

Older People's Understanding on Old Age: A Mixture of Myth and Reality in Nepal

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Abstract

Living longer is regarded as a triumph of human development. In Nepal, by and large, old age has been understood largely from the physical dimension; thus, there is wider belief that in old age people are frail and weak. The socio-psychological dimensions, in which elderly people are facing isolation due to loss of spouse, negligence from family and negatively viewed by society with old age stereotypes, are overlooked. The main objective of this research paper is to explore the elderly's own experiences and understanding on old age. This is qualitative research within the interpretative research paradigm. Interview, field notes and participant observation were the key information gathering methods adopted. The study was carried out in Kathmandu Metropolitan City. And total six elderly persons, their family members and eleven stakeholders are selected purposively representing different ages and gender.

Keywords: Ageing, senior citizen, Kathmandu, Nepal

1. Introduction

In the context of Nepal, the Senior Citizen Act 2007 defines an individual over 60 years as senior citizen (Ministry of Women Children and Social Welfare [MoWCSW], 2007). Nepal's ageing population of 60 years and above is increasing from 6.5% in 2001 to 8.1% in 2011 (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2011). According to the National Planning Commission (2012), increase in life expectancy and decline in total fertility rates are the major reasons of an increasing ageing population in Nepal (National Planning Commission [NPC], 2012). The growing numbers of elders are posing hardships in various social, cultural and economic phenomena in these days. Evidently, non-communicable diseases are major health problems faced by elderly of Nepal (NPC, 2012); meanwhile, discrimination and abuse, anxiety, depression, helplessness, and loneliness are also increasing (Geriatric Center Nepal, 2010). According to Jolly (2015), poverty and marginalization are common problems encountered by the elderly people around the globe.

Country like Nepal, societal change has further posed elderly lives in chaos. The traditional family norms and values have been eroded (Shrestha & Dahal, 2007; Dubey, Bhasin, Gupta & Sharma, 2011) and preferences are reshaped. Presumably, due to influence from west, our cultural values and identities are declined. Family values, beliefs and rituals which were once our pride remain no more.

The pace of migration from rural areas to urban and cities to abroad have affected our social system and absence of adequate social security hits elderly life. Due to lack of employment opportunity and to mangle hands to mouth problem: most of the youths tend to go abroad and each day around 1,500 youths (Department of Foreign Employment, 2016) leave this country. Consequently, elder members of the families have to remain alone in their homes. The labor market shortage mostly in agriculture is getting worse; hence, elderly people are compelled to work in the field. This reality has badly affected their health and welfare as well as there has been shoddy agricultural production. From this, it is evident that the recent shift of family structure and youth migration has affected elderly livelihood.

2. Literature Review

Literature review is a process that helps to understand known topic, applied concepts and theories (Bryman, 2012). It begins with an overview of global concerns to old age; scenario of Asia Pacific Region; South Asia Region and Nepal. Also, it deals with the construct and support system of old age and conceptual framework and conclusions.

2.1 Graying Globe: Concerns for All

It is difficult to find a universally accepted age bracket of the elderly. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2009) categorizes that 60 years as an old age for developing countries and 65 for developed countries. The most of the bureaucratic institutions also set a number of 60 to 65 years as the beginning old age (Dubey et al., 2011).

According to the United Nations (2015), the global population of 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56 %, from 901 million to 1.4 billion by 2050. The projected ageing population may have greater socio-economic consequences to the world. With this line, the United Nations (2015) concludes that an estimated 342

million older people lack an adequate income security, and this number will rise to 1.2 billion by 2050 in developing countries (United Nations, 2015). Hence, this has certainly alarmed the world about its management in the long run.

2.2 Asia: A Milieu for Growing Ageing Population

Asia is experiencing a rapid growth of ageing population over the decade. The elderly population in Asia is projected to reach 922.7 million by the year 2050, putting Asia as becoming one of the oldest regions in the world (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2012). Specifically, Japan is expected to be the fastest ageing population with about 44 % elderly in 2050 (ADB, 2012). Further in Asia, the percentage of elderly is expected to rise to 31% in China and 21% in India by 2050.

Compared to East Asia, South Asia population is still relatively young. The projection predicts that by 2025 the proportion will be increased to 10%, and 19 % by 2050, which also means one in 5 South Asians in 2050 will be an older person (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], (2009).

2.3 Ageing Population in Nepal: Upheaval Task

Thanks to the modernized and globalized world for dramatic progress brought in medicine, science and technology. As a result, Nepal's maternal, child mortality rate decreased (Ministry of Health, New ERA & ICF, 2017). The life expectancy rate of Nepali has increased to 79 (NPC, 2017) and fertility rate has decreased from 4.6 births per woman in 1996 to 2.3 births per woman in 2016. The senior citizens population accounts for 8.4 % of the total population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011), which was 6.5 % in 2001. This shows the noticeable increase over the decade. Most importantly, this scenario indicates that Nepal needs to prepare to cope with the ageing population by having social and economic policies for addressing effective management of the ageing population in coming days.

2.4 Defining Old Age and Retirement in Nepal: An Attempt

The Government of Nepal defines people above 60 years as senior citizens (MoWCSW, 2007). Whereas the definition varies; age of 58 is considered for civil servant, age of 63 for university professors and the judiciary services (NEPAN, 2010).

Besides the bureaucratic classification, some ethnic groups have regarded a different stage of life as old age. In some ethnic groups, older people are considered almost god like at the age of seventy. Amongst the *Newari* ethnic group, elderly people are felicitated as gods on attaining centenarian with three different ceremonies called *Janku*. The first ceremony is called *Bhim Rathardoan*, conducted when a person reaches 77 years, 7months, 7 days, 7 hours, 7minutes Aand 7 *pala* (lowest unit of Nepalese chronological time); and the second ceremony is conducted at age of 84, and the third at 90 (Upreti, 2006). This shows culturally some communities have respected elderly and celebrate their longevity as festival. But these practices are changing along with the scenario of the world. Hence, there is no uniform meaning and understanding on elderly in Nepal.

2.5 Old Age Allowance in South Asia

The United Nations (2013), highlights that public transfers [old age allowance] can be a major source of old age support. In India, the Ministry of Rural Development is implementing the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme. Under this scheme per person, IRs. 200 is given to persons above 60 years and IRs. 500 is given to person above 80 years belonging to below poverty line households (Government of India, Ministry of Statistic and Program Implementation, 2016). In Sri Lanka, senior citizens over 70 years, whose monthly income is below Rs. 3000 is given a monthly allowance of Rs. 2000 for empowering the later stages of life (Government of Sri Lanka, Ministry of Social Empowerment and Welfare, 2017). In Bangladesh, people of age 65 and above receive an old age allowance of Tk. 400 monthly per head from the Ministry of Social Welfare. For women recipients a 62 years old age bracket is set (Government of Bangladesh, Ministry of Planning, 2015). From different provision and benchmark, it seems that countries have adopted allowance provision, taking reference of age category, poverty line and economy.

2.6 Old Age Allowance and Other Entitlements in Nepal

Nepal has anchored universal allowance for elders in national legislation in the form of a non-contributory universal scheme. The scheme was first announced by the then Prime Minster, Mr. Manmohan Adhikari, on 26 December 1994, in which senior citizens over the age of 75 would be given a monthly allowance of NRs.100 (NPC, 2012). While the program was first piloted in five districts, it was rolled out nationwide on 2 July, 1995. In the next fiscal year, the Nepal Congress Party came to power during 1996-97, and two additional social security programs were initiated for widows above 60 years and allowance for disabled of NRs. 100 per month (Help Age International & NEPAN, 2011). Similarly, considering the socio-economic diversity in 2008, new provisions on allowances were made for Dalits (NRs. 500 per month), widows and people above 60 years in the

Karnali Zone (NRs. 500 per month) by adjusting the eligibility for senior citizen allowance, for all non-Dalits citizens 70 years and 60 years for Dalits and senior citizens in the Karnali zone. The government of Nepal distributes the allowance from the Village Development Committee (VDC) and Ward Office in three trimesters: *Ashwin, Magh and Jestha*.

The Government of Nepal has made a provision for a special concession for the elderly on public transport. After the enactment of the Senior Citizen Act 2006, and its regulation 2008, senior citizens are getting fifty percent concession on public transport. Similarly, they have reserved seats in these transports as well but there has been huge concern over its effective implementation. Likewise, in entertainment sectors such as cinemas, the aged are entitled to get fifty percent discount. Also, the aged are entitled to partially or fully free services at central, regional, sub-regional and zonal hospitals (Ministry of Health & Population [MoHP], 2012). There are also special facilities in health treatment, such as the granting of 4,000 NRs total (in two installments), and a payment of 100,000 NRs for kidney, cancer, heart disease and prolapsed uterus treatments to the elderly (MoHP, 2012). These attempts from the state indicate that elders are in the process of getting recognition but there are concerns whether these are sufficient and effective in implementation.

3. Methodology

Research methodology is a plan of action to conduct the study. There are three major educational research paradigms or approaches viz quantitative research, qualitative research and mixed research in practice. Quantitative research relies primarily on the collection of quantitative data, qualitative research on the collection of qualitative data, and mixed research involves the mixing of quantitative and qualitative methods (Johnson & Christensen, 2010). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality where the observer locates in the world. Lichman (2012) argues the purpose of qualitative research is to "describe, understand and interpret human phenomenon, human interaction or human discourse" (p. 17).

Based on these assumptions, qualitative approach has been adopted to understand social life, lived experiences and understanding of old age. This research paper explored elders' and stakeholders' experience on old age for understanding old age as phenomenon and to create a discourse for further research study.

4. Data Interpretation

Qualitative research has its own data interpretation method. We have adopted manual form of data interpretation. All field notes and interviews data are transcribed and index in order. After that deeper meaning and indicated connotations are drawn. Then, special events, sayings and behaviors observed during visit and recorded were coded. Further, recurring issues are managed into similar categories. After that coders were arranged in similar categories into themes. Finally, themes were interpreted by deriving meaning, mentioning stories and arguments (Brewer, 2005). While interpreting, metaphors were employed; emotions and subjective interpretations were presented in thick description (Crang & Cook, 2007).

5. Results

5.1 Experience of Old Age

First hand experience of old age is crucial to understand the aura of old age. As elderly first hand experiences are less explored, it is assumed that their feeling and experience painted across a life time can be a spot light to understand how elderly are passing through an important juncture of life. The next section presents experience of old age, which is presented metaphorically.

5.1.1 Old Age: A Stage of Physically Weak but Mentally Strong

Usually, old age people are recognized by their physical appearance and psychological changes. Tek (76) shares his old age experience. He says, "*When I entered my 70's, I started to feel physically weak. Sometimes, I could not sleep the whole night due to bodily pain. It is difficult for me to do physical activities the way I used to do. Currently, I have hypertension and take regular medication for this and sugar problems. But I try to continue to serve the elderly community because I cannot remain idle. I want to exhibit my inner power by serving as the chairperson as long as I can*". Tek's experience shows that he is going through major physical changes and for him old age is change of physical organs. According to Kececi and Buiduk (2012), people experience old age when their visual, tactile, olfactory and taste senses tend to decline. Chet (79), who is another research participant says, "*I experienced some biological changes after my 60s. My eyes got blurs; I felt pain in my body and suffered from diabetes. Then, I realize I had become an older person*". His experience shows that after 60s individuals experience physical change and this symbolizes that the persons have become older. The same response is expressed by Sabita (76). She states, "*Aha, there are some changes, such as aching body parts, difficult to sleep, difficult to walk, difficult to memorize, and emotionally sensitive*". Her experience also demonstrates that biological change and physical weakness are the major markers experienced by elderly.

Tika (73) states, "Old age is oldness of physical organs, but heart becomes more sensible and emotional. I

had heart surgery last year; the doctor suggested that I stay at home". Tika also encounters health problems when he was sixty eight, but considers emotional changes are major factors he felt in old age. Tika further shares another day that although physically he is weak, he thinks he is mentally strong enough. He states, "Today's young people access our biological changes and says hajurba (grandfather) but they never try to recognize our intelligence". His expression indicates that he has a feeling that his knowledge is not accessed by the young generation. It seems that also Tika believes the young generation has narrowly projected elderly in the society.

Another research participant Kabita (64), compares her old age experience with a 'caged parrot'. She says, "I am gradually feeling I am like a parrot, caged in a net. See... due to my health problem I cannot go the market alone, cannot visit my kin or interact with my old friends. Last year, when I was going outside the kitchen garden, I fell down and got my right leg fractured. Since then, my son and daughter in-law never allow me to go outside alone from my room. And during this year, I am feeling difficulties getting up out of bed. Sometimes, my daughter in-law takes me to the market for shopping, and or sometimes my eldest grandchildren do that. The rest of the time, I just live in this room". Kabita experiences depict the paradox that although some elderly are bound by physical frailness, they want to engage socially even in their difficult health condition. Further, it seems that although in old age, elderly favor to be active but their body does not allow them to do so.

The daily routine of some research participants was also observed to get a vivid experiences and expressions of old persons. It is unbelievable that one of participants in his late age was also quite healthier and active as young. Chet (79) wakes up early in the morning and goes to the temple for worship. Firstly, he cleans up the temple premises and then bows-down inside the temple and takes flower for his wife and son. After this, he does yoga. He takes *roti (bread)* and milk prepared by his wife. After this, he heads to the grocery and begins his daily routine as shopkeeper. Again, he worships an idol kept just ahead of his treasury. During a day time, he goes to inform about eye-camp and on the way he meets a person around forty-five years old, who says "Namaste" to him and asks "where he is going". He also asks why he is walking around the community. He shares with him the plan of Netra Jyoti Sanga eye surgery for six *motibindu (cataract)* patients at the Teaching Hospital, Maharjunj. When we together return back from the community, his wife shows anger towards him "*Buda pani, kay khana lae janu parayko ghar-ghar ma, pasal ma nabasary*" (*For what benefits you to visit door-to-door by not staying at the grocery?*). He replies, "*nakara (do not shout at me), you don't know that Netra Jyoti Association came the other day and informed me about free eye-camp, thus I need to tell this news to others*". From his daily life, it can be say that some elderly in their 70s are also physically and mentally strong. So, we cannot make generalizations that all elderly are weak and looking for help in their later age. The reason behind his motivation and fitness was probed, he replies, "*Babu, our generations are a strong generation. I will tell you since my 60's I left drinking alcohol and turned into a vegetarian. Also, I am regularly doing yoga and engaging in social work. I think it is due to my habits*". The similar findings show that encouraging "older persons to remain physically, politically, socially and economically active for long as possible will benefit not only the individual but also the society as a whole (UN, 2011, p. 9). From above, it indicates that these days' elderly people's perspectives are different from older adults of the past. The modern elderly are careful about their health, and may engage in various social and spiritual activities; it also shows that through regular exercise and diet they can be physically and socially strong.

Kabita (64) also shares the same story. She says, "*When I was young, I worked on the farm land, because I had to nurture my children. During that time, we used to eat organic food from our farm. Time has changed, now all my children are employed, and we are compelled to eat pesticide mixed foods. This has caused health problems for many elderly people*". Here she seems quite aware about her effort of maintaining healthy eating habits but she cannot do further as her physical condition does not allow her fulfilling all of that. It is illustrated from her expression that elderly who are physically trained can have less health problems than those who have not.

We found a contrasting view from a family member of research participants. Saroj (31) son of Chet says, "*Old age people become socially and physically weak when they are old*". This shows that there is not enough information and orientation about old age to the new generation because they view it from biological changes. I think third generation has fewer and false knowledge of elderly. The grandson of Chet (Shyam, 19) considered that elderly is 'stubborn' and 'conservative' in their old age. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), (2009) also highlights that engaging older people in physical or other activities is helpful for their mental health.

One of research participants confesses his current old age stage by giving an example of oriental perspective. Rampal (60) points out, "*Our [Hindu] scripture has classified age into three categories: 1-25 years age group is called Brahmacharya (sexual abstinence or life of student); 26-50 age groups is called Grihastha (marital life or life of householder) and 51-75 age group as a Rajpath also called Sannyasa (asceticism). As this scripture rightly mentions that after 60 years people leave active life and try to gain spirituality as in the ancient times like priests did*". Here, he seems to persuade himself but some may lament due to the past. He also tries to indicate that it is a natural course and it has to be understood by elderly. WHO (2015) also defines old age

stages: i) early childhood; ii) studenthood; iii) a defined period of working age; and iv) retirement (WHO, 2015).

5.1.2 Rich Experiences: Unutilized Potentiality

In general, elders pose a rich and long experience. It is also believed that wisdom does come with age. Most of research participants stress that in old age they perceive that they are resourceful and carry wisdoms. Chet (79) says, *"In my 70s also I attend meetings, seminars and workshops on various subjects of old age. I know much more than others on old age but where should I share it"*. From his statement, it shows that he carries rich experiences and knowledge and this can be a resource to the family and society if properly utilized. Further, we ask him what sorts of knowledge and skills, he thinks, he poses himself and replies, *"Yeah, I am a retired civil servant, I have visited many places, taken training, nurtured children, let's say what I do not have to impart on others. I believe my whole life is full of experiences and my experiences are knowledge for other people as these are the resources"*. From his statement it is likely to be said that work experience, life experience and exposure are key sources that they hold. We also agree with him that undocumented first-hand experiences can be an instrument to others.

We find Rampal (60) has strong views that the elderly are resourceful but not recognized yet. He says, *"Some of the retired civil servants are working as advisors in companies and non-governmental agencies; some retired officials work as a chief executive officer. So, if we get an opportunity we can prove that we are equal to others"*. From his expression, it seems that the public sector has not properly recognized the value of elderly, although government policy documents emphasize. The private sector is benefiting from their resource knowing they are a valuable source of knowledge for them. When he is telling his story, 70 years old Magay Buda of Fuifata, Ruga VDC of Mugu reminded us - he cannot read and write but he has indigenous knowledge to train on *Atis* (one kind of herbs found in Himalaya) seeds collection and seed nursery training to group farmers. Hence, they are expecting assurances from which they could benefit in their later phase of life.

We encounter distinct opinions on the elderly's richness of knowledge from Tek (79). He diplomatically says, *"Not all people who have gone to India are earning money, so likewise not all elderly people are experts: some may work only on farms and are rich in experience and skills in this area and others may not. For me, the knowledgeable one should have exposure to the east and west. In addition, one should be experienced in having some struggles in their life experiences"*. He believes that modern education has made the current generation more wise and knowledgeable. This may be because he does not know the importance of indigenous knowledge and power. Therefore, he thinks that the current generation is shrewder than older generations. Also, he perceives that among those who have high exposure, life experience and education attribute a resource to share with others. But, it is assumed that those do not have skills instead they have past memories and experiences that could be a source of motivation for the coming generation if utilized properly (Robinson, 2015).

Rampal (60) believes that a person should have a specific knowledge to be recognized as a resourceful person. He thinks knowledge about technical subjects is more likely to get honor from the society. He argues, *"I am active although I am quite old. I used to spend most of my time in writing poems and old stories. I have knowledge of Ayurved also. If someone asks me about my knowledge and skills, only then I will tell them something. I will transfer my knowledge only to those who listen to me properly, and want to apply the information to their lives"*. From Rampal's opinion, we cannot generalize that all elderly as an asset for the family as they bring long history. Those who bring special experiences and knowledge should be provided adequate opportunities to utilize their feelings and experiences for a better future because they represent a living history of our society and potential pathway for our future. The next section deals about the experience of treatment by family and society despite aforementioned positive side of possessing knowledge and skills.

5.1.3 Experience of Neglect and Discrimination

Discrimination in old age is one of the common problems faced by elderly people (Help Age International, 2011). Ageist attitudes and stereotype are posing serious threats to the dignity and well-being of old age. During our field information collection, one of research participants compares his old age with *"Dada mathi ko gham"* (the twilight of life). Though, it was not the first time that I have heard this illustration. In our interaction, Chet (79) elaborates, *"As sunlight starts to dim in very late afternoon, the elderly life also begins to dim in the same way"*. Here, he shares his experiences that in old age things get dim as compared to youth. It is assumed that this expression is widespread among society postulating that in old age people need to disengage from regular activity.

It is evident that society must focus on the continued participation of older people in social, economic, cultural and civic life (UN, 2011). Tek (79) expresses, *"In our society the aged are regarded as creatures from another planet. Thus, they may discriminate us by saying, Buda Budi (older person), instead of senior citizen. These words actually hurt"*? It seems that Tek reflects the stereotype inflicted in our society regarding old age. It is strange that in old age elderly are treated as alien. His response further clarifies that society needs to change the widespread mindset on old age. It is also a new learning that the word like *"Buda-Budi"* hurt them. As old age issues cannot be understood by separating social context as an old age person is situated in society. It can be said that this is due to lack of proper orientation and understanding about the brighter side of being aged. We

further ask him, "What sorts of behavior and language are elderly looking for"? He replies, "I have been emphasizing to my daughter-in-law; speak gently with love, and use soft and honorable language like, *Jiunari hunay hoena* (in respected term, let's have a food)', *parsadhi garahan* (lets have holy food) instead of *khana khanay hoena* (directly saying, are not you take food?)". It was also noticed that he is looking for more respectful terms while communicating with family members. One day, around 2 pm, when we were sitting with Tek outside the gallery of his house and interacting; the daughter-in-law of Tek came outside and asked him "Buwa khaja kay junari lesincha (Father, what would you like to take for snacks?)".

We continue to explore the perception of old age. One of the elderly women shares her experience and her responses are similar with Tek. Sabita (67) says, "With increasing age, it is true that we become closer to death. She further explains, *I think change in physical appearance is natural and that everyone will go through this stage. What I notice is a strange indifferent behavior of family and society to me*". From the above statement, it is understood that she has understood old age is a natural process and life and death are the part of the cycle. It can be considered that death and biological failure is a cultural construction and this has devalued the beauty of old age. It also seems that elderly are concerned with the changed behavior and communication with them. When further inquire about her family relation? Kabita (64) says, "It depends upon the family background [orientation], the education and cultural environment of the individual, and how elderly are behaved. So far my family is taking care of mine". We continue to explore and one of my research participant shares his agony, Premlal (62) who says, "In our society, we have a general belief that after 60 or retired from your job, you are useless like 'dustbin'. But imagine that in China old and retired people are serving in the government and as think tanks". The above expressions depict how deep rooted negative stereotypes are hurting elderly dignity and lives. We can derive a meaning from his statement that elderly ought to be think tanks but are being treated like dustbins. Further, the comparison indicates the discriminative understanding of old age persons. This also shows that elderly are having cross-culture interest and information. It draws our interest to know how he gets such information. He says in ironic ways, "We are also up to date about the global news. I am used to watching Television, reading newspaper and attending meetings and through this means I get such information". From his view, we came to know that mass media and modern information technology is making elderly more resourceful than before.

We got another different expression on old age by one research participants. Chet (79) says, "We are like 'Fatayko luga' (torn clothes), everyone thinks to throw out and get a new one". His comparison symbolizes the darkest side of old age people put by society. It can be easily understood that he actually expresses what our surrounding perceives and treats old age people. It also resembles people enjoy new comers baby as new and hardly celebrate elderly as old is gold. He compliments his statement by sharing his recent experience of Pashupatinath Old age Home visit. He describes, "Time has changed – children see us as a burden, thus they throw us from home to shelter. 'dharma karma haryao' (duties and responsibility has been forgotten). Remember that in the old age, no one will be with you. So, I want to repeat and modify our popular proverb 'jasko kahi hudena uskao vhagwan huncha' (God is with those who have no one by side)". His statement shows the half-reality of current society. The filial responsibility has been forgotten by some of families. It also reveals the dark-side of our society, where parents are kept in shelter. We think family is surrounded by society, so the family also sees them as a burden. In fact, children must serve parents as a resource for their better sense of later life (Esteban, 2015). Likewise, Rampal (60) expresses, "We have a popular stereotype that the elderly are a burden, and investment in them is unproductive. Their meaning of burden is that we are dependent on our children. This is only an economic reason. If we want to see respect and dignity for the elderly this kind of mind-set should be changed in our society and only then can we get respect". The expression as stated by Rampal indicates dissatisfaction over the societal mind-set and behavior to old age. It also resembles that we have a lack of right information and the positive sides of having elderly are not highlighted. This sort of socio-cultural outlook has made the aged further vulnerable. It can be understood that so-called stereotype projected by ancient society has to be changed. Such views are discriminative and also abusive. This is equal to other discrimination like sexism and racism (WHO, 2015). From this, it is concluded that it is necessary to change our mentality through policy and strategy, so that the aged will be considered treasures of the nation. In next section, one of the emerging issues of loneliness encountered by elderly in these days.

5.1.4 Experiencing Loneliness: Losing the Self

Loneliness is a growing problem faced by elderly in these days. Elderly people experience loneliness due to the lack of close family ties, lack of friends, loss of spouse and reduced connections with society (Singh & Misra, 2009, p.13). Sabita (67) has a similar experience and perception on old age. She says, "When my husband died, I was fifty-five years old. I became totally alone, after his death. Though I have three sons and daughters and their children, I cannot pass my time with them. I have a small kitchen garden. Sometimes I work in it and play with my grandchildren. Otherwise, for the whole day I stay in front of my house watching people on the road, and

¹Old age home managed by Government of Nepal.

looking at other people doing this and that". The above statement is of a widow, who strongly misses her deceased husband. This also indicates her difficulties to spend her time. Her daily life experience shows she wants to spend her time with her family members and grandchildren to forget her past sweet memory and not feel isolated. The study conducted among elderly of Nepal shows that spouse, children living together and friends reduces loneliness in the elder (Chalise, Saito, Takahashi & Kai, 2006). Her story is also an example of how changed family structure threatens elderly lives.

One of research participants' spouse is also suffering from dementia and blood-sugar and thus she is confined within their home. During field visit, it was observed that she was lying near in bed and taking care from his sister (who never married). Sometimes, his wife finds it difficult to go restroom, though it was in ground floor. Tek (76) says, "*She needs support from a family member, as she has dementia, she usually forgets and finds it difficult to recognize sometime*". This shows that non-communicable disease is also a reason for isolation and depression. We meet Mohan (92) when was interacting with other participant at ¹chautra. Mohan is the eldest one in that area. He is a widower and he lost his wife when he was 60. His sons are in the service and his daughters and grandsons go to school during the daytime. He has a great-grandson with whom he finds it difficult to communicate. So, in his family there is no-one to communicate with him during the daytime. Mohan share his daily routine, "*Babu, passing time is very difficult to me in this stage. All my grandchildren are married and their own children are also nurtured. In such case, how do I spend time and with whom? Therefore, I spend two to three hours staying here [chautara] in the morning and in the day time sleeping and again in the evening time revisiting here* Esteban (2015) argues that household composition is also one of the major reasons of loneliness. Here, households' composition and their priority is the major cause of loneliness to him. We further inquiry, what does he do by staying in chautara? He reacts, "*I take the shelter and listen to the chat of others. People stay there and talk all kinds of things, some are helpful and I get updates. Also, sometimes I also shared the history to them, that's all*". It is understand that that most of the elders are gathering at rest place made from stone platform or the temple for breaking loneliness and getting friends. The public place and gathering center also indicates the needs of elderly recreation or a day center, which will be safer than other public area.

This reveals that public places are being occupied by elderly to pass time by talking and listening to others. The social capital theory emphasizes the bond for sharing and caring within group to cope with the pain and hardships (Putnam, 2000). It seems that the old age population is increasing the provision of elderly clubs or recreational centers where religious, social and cultural gatherings are effective means for elders to get some respites, and it is needed.

A similar story is states by Chet (79). He recalls his past, how he used to travel, and met all of his important wishes. He replies with definite pain in his face, "*Babu purano kura kay garnau- (let's forget the past); when I was in my mid 60s, usually I visited the Pashupathi Temple weekly. Now with my deteriorating health, I wish I could visit the Temple just once a month. But I cannot disturb my sons and grandson about this, because of their busy schedules. Passing time is very difficult for me so even I sleep two hours in the day time*". During this moment of sharing his past, it was observed that he takes his eyes up and takes long breaths— which symbolize he became lost in reminiscences. We try to understand and think on one hand, he desires to continue to visit temple like he used to do when he was young; on the other hand, he fully realizes the limitations of his family to spend time with him. So, we conclude that religious activities and peer group gathering may be fostered by either side.

It is similar with a single woman, Kabita (64) who articulates how she accepts her old age. She describes, "*I missed my previous days, when I was young, and my own courage and my husband was my strength. Today, I have lost both, and I have only the memories. I do not have any intimate friends with whom I can share all these things. I have a great sadness in my life. I cannot recover any joy. Old age does that, it takes away all my happiness*". The loneliness experienced by these last two is most painful when we were listening. From her expression we can say old age persons need a close friend or circle where they could exchange their feelings. This also further magnifies the need of elderly club or center.

There is also a story of elderly happy with their family. We also notice how elderly have adjusted and mingled with family. Sabita (67) shares her experience, "*Though I lost my husband much earlier, my grandchildren became a friend for me. They are a source of my happiness. They love me and care for me, things which I need at this time*". This shows that she is experiencing less isolation because she is living with a joint family. Her experience of old age is different than elders who are unhappy with family. It resembles that elderly background matters to understand old age experience. From this, we can say that positive sides of the aged living jointly have to be brought into the light. According to activity theory, physical, psychological and social engagement in old age contributes to the wellbeing of old age (Madison, 2000). This provides evidence for pondering upon the multiple perspectives of the participants.

We encounter a different feeling of migrated older person. Khusal says, "*We are migrated from Biratnagar*

¹ Traditional chowk where older persons gather and have talk

in 2011. My father is now 76 and he needs constant care from us. I work in a school at Koteshwor and my wife too. In such case we are not having time to stay with him". He further says, "My father insists that otherwise we must rarely go outside because we need to serve him his meals, give him his medicines, and help him go the bathroom. It would be better for my wife and myself (to properly maintain our own lives) to have him attend a day care center, and come home at night". His response reveals the life of a migrated family, where a breadwinner finds real difficulties in spending the time with parents and providing care to one or two parents. His story reflects his obligation, because, he has to earn for family survival. The same kind of opinion was shared by the son of Chet who is a Master's student at the Shankar Dev Campus: He says, "I know there are some family members who are heavily criticized because they are not providing proper care to their elders'. There is another side to it: I am the only son and never married, in my case how I can take care of my parents? I think..., in such case for proper care, elderly club and care is essential". We considered his insights and understanding as especial care, where no family member in home can take care of the elderly who are biologically weak and need unvarying care. This also further signifies the dire need of elderly clubs. The Local Level Governance Act 2017 has provided authority to local government to establish senior citizen clubs, daycare centers and meeting places (Government of Nepal (GoN), (2017), with this provision, we can assume that family related isolation shall be lessen. In next section, interesting findings of elderly fear and a tendency for searching for god was mentioned.

5.1.5 Experience of Fear of Insecurity and Increasing Spirituality

Fear of insecurity has a significant impact on elderly health and well-being. In old age elderly feel scared when they are physically weak and have loss social contact (Long, 2013). We uncovered that some of research participants share their anxiety about the future and fear of death in old age. Tek (79) shares, "In old age you are not confident and strong enough as you are in youth, you will lose determination". He continues, "Four years back, I used to think, why should I do this and that. I was completely carefree. When I entered into old age a miserly aspect came into my life. Two examples: When I see a small piece of wood lying on the road, although it is so small, I want to carry it home. Similarly, even though I have enough money in my pocket, I prefer to spend less and save it". It can be easily assumed from his statement that sometimes greed increases in the aged because they feel insecure. This also implies that while young he was carefree. We consider that his feeling of greediness is because of a lack of income security that he may have seen. It is related to the psychological changes which bring anxiety in old age. He further explains that to overcome fear of the future, he regularly attends religious programs where he feels peace of mind. He further adds, "As I do not have to do anything in my home, I visit ¹satsangat, temple and any kinds of religious activities that give me consolation and peace". He also adds, "In old age, an older person needs inner peace and calmness and it is possible through relying in god". A similar kind of belief is also shared by Chet by asking our age before responding. He mentions, "Now you may be carefree, remember one important thing that you may also realize when you become old you start to feel your religious needs and you begin to feel that my final days are coming. The dharma (religion) and karma (deed) are tools to remain happy and healthy, which come from Bhagawan (God)". He experiences that through spirituality he feels happy and relaxed. Further, it shows that his inclination towards religion is due to fear of death. When he shares his religious activity, we reminded a religious gatherings organized in our neighborhood, where our grandparents used to attend by citing the *Ramayan* (ancient Hindu epic).

We learn that this is a common practice among elderly for various reasons. Barken (2011) stresses through religious activities psychological well-being among older adults can be enhanced. In addition to this during the elderly group meeting, it is notice that they discuss establishing a kind of spiritual library and they plan to ask for the support of the Indian Embassy. Their idea is that elders can gather and hear the religious sermons, read religious books and exchange their faith. We ask why they think so. In convincing tone, he replies, "I go to satsangat. When I attend it, I feel calm and completely stress-free. Furthermore, through interaction with others, I forget all my personal troubles; I loved joining in this". From his expression, we understand that religious activities are for forgetting the past troubles and becoming re-energized. The study shows that there is an association with healthy old age and religion (Freitas et al., 2009).

The religious gatherings are very crucial for interaction with other elderly, where elderly can exchange their experiences, feelings and stories with others. Their sharing activities actually help them to stop thinking of the troubles and hardships of life. Instead they are motivated by the energy generated from being together and going through similar experiences. The study shows that attending religious services/activities and the practices of prayer enhance psychological well-being among the elderly and reduce the fear of death (Barken, 2011). The next section deals with understanding of old age of elderly and stakeholders.

5.1.6 Age of Respect and Honor

In Nepal, old age persons were considered sage and respected. And older people have traditionally relied on the family for survival (Bisht, 2002). But due to the onset of industrialization and urbanization, I find old age people are viewed quite differently than before. Anita (35) says, "The oldest person is the head of the household. As

¹ Religious gathering

their age matured them, we choose to listen to their opinions and suggestions before doing something. They are also the 'shree' (head) of the household. They are our sources of happiness". Here, she perceives old age people are the head of the family so they have to be respected. Also, her expression connotes family respect and love towards the elderly in eastern society. Another day, she reminds of a Nepali proverb, "*Matri Devo Bhawah (Mother is Goddess); Pitri Devo Bhawah (Father is Goddess); Guru Devo Bhawah (Teacher is Goddess)*", while she explains by oriental value elderly are like goddess. The Sanskrit (ancient language of Hinduism) proverb which highlights respect and honor to the elders are gradually declining.

It also observe that some young people are still having this sort of value. One day when sitting with Chet (79) at his shop, two young individuals come to say goodbye to him (just prior to going to leave for Australia for their study). They regard Tek and his wife as senior guardians of the community, and they had come to take their blessings. They handed over small gifts (I do not know what was inside the box) and asked for blessing. After observing this incident, we find hope that not all young generations are contaminated by westernization. When the young couples leave, we ask him how he feels when his neighbor children favor their blessing, he replies, "*This is something I have gained during my lifetime. Daily 10-20 people greet me while they are passing my home. This is our tradition; look, no one in this society opposes my position. If I go to someone's door and ask for a contribution for social work, no one refuses*". His story indicates that still some are having a huge respect for the elders and are taking them a blessing and this tradition has to continue, where everyone feels honored and connected for the overall well-being. There is not negativity in the society about elders in all occasions, rather these moments which we witnessed while being in the field reveal some positive realities existing till these days. He further adds, "*It is our culture and religion to respect the senior citizens, no matter what their social position is*". The married daughter of Chet says "*old age people are perfect in everything, well-experienced and can be respected and consulted*". Meanwhile, Anita also agrees with all this. She adds, "*Elderly is an ideal person for the family, who guide it with their vast array of experience; they are the agrani (senior) of the nation, from whom the nation could benefit*". The above expressions show that elderly are taken as someone who is full of knowledge from whom valuable advice is possible, as they are full of experiences. In Nepal, the elderly males are regarded as wise men because they are able to settle disputes; arrange marriages; and supervise other life cycle ceremonies such as birthdays, and deaths (Regmi, 2010). In conclusion, elderly are entitled for respect and honor from family and society. In next section, understanding of the social status of the elderly is presented.

5.1.7 Old Age: Decline of Social Status

When elderly retire from the labor market or abandon such positions this undermines their status (Madison, 2000). Mahesh (38) who works at the Pasupathinath Old Age Home, says, "*In our society the value of the elderly is viewed indifferently. A person after their 60s is considered less capable and functional. Because of this, social reputation and respect also decline dramatically*". We learn that society sees old age people from his/her involvement and activeness. His views also counter the idea that old age people get less respect than before. He further tries to justify his argument and says, "*Most of the old people suffer from several kinds of diseases. Due to illness they cannot travel in public and some cannot work; these can be real hindrances for social involvement*". From his articulation, it can be said that elderly position and activeness cause their identity in the society.

Prakash (42) who works for a civil society organization on ageing also expresses similar perception. He says, "*When one becomes elderly, he/she will be less active then before and has less interaction with family and society than when young, this may be causing less respect from others*". He perceives the regular interaction and engagement enable the respect from others. This sort of opinion is supported by Barker (2011), who articulates "*elders in good health are viewed with respect, while those in poor health are viewed with disdain*" (p. 104). When we met Sundar (89) who is the chairperson of an elderly association, we are amazed by his mental and physical strength in this age. When we meet him in his home, he is surrounded by English and Nepali Newspapers. And, his living room is full of medals and appreciation letters. We realize that as he is a medical doctor, from a minority group and served the Commission of government, he viewed our intention of this research positively. Next section presents how family role is crucial to protect older persons.

5.1.8 Moment of Family Care

Traditionally, elderly care has been the sole responsibility of family members. But nowadays it has been changed due to fragmentation of family structures and compulsion of job and education. In Nepal, throughout the years among family, women's roles have changed tremendously and are making its greatest impact in society. We have seen and experienced that there is a perception that women should take care of senior citizens in the family. Shyam (19) explains, "*My grandmother is 76. She smokes cigarettes in front of my grandfather and family. May aji (grandmother) is very superstitious, believe in incantations and palm readings, which I think are not scientific*". From his perception, it is assumed that superstitious beliefs of the aged show them as orthodox and conservative. Also, the traditional beliefs make his grandson feel that his grandmother is conservative. In our other visit, he also adds, "*My father and uncles have great respect for my grandmother, whom you may not believe. Still, at this age she also looks after the house rent, and is responsible for all the family property*". This

shows that within three generations, understanding of old age and elderly is different, sometimes even opposite.

We asked the daughter-in-law of one of research participants, Sarita (35), who says, *"When it comes to elderly care, especially we daughter-in-laws are criticized unfairly. The changed context of time has to be understood by the elderly and family too. I work in a private company, I need to go in the early morning and return back late. Tell me, in such a case even though I wish to be with them, how can I manage my time"*? She believes that providing care to the elderly is not only the duty of the daughter-in-law, it is a collective responsibility of the family. Further, as women are entering into jobs and no one may be at home during the daytime, in such a case an alternative care system is needed. In addition, it also reveals that the changed role of women has to be understood and respected accordingly by the elderly, so that there will be no blame place on them.

Mira (42), a civil servant says, *"Our society has a lack of a positive understanding of old age and has also forgotten their dharma (religion): First of all, the elderly are father and mothers of their children. So, the elderly's own care goes automatically to their children. And, it is the dharma of every child"*. From her remarks, we understand the elders' care is the first and foremost responsibility of family. Family has to see them as god and maintain their dignity. Thus, the family needs to provide adequate care for their own elders. She further tells why the family is not taking care of their elders. She elaborates, *"There is a generational gap between the old and new generation due to science and technology. The current generation is materialistic and selfish, thus they have not taken care of their own parents"*. Her expression implies that western philosophy and values have an impact towards elderly care.

To some extent, we agree with her that current generation is changed. In our community, it is seen that the sons who have not taken care of their parents and are only caring for their own family (wife and children). Her statement also indicates that modernization has also posed difficulties in their lives. She further adds, *"Elderly are the gems of experience. They have contributed their whole lives for family, society and nation. Therefore, family should maintain the mutual support of the elderly"*. From her, it is understood that when we were children, parents took care of us and now it is our turn to take care of our parents. Thus, in old age it is a responsibility of children to take care of their need and honor them as a valuable person of the family. Shiva (45) during a geriatric-related seminar on December 10, 2015: he shares a slogan *"Ochayan Chodna Paidaina (Don't ask to leave the bed): Bidra Ashram Chahidena"* (No need for an old age home). This carries a splendid meaning because it emphasizes the importance of staying with the family rather than the old age home.

In our visit, Sabita's (67), she is surrounded by her son and daughter-in-law. In a lovely and frank setting, and having her hair combed and oiled. This shows some elderly are getting adequate affection and care from their off-springs. Due to changed in family values, we have seen many such cases where daughter-in-laws and elders are breaking relation. It is believed that elderly relations with family are two-fold. Sometimes, there is antagonism towards or from the daughter-in-law, sometimes not: so much depends on all of the members. Sabita emphasizes that, *"The elderly care depends on the elderly themselves too. The elderly should also be flexible. If they want to limit themselves to the past, the relationship will be broken and that will hamper everybody"*. From her response, we can draw a meaning that when it comes to the elderly care, role and behavior of elderly themselves also important. So, we cannot only blame the daughter-in-law or women who usually cook food and feed family members.

We further ask about the family role towards the older person to the person working in the civil society organization. Sundar (89) says, *"The idea of having family is for 'varanposhan' (nourishment). Unfortunately, in our society family property has become a major insecurity. I have a bad example as a testimony of this- there is a rich family in Newroad, Kathmandu. I will not give their names; they were also my old friend. Their big house has 7 or 8 levels; the father was physically forced by his son to give over all of the property- to repeat, this happened under physical duress. He came to the [National Senior Citizens] Federation, informed them of this serious incident and asked for help"*. From his expression and examples, we understand that sometimes family property causes insecurity of the elderly people. This is one of the emerging threats that elderly face in recent past. Some elderly are having such incidents in their life, where the children have forgotten the meaning of the parents. We anticipate that this sort of "crime" should be eliminated by strong law and order.

5. Findings and Discussions

This study discovers that elderly are seeking a new narrative of understanding old age. They want to be recognized not by an old age identity of frail, decline and dependent but by rich in wisdom and sage of community, in their old age. The elders and stakeholders have perceived that old age is a natural phenomenon and the physical dimension of old age has been overrated by the society. I also explore that society perceives old age people with negative stereotypes because of a narrow view of knowing old age. These sorts of identities constructed by society put them in a painful condition (Yang, 2007). Further, such belief by society is harmful for the well-being of older persons (Holstein, 2010). Meanwhile, elderly are looking for changed behavior and identity such as some elders do not like people to say "older persons/elderly". Elders also detest the particular

words *Buda -Budi (old man, old woman)*. Against this somebody opines they would be happy if someone says "uncle", or some says they are happy with the words "senior citizen". This indicates that modern day's elderly are different than the past; the education and social changes have brought positive awareness on their lives. Their further awareness also was noticed with demarcation of old age. The educated elders and some stakeholders have also expressed the demarcation of old age (60 years) needs to be adjusted as life expectancy has increased and vulnerability pattern of human development has changed. The NPC (2012) also supports their idea that timely adjustment of recipients of the entitlement has to be complemented by data and fact.

We find mixed perceptions of old age: some participants say old age is a biological change and they are physically strong, whereas others believe their intensity of physical activities are decreased and they are dependent on family. This symbolizes activity theory which promotes the activeness and continuity of engagement also in later life.

Another important finding is to get to know is that uneducated elders think that after 60 they become useless and compare it with "rubbish" and waiting for death whereas the educated elderly believed that old age is the construct of society and it is no more relevant in the present days. The elders express that the society has projected them as other and their identity is tempered by cultural ideologies. It shows that instead of treating in such a way, family and society needs to value them as unique and resourceful to get wisdom and blessing (Eagger, 2001). This research also reveals that elders prefer respected connotations in lovely tone while communicating and friendly behavior from family members. They also look for a calm family environment and a culture of speaking slowly with them. They have also expressed that they could be distracted from the loud voice and rough words. It means that their psychological changes have to be understood by family (Bodi, 2012).

It is finds that the young generations have a lack of knowledge about ageing or old age. Some family members present themselves that they have unfamiliar demarcation and entitlements of old age. Realizing these facts, elders themselves suggest having elderly education by making this mandatory in school curriculum.

Most of the senior citizens have also viewed that in their young age they have contributed for the prosperity of the society and in old age they need certain types of recognition. For this, they also demand for volunteer or paid work. These all evidently show that elders are looking for identity and recognition. This shows that despite their physical and social functioning, older individuals tend to not feel old (Yang, 2007).

Interestingly, this research reveals that old age has created an opportunity to reflect with them as they are free and dedicated more for the spiritual well-being. All of my research participants agree that spirituality in their life is increasing, in compared to the past. Most of the elderly expressed that the spiritual gathering and spiritual deeds in old age makes them content in their life. Most of research participants are attending religious activities organized near their community. Those who seek religious activities are widows or widowers, and who do not have children. They also articulate that religious functions increase calmness, satisfaction and joy. It seems that individual's relationship with the sacred can be developed by spirituality. The research also supports research finding that spiritual contact and direction helps to transition from external orientation toward an inner orientation (Chave & Gil, 2014). Some of research participants have described that after they become literally old they begin to focus more on the meaning of life (Wong, 2010). Some of research participants have recognized spirituality with good health by providing an example of *Yoga*. Wong (2010) emphasizes religious beliefs increase better health and increase longevity. Some elders have also stated that when they become old (after 60's), they fear loss and death. I presume that it may be because of a lack of recognition that death is inevitable. The physically weak and widow elders are among them who relate old age with unhappiness and isolation. In addition, most elders rated religious activities are for forgetting the pain brought by loss of family and friends and to focus through spirituality (Holstein, 2010).

One another important learning of this research is that none of my research participants and stakeholders favored the idea of old age homes, for those elderly who have family members and the wealthy. Their understanding is that old age homes/shelters must be only for those who are family-less and vulnerable. They have also stated that family is a durable source of support in old age. In the later life as health, social and financial resources diminish; family and religion remains a durable source of support and comfort (Erikson, 1986). From this, it is evident that spiritual care in the aged needs careful attention.

Conclusion

We find diverse experience and understanding of old age; it varies of age, sex, gender and schooling of my research participants. The educated elderly perceive old age as a triumph, whereas uneducated elderly women perceive it as peril. It is explored that old age is mainly perceives from the array of biological changes and economic dependency to the others. In old age elderly tend more spiritual gathering and fellowship. Fear of insecurity and self-content are the major reasons that drag them to seek spirituality. The societal construction's of old age persons is discriminative and racist like sexist and color to them. Most of the elderly are unhappy that society perceives them as frail, weak and depend. As a result elderly are forgotten and unutilized by the family and society. Also, those who lost spouse and whose children are out of country are struggling with the loneliness

and discrimination. Thus, modern days older persons are looking for dignity and well being from family and society. The concept of old age home is rejected considering it is contextual - only vulnerable and homeless can enjoy it. They prefer for day care center and club where they can share their emotions, feeling and experiences. Finally, more than own elderly are looking changed mindset and behavior from family and society

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