Spirituality: a tool for learning, change and adaptation of elderly in changing Indian family

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Abstract: Globalisation as a worldwide integrating force leads to changes in the social structures, values and mindsets of people. Parents raise their children expecting they would take care of them in old age but the globalised economy has given rise to a materialistic culture in which children migrate to other cities or countries. Parents accept this in the best interest of their children. Loneliness, depression and other mental health issues among the elderly population are common as a result. This paper is an attempt to explore spirituality as an adaptive tool in such situation. Data is collected from 20 elderly respondents living alone or with their spouses in the residential colonies in Delhi/NCR through semi-structured interviews. The data is analysed under the premise of Structuration Theory. It has been seen that spirituality is considered as a coping mechanism and a tool to manage their daily lives in a happier and more peaceful way.

Keywords: globalisation; changing family structure; elderly; living alone; structuration theory; meaning of spirituality; spiritual practices; coping with loneliness; case study.


Biographical notes: Shikha Kumari is a Doctoral Research Scholar in the area of Social Gerontology. Her research addresses the adjustment pattern of elderly living alone or with their spouse in metro cities in India.

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1 Introduction

Every member of society is accorded a role depending upon his or her status in the given society. In the traditional extended joint family, the elderly person was considered as the family head and was respected for his or her wisdom and judgement. The elderly people
were also considered as custodians of the civilisation and are given special status in the society and considered as a valuable asset (Cox and Newton, 1993). The children while taking care of their normal family and social responsibilities were obliged morally to informally provide for the long-term social care of their parents in prime years of their lives. As a result, it was normal for elderly to stay with their brood or large undivided families in a common household. For elderly, this period of life was regarded as a period of ‘rightful dependency’.

According to the World Population Aging Report (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2015), published by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, there were 901 million individuals aged 60 years or over in 2015 around the world, an increase of 48% over the 607 million older persons globally in 2000. By 2030, the number of individuals aged 60 years or over is projected to grow by 56% to 1.4 billion. By 2050, the worldwide population of elderly is anticipated to increase to about 2.1 billion. Further, the proportion of individuals aged 80 years or over is rising considerably faster than the number of elderly. In 2000, there were 71 million individuals aged 80 or over around the world which has increased by 77% to 125 million in 2015. This is projected to increase further by 61% to reach about 202 million in 2030. The population of the oldest old is likely to reach 434 million globally by 2050.

According to India Aging Report (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Population Fund, 2017), globally, individuals aged 60 years or over constitutes around 11.5% (of the aggregate population of 7 billion). By 2050, this proportion is anticipated to increase to around 22% when the elderly will outnumber youngsters (below 15 years old). In Asia all in all, the extent of the elderly is anticipated to increase from 10.5% to 22.4% amid 2012–2050. In East Asia, the extent of the elderly is predicted to be 34.5% by 2050. Japan (41.5%), South Korea (38.9%) and China (34%) are predicted to report the most noteworthy extents of increase in the elderly population in the region by 2050. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations is predicted to have just around 21%population over 60 years by 2050. Inside the SAARC, Bangladesh (22.4%), Bhutan (24.1%), Maldives (31.2%) and Sri Lanka (27.4%) are assessed to overshoot the SAARC normal for the population statistics by 2050.

The proportion of elderly in India has been expanding at high rate recently and the pattern is likely to be similar in the coming decades. The segment of population aged 60 years or over is predicted to increase from 8% in 2015 to 19% in 2050. Before the end of 21st century, the elderly will constitute about 34% of the aggregate population in the nation (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Population Fund, 2017). According to Population Census 2011, there are nearly 104 million elderly persons in India consisting of 53 million females and 51 million males. While larger part of the elderly is still living with their children in India, around one-fifth either live alone or just with the life partner. Those living alone or just with the life partner must deal with their material and physical needs on their own. The extent of older people living alone without a spouse (solo living) has increased over time from 2.4% in 1992–1993 to 5% in 2004–2005 (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Population Fund, 2017). According to NSSO 60th Round Report, 2004, more than 56% of elderly persons live with their spouses and 32% of aged persons live with their children. About 5% of elderly persons live alone while another 4% live with other relations and non-relations.

Migration of younger working age persons from rural areas can have both positive and negative impact on the elderly. On the positive side, this helps in the financial
empowerment of elderly as well by way of contribution from the children which is helpful in meeting the cost of health and social care and running household. The other side is elderly living alone or with just the life partner which is normally examined in terms of social detachment, poverty and distress. Elder individuals like to live in their own homes and community thus ‘ageing in place’ is a preferred choice (The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines ‘ageing in place’ as “the ability to live in one’s own home and community safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Population Fund, 2017)).

The well-being of older persons greatly depends on whom they live with (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Population Fund, 2017), particularly, in developing countries where the elderly have a little resource to the formal system of delivery of social care including other related welfare amenities. Living arrangements for the elderly was not an earnest consideration in India till a few decades ago because families were expected to provide for the care and other support services. However, with nuclear family norms, due forces of urbanisation, migration and globalisation and due to increased life expectancy, due to the advancement of medical services, the conventional living arrangements for elderly has undergone huge transformations. The diminished level of informal social care and support provided by the families means older persons (especially the elderly women) who live alone are likely to be more vulnerable than those who live with the family. Loss of spouse in old age adds further significant vulnerability in later years. Since widowhood adds vulnerability during old age, understanding the proportion of widows among older persons in a society provides a much clearer picture about the status of older persons. Nearly 66% of those over 60 years of age are currently married, 32% are widowed and nearly 3% are separated or divorced (Census of India, 2011 as cited by Elderly in India, 2016 report). The marital status distribution of elderly men is considerably different from women given that 82% of older men as compared to 50% of older women are currently married. The proportion of those who have lost their spouses is much higher among women compared to men with 48% of older women and only 15% of the older men being widowed (probably due to differences in life expectancies). Since women are more likely to be dependent on men for financial security, women face more adversities due to loss of spouse compared to men.

The ‘urban upper and middle-income elderly’ are generally healthier and active and are often able to lead productive and purposeful post-retirement lives. This group also benefit from the migration of their children to better employment opportunities. Many are well-off because of their prosperous children but living alone, they are left alone to fend for themselves. On the other hand, the same segment in rural areas continues to be family-dependent in old age (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Population Fund, 2017). The loneliness was found to be significantly higher among the elderly who were living alone as compared to those who were living with spouses, or couples who were living with the family (Bhatia et al., 2007). Living alone seems to be an important risk factor for poorer mental health (Chou and Chi, 2000) including feelings of loneliness in later life (de Jong Gierveld and van Tilburg, 1999; Sundström and Fransson, 2009) particularly if living alone is caused by widowhood. This association can be explained by the loss of a key relationship in one’s personal life (Lopata, 1979) or the loss of social contacts (Pinquart and Sörensen, 2001). Loneliness itself is a major source of suffering among elderly people (Luanaigh and Lawlor, 2008). Studies have shown, that loneliness leads to increased morbidity, for example, it is associated with greater
numbers of chronic illnesses (Theeke, 2010) such as cardiovascular disease (Sorkin et al., 2002; Thurston and Kubzansky, 2009) and impaired cognitive status (Holmen et al., 1992). Loneliness even leads to an increased risk of mortality (Luo et al., 2012; Tilvis et al., 2011).

2 Ageing and spirituality

Thus, the elderly population at this juncture is faced with serious challenges due to various socio-economics forces (such as population dynamics, urbanisation, migration, globalisation, changes in social norms and values, and changes in primary social institutions like family with increased focus on nuclear family and children, etc.) Having invested all their savings on education, prosperity and the well-being of their children (instead of saving for their rainy days in the old age), the elderly find themselves at the crossroad living alone or with the spouse without any significant institutional support from the welfare system of the State (Sen, 1994). The children may or may not support depending on the willingness and practical constraints of their day-to-day lives. The welfare state, by and large, is unable to pay or provide for delivery of formally organised health and social care services and related support services including personal care services to the elderly. In view of such challenging situation and due to cultural reasons, the elderly usually resorts to spirituality as a tool for coping with the stress and loneliness. Living in their homes all by themselves and faced with a scarcity of resources and meaningful relationship and social stimulation, they take refuge in an easily accessible primary institution of religion to make sense of existential reality. They create spirituality, give it a framework and use it as a coping mechanism for their successful, peaceful, happy, active, creative and healthy ageing with confidence.

In this paper, we would refrain from defining spirituality to maintain neutrality. Rather we shall focus on how ‘spirituality’ (in whatever form) affects the life of elderly people in Indian society. Life course continuously changes and evolve every day; nevertheless, the old age in almost all the world civilisation drive a sizable number of individuals towards spiritualism in the asylum of God. After the call, what spiritualism does for the elderly? Does it meaningfully help in making sense of challenging realities of old age especially in a resource-constrained Indian society?

This paper is an attempt to discover how the elderly living alone or only with the spouse are perceiving the meaning of spirituality and in what ways they are incorporating spirituality in their daily lives as a tool for learning, change and adaptation for their active/creative/successful/peaceful and happy ageing.

3 Previous studies

Ever since the United Nations diverted started considering the issues associated with ageing and proclaimed 1999 as the International Year of Older Person, there has been significant research on exploring the relationship between spirituality and ageing. The combined efforts of researchers worldwide in understanding ‘spirituality’ in relation to disciplines such as psychology, sociology and philosophy has brought a better understanding of the subject on the international dais. Mitchell and Weatherly (2000) have explored and deliberated on the role of visiting church and involvement
in its activities on the well-being of elderly people. Musick et al. (2000) have based their research on the connection of transcendent notions of spirituality and somatic conditions of elderly in the state of Florida. Their research was part of an ongoing study on ‘Spirituality and Adult/Human Development’. Traphagan (2000) has examined from an anthropological angle, the significance of cultural mélange of Africa to comprehend the effect of religious beliefs and practices on the health of an elderly individual. Farther et al. (2000) have probed on reasons of disquietude relating to death among older individuals in the state of Philadelphia which was part of a larger project. The characteristics of transcendental progress during the stages of the life was considered. The last phase of the life was linked to greater spiritual drives/enthusiasm (McFadden, 2000; Chatters et al., 2001; Shlonik et al., 2001; Braam et al., 2001; and Wink and Dillon, 2001, 2002, 2003). The spirituality and well-being are currently in vogue and being practiced as part of medical treatment process. There have been numerous studies indicating a significant relationship between spiritualism and health (Arcury et al., 2000; Contrada et al., 2004).

Several inter-disciplinary types of research suggest that people often resort to spirituality as a mean to face or tackle their pain (Ashby and Lenhart, 1994; Keefe and Dolan, 1986; Keefe et al., 1997; Rosenstiel and Keefe, 1983). Spirituality is believed to give wisdom to an individual which he follows throughout his or her life. It also blocks the adverse thoughts in an individual (Suhail and Chaudhry, 2004). Many researchers have noted that spirituality has an affirmative connection with satisfaction, happiness and high morale. It is believed to have a precautionary effect on several mental disorders (Cohen and Koenig, 2004). It has also been recognised that spirituality has a resilient effect on the rationality and the reactions of an individual and plays a vital role in tailoring the personality of an individual within specific surroundings (O’Neill and Kenny, 1998). Spirituality inspires people to follow positive behaviour and routines (Hadzic, 2011). It aids an individual face the harsh realities and problems of life in a peaceful and rationale manner. It is believed to be a complex and intimate aspect of human upliftment in which an individual gradually progresses to a higher realm of well-being, realisations which help an individual in identifying his or her identity or purpose of existence (Derezotes, 1995). It refers to a bundle of constructive characteristics and beliefs which brings peace and wisdom of one’s life and keep him or her at bay from rigid and ludicrous religious practices (Wulff, 1996). Spirituality is perceived from the thoughts, opinion, rationale and behaviour of an individual which is based on his experience with himself or herself or with the surroundings or with the God (Reed, 1992). With the increase in the population of elderly, it may be imperative for the health and social care professionals such as doctors, nurses, social workers to appreciate their spiritual necessities and work accordingly.

As a summary of the previous western studies mentioned above, we can say that for some spirituality is a transcendental connection, for some, it is based on their religious and other beliefs. Spirituality is linked to greater spiritual drives and enthusiasm, a means of tackling their pain, a way to block adverse thoughts. It also leads to high morale and happiness. It helps in a better adjustment in the elderly surrounding. It also brings peace and wisdom in one’s life.

In India, for some people, spirituality is tied up with past or present deeds of an individual. As per Bhagwadgita, an individual cannot traverse his or her karmas (deeds). He or she has to suffer or be awarded for based on his or her ‘Karmas’. Karmas are the steps towards – moksha (salvation). Good karmas lead to eternity and bad karmas lead to
the continuous cycle of birth and death in different living forms (Chand, 2012). The
Ancient Indian text enlightens numerous set of karmas such as meditation or prayers or
yoga etc. through which an individual can attain moksha. Apparently, the teaching of
Bhagwadgita or that matter any religious text guide an individual on the same path and
only differs in nomenclature.

We can see, all the teachings be it western or Indian philosophy, suggest spirituality
as a way to reduce the suffering in one’s life. These spiritual practices and faith
demonstrate tremendous effects on one’s state of well-being and give strength to bear the
pains.

4 Theoretical framework

Giddens’ (1984) concept of Structuration has been taken as the premise to understand
how the context (absence of children) is involved in the production of action (spiritual
practices). Giddens says human agency and social structure are the two ways of
considering social action, not two separate concepts. Human agency refers to the ability
of humans to act independently and to make their own free choices and structure denote
to the factors as religion, culture, social institutions, gender, and customs etc, which seem
to facilitate and/or restrict the opportunities that the individual has. According to
Giddens, there is a duality of structures, on one side of this dualism is composed of the
actors who undertake actions and interaction in society and on at the same time, rule,
resources and social relationships are also produced and reproduced in those social
interactions. There is a need to conceptualise the existing dualism as a duality- as two
facets of a single phenomenon while trying to understand the spiritual practices and
interpretation of elderly.

The various socio-cultural practices, beliefs, norms, values are associated with
spiritual activities undertaken in the day to day life. In what way, the various processes
going on in the life of elderly influence their spiritual practices are also important to
understand. Older people’s practice of spirituality acts as a mechanism to adapt to this
new social situation in which they are living alone or with the spouse.

Giddens’ theory of structuration asks the question that whether it is individuals or
social forces that shape our social reality. He avoids extreme situations, saying that
though people are not entirely free to choose their own actions, and their knowledge is
limited, they, however, are the agency which reproduces the social structures and leads to
social change. Thus, action and structure cannot be analysed separately, as structures are
created, maintained and changed through actions, while actions are given meaningful
form only through the background of the structure; the line of casualties runs in both
direction making it impossible to determine what is changing what. Under the premise of
structuration theory, we analyse how spirituality helps or restricts the adjustment of the
elderly.

5 Methodology

As this study aimed to acquire some in-depth understanding on meaning of spirituality
and role of spirituality in coping with the lack of immediate family in Delhi/NCR, we
have decided to approach our issue by using case study design as the nature of the study
is exploratory and case study was the most appropriate strategy. Each elderly individual represents a single case study. We conducted this study in Ghaziabad (Crossings republic and Indirapuram), Noida (Sector-93 and sector –62) and Delhi (Vasant Kunj, Malviya Nagar and Dilshaad Garden). The criteria for respondent selection were age (60+), residence (Colonies) and living arrangement (either living alone or only with their spouse). Data has been collected from 20 respondents in Delhi/NCR area by Snowball sampling through semi-structured interviews and analysed under the premise that context is involved in the production of action (Structuration theory).

We incorporated schedule method for data collection that included three methods—questionnaire, observation and semi-structured interviews. A form was developed and administered to find their background characteristics like age, sex, marital status, living arrangement, and duration of stay in the setting, educational attainment, previous and present occupation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the aim to understand the mechanism of spirituality in their coping process against the absence of their children and loss of the spouse. We had developed an interview guide consisting of questions on the meaning of spirituality, the implication of spirituality on their feelings, coping with the absence of the spouse (in case of widows), coping with the absence of children, the time they spent on spiritual practices. We also observed the type and interior of the house, things present in the house. The appearance and behaviour of the respondent and overall house environment were also considered.

6 Findings

Background characteristics of the elderly is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristics</th>
<th>No of older people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1 Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young old (60–69)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old old (70–79)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oldest old (80 years and above)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2 Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4 Living arrangement</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With spouse</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1  Background characteristics of respondents (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background characteristics</th>
<th>No of older people</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 Duration of living in this arrangement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–2 years</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–4 years</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6 years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 6 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Place of residency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghaziabad</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delhi</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noida</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Educational attainment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher Secondary</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Graduate</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Previous occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised sector</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unorganised sector</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Current occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not working</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised sector</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unorganised sector</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Economic dependency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully independent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent on spouse</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully dependent on children</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially dependent on children</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partially dependent on relatives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 General health status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In good health</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional illness</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic illness</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We divide our findings into two parts

- **Spirituality perceived by older people:** It is explored on the basis of the meanings of spirituality for older people and their spiritual beliefs.

- **Spirituality as a tool for learning, change and adaptation:** It is accessed on the basis of the older persons’ practices and experiences of spirituality.

## 7 Meaning of spirituality

There are various conceptualisations of spirituality in the literature. According to Canda and Furman study (Canda and Furman, 1999, cited in Pandya, 2010), the Gnostic view proposes that spirituality is about divinity and divine beings and the transcendental view consists of explanations in spirituality as to asking major existential questions. The theological understanding of spirituality proposes a set of beliefs in a divine being and manifestations of those beliefs (McGinn, 1993; Nakasame, 2008 as cited by Pandya, 2010). Non-religious spiritual propensity proposes that religion is not a fundamental belief system, but that all features of religiosity can take non-religious spiritual forms (Frey et al., 2005, cited in Pandya, 2010). According to Roof (1993, cited in Pandya, 2010), the sociological perspective on spirituality is congruent with existential orientations and described as giving expressions to our inner beliefs – a power that comes from knowing our deepest self/selves and what is it that is sacred to us. The psychological perspective of spirituality posits that characteristics of spirituality within the domain of well-being (Pargament and Mahoney, 2002, cited in Pandya, 2010). The social psychology perspective on spirituality is the view of spirituality/ religiosity (mostly the terms in this vein of literature are used interchangeably) as a coping mechanism (Pargament, 1997, cited in Pandya, 2010). Surreal conceptions of spirituality comprise of discourses on an unknown realm – an outer world that is beyond self (Cox, 1996; Shea, 2000, cited in Pandya, 2010). The syncretic and amalgamated view, on the other hand, proposes that spirituality is about divinity and about self and tied to attributes of personal meanings that have a positivistic characteristic (Shea, 2000, cited in Pandya, 2010). Further, Frey et al. (2005) study (cited by Pandya, 2010) have conceptualised spirituality as a congruent meaningful life scheme and high functional self-efficacy beliefs that synergistically promote personal agency.

## 8 Spiritual beliefs

Nine types of spiritual beliefs grouped under four categorisation sextants in literature as self-Absolute Self-synergy (Ghosh, 1954; Stewart, 2000, cited in Pandya, 2010), self-divine connections consist of the beliefs of self-world exchange and self-ethical self-mirroring were discerned. Self-Divine Connections include self as part of Divine, duality between self-divine and actualising alignments as a core. Self-world exchange includes the beliefs of the divine as predisposing all existence and harmonising social exchange presupposing divinity in all beings. Self-absolute self-synergy comprises of non-duality and supramental realisation. Self-ethical self-mirroring consists of beliefs as spirituality as a yardstick for deontological ethics and, spirituality as a yardstick for teleological ethics (Pandya, 2010).
From our case studies, we have gathered the following categories of the conceptualisation of spirituality:

1. **Spirituality as a belief in something bigger than self**

   In this theme, spirituality is perceived as a connection with something bigger than themselves. This bigger entity was God for some respondents, Guru (teacher) for some and for some it was the universe or supernatural powers. They quoted their beliefs as:
   
   “For me, spirituality is the belief that there is something greater than me that looks after me”.
   
   “For me, spirituality is letting the Almighty decide what’s best and his deeds are unquestionable.”
   
   “I feel connected to the universe. We all are energetic beings. We all are one.”
   
   “For me, spirituality is following my Guru’s words and teachings.”
   
   “I feel spirituality is faith much greater than ourselves and nothing could go wrong if you believe in the One”

2. **Spirituality as a way of living**:

   “Spirituality for me is something that is found deep within oneself and it transforms your way of loving, caring or relating to people around you.”
   
   “Spirituality cannot be found in temple, church or any religious institutions but it can be sensed in the smile of a kid when you make him or her happy.”
   
   “For me, it is simple living and high thinking. I believe spirituality makes me stand up for my principles like loving, helping and caring for others.
   
   “Spirituality for me is connecting to my inner genius. Improving myself daily, being patient with self and others.”
   
   “Living a peaceful and content life with non-violence is the crux of spirituality.”
   
   “For me, spirituality is performing my daily chores with utmost sincerity”

8.1 **Spirituality as a tool for learning, change and adaptation**

*Spiritual practices*

Combining conceptualisations given by Frey et al. (2005, cited in Pandya, 2010) revealed the following conceptualisations on spiritual practices – practices amounted to altruistic/generous notions in dealing with others (aspects of unconditional love and forgiveness); sense of positive coping with life’s stressors (detachment and practical disengagement); followed by maintaining support for self by retaining relationships; realistically accepting the ageing process along with the ideas pertaining to death and dying; and showing a penchant for positive and productive ageing.

*Experiences of spirituality*

According to Pandya (2010), the spiritual experiences of older people are divine Intervention in the face of adversities, absolute Being as a constant soul companion, visualising White Light at the time of Meditation/Prayer, magicalism (chamatkaar) or getting the unexpected, rendezvous with the universal being in near death experiences.
From our case studies, the following categories emerged on spirituality as tool for learning, change and adaptation

1. **Spirituality as a process of re-engagement**

   **Case study-1**
   
   “Female, 75 years old, housewife, living with the spouse in a comfortable and well-furnished apartment, says both of her sons stay abroad. They seldom call them. They would crave to hear their sons, daughter-in-laws and grandchildren voices and whenever they call they were always in a hurry. They were not able to talk to them properly. She had become very sad, depressed and negative over this and in a way stopped living her life. She did only those things that were needed for her survival. She said, ‘My husband was so worried about me then. Fortunately, I met a friend of mine at that time around. She was very happy despite being a widow and living alone. She told me, instead of being negative about her situation, she utilises all her time in doing various religious and spiritual activities as meditation, yoga, reading, delivering a talk, discussions, listening to various program, worship, being a part of gatherings etc. She took me along to all the programs she attended and I found peace and enjoyment in them. I started practicing all those things regularly and it has a very long-term positive effect on me. I use to watch movies, visit friends, talk to my relatives over the phone but it has a very brief positive impact on me’. She continues to do these among other activities but dhyana (meditation) is something that she does and enjoy doing the most and it has become a very strong practice for her. This has pulled her out of that negative situation she was in before and she has started living her life again. She has so much to do now a day. She does not have time to think why her children and grandchildren have not called her. Her children’s behaviour is more or less the same but it does not bother her much anymore. Her husband is also very happy to see this transformation and started joining her to various programs. She has started living again and does not feel lonely any longer. She says, she is very happy with herself.”

   **Case study-2**
   
   “Male 70, living with a spouse, retired IAS officer, financially secured, intellectual says, he was busy 24 X 7 in his job, he used to meet many people on a daily basis but after retirement, suddenly, there was a void. He used to miss his job, engagements, meeting people, the sense of authority accorded to him by his job. He loved reading from a young age and he did not get much time to read when he was on the job due to his various commitments. He says, he realised this and took up his hobby again and after retirement, he has all the time to do what he likes to do and now most of his time is devoted to reading. He likes to read anything and everything but reading text on spirituality is something he relishes the most. A part of his daily reading routine includes reading text on spirituality and he delivers lectures on Srimad Bhagavad Gita (a holy book of Hindus) in his residential society. He along with his wife attends most of the spiritual programs in their city. It leads them to travel and meet new people, that they enjoy this so much. He says, ‘Spirituality gives me needed food for thought, something to discuss, something to look forward to, something I enjoy practicing and talking about. Practicing spirituality is a process of exploration and re-discovering of self for him.’”

2. **Spirituality as support system/coping mechanism**

   **Case study-3**
   
   “Female, age 69, widow of five years, financially dependent on husband’s pension, mother of 3 sons, living alone but in close proximity of her children
S. Kumari and A. Sharma

house says, initially they (she and her husband) used to stay with one of her sons in a 4-bedroom apartment and she continued to live with her son after the death of her husband and looked after the house and her grandchildren. Slowly things began to change, her daughter-in-law started misbehaving with her, shouting at her that led her to separate from them. One of her sons arranged this accommodation near his home in his shop, where she is living now. Her home consisted of one room and the room has one bed, one small temple, one TV, one slab for cooking, a fridge and a small bathroom at one corner. There is no way for the cooking smoke to leave the place if she has not opened the main door but she has no complaints about it. She says, when she started living alone, she had ample time left in the day. She did not have anything to do, no one expected her to be around except her few friends. Her children live nearby but do not come to visit her frequently. She has always been a religious lady so, she has accepted her situation as God’s will. She says this belief has given her strength to live her life. She has the whole day ahead of her and instead of letting the loneliness crawl on her, she does Bhajan-Kirtan (devotional song), meditation and worship. Her day starts at 6 in the morning and till 9 am she is done with all the household chores. She watches spiritual programs and channels on television. Every day in the evening she goes to a nearby temple to listen and sing devotional songs. She goes to religious tour and attends programs with her friends. She believes God is there to take care of her and shares, as per Hinduism, we all are souls and all of us has come alone and will go alone. She says, she has lived a very happy life and does not have any regret. Her belief in God has given her strength to cope with her situation.”

In this case, the belief that God is taking care of her has given her strength to live alone. Her present situation in which she is living alone has given rise to her spiritual beliefs. She has devoted herself to the service of God.

Case study-4

“Female, age 75, widow of last one year, lives alone in a flat in Ghaziabad. Her children settled abroad. They regularly send her money and come to visit her. She has one full-time and one-part time maid to look after her. One car along with a driver is always at her disposal. Her children want her to come with them but she does not want to go to any of her children. She says, she is never alone, she feels the presence of her husband in the present house. The feeling of her husband presence makes her go by her day. She says her husband is her soulmate and soul is primary, the body is just a clothing for the soul. She believes, her husband has only changed his clothing but his soul is here at this house with her, looking after her, caring for her, the way he always does. Instead of waiting for her children or relatives calls or theirs visits, she passes her time by talking to her husband who died a year ago. This makes her happy and contented in the last turn of her life. She has a sense of being loved and cared by her husband. This belief that her husband’s soul is around her, in the same house takes away the loneliness from her mind and heart.”

Case study-5

“Female, 65 years, a widow from last two years. After her husband’s death, she lives alone within the close proximity to her son’s place. She is financially very well-off. Very fondly, she remembers her past days, when her husband praised her for clothes, makeup, smile and all this made him happy too. Her husband always desired her to be like this. She treats this as her husband’s wish. Now after his death also she dresses the same way like old times. It makes her feel happy and also somewhere in her mind she believes her husband is also happy...
seeing her in this way. She keeps herself busy and happy by reading, social
works, cooking etc. for her husband. She believes that her happiness brings
happiness to her husband’s soul, is the biggest factor in her adjustment with the
old age.”

The above two cases are similar wherein both the ladies they are spiritually connected to
their husband. They feel them around and strongly believe that their happiness or sadness
matters to them. By being unhappy, they would also make their husband sad wherever
they might be. This has helped fight loneliness and stay happy in the toughest phase of
their life.

3 Spirituality as an active involvement in life

Case study-6

“Male, age-78, married, looks after her wife. Ever since his earlier days, he was
involved in various community services such as teaching children at the slum,
organising blood donation camps etc. Nowadays, he takes care of his bedridden
wife. He says, ‘I love serving others, since I am old I had troubles going to a
distance to do something. So, I, now have this opportunity to serve my wife at
my own home. She needs help, she is weak, frail, unable to do her own chores.
She is fully dependent on me’. He has employed a full-time maid to help him
take care of his wife but he, himself looks after everything to make sure his
wife is getting as much comfort as she can. He proudly declares, now, I am
serving my wife and fulfilling my destiny as I believe I am made for serving
others.”

Case study-7

“Male, 67 years old, widower of four years. He lives adjacent to his daughter’s
home. He says, he was very depressed when his wife left for her heavenly
abode. It was a rough time for him. Loneliness and sadness crawled on him.
He and his wife did everything together be it going somewhere or spending
time at home and suddenly he has to do everything alone, he often wondered
why his wife left him alone? Since they (he and his wife) were living adjacent
to his daughter’s home, they took care of their only granddaughter, when their
daughter and son-in-law go to work. He said, “I use to think why I am still
alive? He often thought about the reason for being still alive. He now believes
that he is alive to take care of his grand-daughter as his daughter needs him.
This belief that he is needed gave him a purpose to live. With pride, he says,
‘now my days revolve around my granddaughter’. I do everything for her from
the time she goes to school until the time she sleeps. I feed drop her at the bus-
stand, pick her up in the afternoon, feed her, put her to sleep, help her in
studies, take her to play etc.”. In the evening, he also looks after the children of
his residential society while they play. This purpose of existence has given him
the strength to adjust to the loss of his spouse.”

The above two cases are the classic examples of current urban societal structure. In old
age, when someone loses a spouse, they have to suffer loneliness. They sometimes get
lost and try to find their purpose of existence. They feel they are no more required in the
world. In the above two cases, both the individuals have found a purpose or a duty they
had to take care. This purpose of existence helps them to tackle loneliness and adjust
through the old age. This ‘purpose’ gives them a new strength and energy and fulfilling
the ‘purpose’ becomes their life. This spiritual belief of having a purpose in their lives
allows them to live happier and fulfilling lives.
4  Spirituality as a shift in thought process

Case study-8

“Female, 69 years, married, suffering from arthritis and heart disease from the past 2.5 years, she is looked after by Husband, who is aged 75 years. She shares her philosophy with a sparkle in her eyes. She says God chooses a few people whom he feels as his own. Like everybody, God also has some problems, troubles and worries. He has to take care of everyone. So, he chooses a few people to share his pain and the pain from which she is suffering is not her but it is his. He has shared this with me. She says she is God’s favourite. She says, ‘I do not want to go to the hospital in my last days. I have told my husband not to put me in the hospital in my last days. I do not want to have any interventions to keep this physical body alive. I have accepted that my body will be in pain but I want my soul to go peacefully. The ultimate aim is to be happy, forget the bodily pain.’”

It was a completely different way of looking illness. This believes that she is a chosen one, detach her from her pain and give her strength to cope with the illness. Pain is still there but she has accommodated the pain as it will stay.

Case study-9

“Female, 81 years of age, widow, living alone. Her son lives in the same residential society but in a different block with his wife and two children. After marriage, her son has started living separately and she used to stay at this apartment with her husband, who died a natural death three years back. She says, ‘my son shouts at me so much. I used to be sad and depressed all the time. I felt like a failure as a mother. I terribly missed my husband so I started reading his books as he was very fond of reading. I also use to read but not as voraciously as him. While going through his books, I stumbled upon a text that said anger is a pathological situation of mind. If your spouse, son or someone at your house shouts, who is in physical pain, what would you do? Would you go near him/her and give them medicine, ask them what he or she needs or would you feel bad that he is shouting? We understand he or she is shouting because of the bodily pain we do not shout at them as its body’s pathological state. It was an eye-opening moment for me. I have started treating him as a soul, who has some problem/disease, that is why he is reacting like this as he shouts and gets angry irrespective of what I do. I realised his anger is due to the pathological situation of his soul. I have started treating his anger as a result of his soul’s illness and accepted him. I do not feel bad, negative anymore because of his behaviour as I believe he is not shouting at me because of something I did or did not do but because of his own situation. His behaviour is also improved with the time.’”

5  Spirituality as a belief in Karma

Case study-10

“Female, 69 years old, lives with her husband. All of her children reside in foreign countries and sends them money. She says she believes that their karma is connected. If she feels bad, do something bad then it will eventually come down to her children and she says she loves them enough not to cause them any harm. So, she leads her life as directed by the Hindu texts. She says, ‘I have to maintain my relationship with my children on a distant mode. Maybe I have done something to them in my previous birth that is why they are not living with us. If I accept this in this birth, I will not have to carry this baggage of disappointment or hurt to my next birth. Thinking like this gives me a different kind of energy and I try not to get disappointed or hurt by my children not
being near me. She feels the situation in which she is today, is due to her past karma. She says, the pain she is going through, the loneliness she feels is because she did something bad in her previous birth. She is trying to rectify it by worshiping the God, behaving well with her son and daughter-in-law.”

**Case study-11**

“Male, 68 years, married. He lives with his wife, age 62 years who strongly believe in destiny. They have two sons and three daughters, all well placed in the society but none of them resides in the same city with him. He says, ‘we are accustomed to living this way now. Initially, I was depressed but everyone has their own destiny. Our children are at the place they were supposed to be as per their destiny. My destiny makes me be here. They cannot do anything about it. I am living my life according to my destiny’. He is practicing spirituality for a long time. He says’, what I love the most about spirituality is, I access it at my own will. See, to overcome any situation whatever institutional support is required is provided with a control mechanism for example if you go to a doctor for any mental health problem, he will prescribe a medicine, its dosages, you are required to visit the doctors again and again if you need any changes in the medicine. The beauty of practising spirituality is anyone can get into it as and when one like. I decide the amount of time I am comfortable in investing in spiritual practices, what spiritual activities as yoga, dhyana (meditation), pranayama (the regulation of the breath through certain techniques and exercises) etc. are suitable for me, how I want to practice such activities is all as per my will and convenience, it also gives me certain independence over the institutional too.”

Karma theory helps the elderly to understand their situation better and take positive actions too. They believe whatever they have done good or bad, in this life or in the past lives have led them to this situation. It’s the destiny as well as the karmic effects of the past too and if they respond positively to it, it will not only make them happy in this life but also in coming lives too. This notion of karma in Indian spirituality is getting popular day by day.

**8.2 Interpretation/analysis of case studies**

Spirituality has taught the elderly new ways of life to accommodate in a new situation. The process of accommodation is a continuous/ongoing process of learning. They are evolving themselves with this process of learning and enjoying it as well. They do not feel that they are sitting idly and going through their life but they take it as another phase of life accompanied by loneliness but they overcome it by practicing spirituality and they are accepting it. Elderly who are sitting in Dhyan is linking his body to self. It is an exploration of self. While exploring his or her self, he or she identifies the positive characteristics of him or herself. Through this positive identification, the elderly create a new type of actions and interactions that help them to modify their relationships with self and others (refer case- 1 and 2). They start considering everyone as soul (case study-9). It gives a positive shift to the thought process and creates new linkages. Acceptance leads them to feel they too have an aim in their life that is “to achieve something new”. This something new can be exploration of self, re-engagement (refer case study1 and 2), active ageing (refer case study 6 and 7) etc. Spirituality is facilitating them with positive thoughts, acceptance and making them accommodate new ways of learning (refer case study-8 and 9). The elderly have created their own spiritual thoughts and practices that have emerged from their own belief system (refer case study 4 and 5). Their inclination
towards the spiritual beliefs and practices increases with the duration of stay, they were living in the set-up. They have more time to think about their purpose, destiny and where they are going in life (refer case study-6 and 7). As we can see, Spirituality helps in understanding any adverse incident/event in the life of an individual (Park et al., 2001). It helps in deciphering the real cause for the occurrence of the event and considering as an opening of a door of opportunities with greater insights about self (Pryds et al., 2000). Some feel that service of God will lead them to attain salvation, while for some serving the humanity is the path of Moksha. Studies also reveal that people who claim to have positive connections with the God are not likely to suffer from problems of loneliness, anxiety, physical and mental disorders (Maynard et al., 2001; Johnson and Spilka, 1991). It has also been seen in our study that there is no clear demarcation between religion and spirituality, although their practices are more inclined towards spirituality. They have chosen the path of spirituality through their religious beliefs. Spirituality is perceived as a personal connection with something bigger than themselves be it God, supernatural powers, Guru or their higher self while some believe in the notion that “they have come alone and they will go alone”. So, instead of feeling sad, frustrated for their absence of children, they have formed a happier relationship with themselves (refer case study-3). People who believe in the existence of God consider it as message/lesson from God (Emmons, 1999). This connection with God can make their life much easier with abundant emotional comfort and support and fill them with positive energy and strength even during adverse situations and discover their true purpose of life (Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1990). They do not feel grudges against people; instead, they try to do good karma to attain salvation. They treat their present situation as a karmic effect and completing their duties will ease out the burden of their soul (refer case study-10 and 11). Such thought process changes their approach towards taking care of their ailing and bed ridden spouse (refer case study-6) and takes the situation positively (refer case-7). Initially, they have regarded performing their duties as a burden but now they are doing them happily. Spirituality helps in the positive transformation of elderly (refer case-8). As said by Ardelt et al. (2008), Spirituality provides a framework that guides individuals through painful and joyful events, often facilitating positive discoveries among negative experiences (Ardelt et al., 2008 as cited by Manning, 2012). They are shifting towards non-materialistic dimension from the materialistic dimension (refer case study-3). They are not concentrating on how their body looks but how they look and feel from inside. They just want to be their soul to happy, other things do not matter that much. They are moving towards inner transformation, giving a new identity to their soul where their bodily complaints, familial complaints and societal complaints do not matter and they are viewing themselves in a positive form (refer case study-1). Spirituality has also helped them to lower their anxiety of death and last rites.

9 Conclusion

Elderly are engaged in spiritual practices in their day to day life to derive their meaning and purpose, exploring their selves, looking to the answers of fundamental questions of their lives by the means of spirituality. Moss (2005), support this conclusion saying Spirituality also acts as a ‘shorthand’ way of asking the fundamental questions about ourselves as what is important to us, what gives us a sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. Although their practices are different but they all believe in spirituality as a
meaningful engagement leading towards their active and happy ageing. The process of spirituality starts from the exploration of self. Among other means of facilitation, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is widely used. ICT and media are facilitating a number of programs and apps to help them with their spiritual practice. It makes spirituality easily accessible for the elderly at their own will and does not cost them any financial burden and they have ample time left for themselves and practicing spiritual activities in that time make them positive. These programs are helping them to mature their spirituality. If they have any questions about their sufferings, their situations, their loneliness, these talks or the content of such programs immediately answer their queries. They find their answers of why something is happening to them in these spiritual talks and activities and overcome their negative situations easily. They are exploring spirituality to learn something new, to re-engage themselves. They have differentiated their happiness from their existing situation. Now they are moving towards active ageing and exploring their inner happiness.

As said by Giddens’ Structure is drawn upon by the actor in the day to day life experience. In sociology, the family is a structure and elderly’s have created a new form of family structure with the help of spirituality. The structure that is emerging here is a new type of family consisting of one or two persons. They are living in a form of family and performing all the rituals of the family. Either the family members are present in the virtual form or in a distant mode. In this structure, the actors (elderly) are interacting through spirituality to explore new ways of life and to create new types of interaction patterns. According to Giddens’ agency is intimately connected with power. In fact, one of the defining characteristics of agency is power. In this given situation elderly (actor) is becoming and acting as an agency (family) with the power of spirituality and evolving a new family structure. According to Gidden’s dualism, in this structure of the virtual family, elderly are dealing with two kinds of things. First, they are maintaining the structure (virtual family or family in a distant mode) without family members and second, as an agency, they are evolving new patterns of interaction with their family members and others to keep themselves happy in this structure.

The major problem with the target group was loneliness that created anxiety and depression and they overcome it, by practicing spirituality. They have departed from their body concept to soul concept that has given them a new meaning for their life, they have accepted their situation and loneliness is not a problem for them anymore. Spirituality has made the elderly to shift in the new ageing era. Physical body and materialistic things are not that important to them anymore but soul and happiness are.

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A tool for learning, change and adaptation of elderly in changing Indian family


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