectancy in Sri Lanka, which was 43 years in 1946 increased up to 69 years in 1981 and rose to 75 years in 2001.

Due to high fertility, which prevailed before 1950's the younger proportion in Sri Lanka has increased up to 1971 and thereafter it decreased dramatically since 1990. The decreasing trend of younger proportion was replaced by huge proportion of old in the future. The trend in increasing the ratio of older to young (index of ageing) is speedy from 1981 – 2031. The ageing index will increase more than 6 fold from 18.7 in 1981 to 126.6 in 2031. This shift of age structure from younger to older with a higher proportion resulted in a transformation of the shape of the age pyramid of the country from a broad based to “barrel shaped” thus confirming ageing at the apex (Siddhisena, 2004:9).

Although fertility is the key factor in determining age structure and ageing process, mortality and migration do have some effect in determining age structure as well as ageing process. The reduction of infant mortality specially, on the escalation of life expectancy however keeps longer life of ageing population specially the “old-old” (Siddhisena, 2004:9).

During the last five decades, Sri Lanka has achieved a steady and sustained decline of fertility. The crude birth rate dwindled from 37 in 1946 to 17.3 in 1998, while it plunged into further reduction of birth rate as of 16.9 per thousand in 1999. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) decreased to replacement level fertility from 5.3 in 1953 to 2.0 in

2000 (excluding north and east). The mortality transition is well ahead than fertility transition and thus crude death rate decreased substantially to a low level as a single digit since 1950's from 19.8 in 1946 to 5.9 in 1998 and consequently increased life expectancy from 42 in 1946 to 75 in 2001 (Siddhisena, 2000).

According to the census data for the period 1946-1981, the percentage of those aged 60+ in 1946 was 5.4 percent and in 1981 it was 6.6 percent. As projected, population data for 1991-2041 shows that 8.1 percent of older persons in 1991 will increase to 13.1 percent in 2011 and to 27.8 percent in 2041 (De Silva, 1997:3).

This increase will have a tremendous impact on the labour force, education and other social welfare programmes, which in turn will exert pressure on the development of the country. Although the above facts indicate improved standard of living and health care, this situation has increased the dependency rate of Older People and made the provision of social services and social security for old age an increasingly important consideration in the development of future social policies.

1.2. Research Problem

One of the most conspicuous emerging features of Sri Lankan demography is the trend of increasing older age groups relative to the younger age groups. The population is ageing faster than in any other developing country. It is unique that Sri Lanka has achieved this demographic status despite the fact that the country had a per capita income of US. \$ 990/= per annum (2001). According to the Department of Census and Statistics in 1981, the percentage of elderly persons over 60 years was 6.6 percent. In 1991, it was estimated to be 8.1 percent by 2001, it is projected to be 10 per cent and by 2041 it would be 27.8 percent.

It is clear from the data that the median age of Sri Lanka population will increase from 25 years in 1991 to 30 years in 2005 followed by 40 years in 2030 and 50 years after 2050. This means that more than half of the population will be over 50 years after another 50 years. The rapid trend is projected to affect all sectors of the economy, the labour force, education, health and social security.

With the emergence of new socio-economic situations due to modernization, industrialization and urbanization, the extended family system is increasingly undergoing a severe change-yielding place to nuclear families, which are now becoming the social norm.

Long-term care of the elderly will be affected by the rapid increase of older people. The cultural value system of taking care of the elderly that has existed in Sri Lanka has been projected as a system that cannot be expected to last too long because of the rapid economic and social changes. Sri Lanka society has traditionally depended on the family system and non-working women to care for the elderly. This feature cannot be expected to continue in the future since a large proportion of the females who provided the free services at home are now employed in Sri Lanka and abroad.

Accordingly, on the one hand the number of older persons increases and on the other hand there will be a few persons to look after the older persons due to declining of birth rate. Unless effective solutions are found in the near future, issues relating to the aged populations of the country may reach a crisis situation.

The welfare of the aged will therefore, require the strengthening of the family support system and development of supplementary community based programmes concerning matters such as employment, income maintenance, health, nutrition and medical care; housing and living arrangements; and personal social services.

At present, the most elderly are still taken care by the family and community, in keeping with the traditional norms for the caring of elderly. However, socio-economic changes especially modernization including migration have resulted in the proliferation of nuclear families causing the break-up of the extended family system. There is evidence that the number of persons per household is declining due to the limitations imposed by economic and social constrains while the number of old people is increasing. There are misgivings as to whether the family could maintain the traditional in-built protective care for the elderly indefinitely into the future. This situation is forcing a need to evolve a carefully planned family based support system for the care of older persons.

The extended family system, which has continued to prevail even today, safeguards the bonds of love and affection among family members. The elders receive physical and emotional support from their family, their grandchildren and the community. This practice continues to this day as a tradition emphasized by all ethnic groups mainly in the rural areas. The present education system too promotes in the younger generation, the ethics of respecting the elders based on the teaching of Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam (Gunasekera, 1993:10).

The socio-economic issues that have confronted modern society demand greater support for families to look after their elders. Home Help Services, Security Schemes and Economic Incentives to keep the home fires burning, have to be provided to avoid the older persons being institutionalized in homes for elders.

The State has taken the main responsibility of looking after the elderly where family support is not forthcoming. There has been a growing awareness of the need to help the older persons since the United Nation's World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 and the establishment of the Sri Lanka National Committee on Ageing under the Ministry of Social Service with greater participation of the non-government sector. However, the direct involvement of the Government in providing care and protection for older persons is marginal. The free health service, education, pensions and Government assistance schemes provide indirect services to the elderly. The Department of Social Services since its inception in 1948 provides direct services and assistance to the elderly.

1.3. Significance of the Study

Specific policies and programmes for the elderly have never been a priority of the policy makers in Sri Lanka. Welfare and care for the elderly has always been a social topic among concerned authorities, philanthropists and social service minded and religious organizations. As a cultural trait it is taken for granted that elders should be looked after by the children and the community. This is due to the fact that until 1980s the population in Sri Lanka had been comparatively young and people were not living longer to very old age.