

# Elder Abuse: A Curse of Life

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## ABSTRACT

*In India, elder abuse has been increasing as proof of break of Indian family system, values, loss of respect, love and bonding between the family member, parents and offsprings. In fact, it goes unreported more often and remains largely hidden from the public for various reasons linked to culture and circumstance. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to explore the nature of elder abuse, extent of abuse and the reasons which contribute to elder abuse. The study reveals that out of total 210 respondents, only 72 respondents who reported that they have been abused by their family members. Among the abused, the majority of the respondents are verbally abused by their family members. But it is found that verbal abuse has been directed more towards women than men. The study also significantly reveals that economic dependence, poverty and health problems are the main reasons for abuse.*

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## 1. Introduction

Elder abuse is now recognized as a significant social problem throughout the world. In India, as a subject of serious academic inquiry and concerted action, it has begun to receive attention only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when the rapidly growing numbers and proportions of elder persons in the populations are gradually being acknowledged as a significant group having rights, requiring care, services and programs for living a life of dignity and respect (Shankardass, 2003). It is now widely recognized that elder abuse is a problem in India (Anetzberger, 1997; Baldrige & Brown, 2000; Baldrige, 2001; Barton, 2012; Bureau of Indian Affairs, 2013; Smyer & Clark, 2011; White 2004). For years ago, it was believed that elder abuse was not a problem in India. Infact, it may be that elder abuse actually goes unreported more often and remains largely hidden from the public for a various reasons linked to culture and circumstance. Cultural reasons linked to elder abuse generally evolve around the complicated factors of pride, fear, shame and the need to protect one's family (LTSS, 2015). Although family ties in India are still strong and majority of the old live with family members, nevertheless, the position of an increasing number of older persons is becoming vulnerable. In the present scenario, they cannot take it for granted that their children will look after them when they need care in their old age in view of longevity, which implies an extended period of dependency (Reddy, 2002; Tareque *et al.*, 2008). Increasing industrialization, modernization, urbanization, westernization, rapid changes in the family structure and functions, change in the value system, migration of youth for better economic opportunities and livelihood, increasing participation of women in income generating activities, all are the direct and indirect factors responsible for the grater occurrences of elder abuse.

Moreover, increasing individualism in youths has resulted in asserting for individual self, and they are in great hurry to have every source of pleasure ignoring other's consideration totally. This life style does not allow them to care for the personal, physical and emotional needs of elders. Such attitudes may lead to indignity, indifference, and disregard, lack of care, psychological torture and unlimited hostility towards

elders (Jain, 2008). There are estimates that elder abuse in India, in all communities and across all sections of the society, is on the rise. Increasing media coverage, stories field by the journalist, news paper clippings, T. V. coverage in serials, discussions and news, films, literary stories, some published autobiographical account, small scale qualitative studies, evidence of growing literature and research on elder abuse, NGO activities related to elder abuse, all depict abuse of elder persons in some form or the other. There is also now growing evidence from crime records and old age homes which indicates that elder abuse is no longer a hushed affair (Shankardass, 2008). Therefore an attempt has been made in this paper to explore the nature of elder abuse, extent of abuse and the reasons which contribute to elder abuse in Assam.

## 2. Field and Methodology of the Study

The field of the present study comprises two villages namely Kapahua and Barbam No. 1 villages of Tengakhat circle located in Dibrugarh district of Assam. Keeping in view the objectives of the study utmost care was taken while selecting the respondents, so that it fulfils the objectives of the study. Initially, a pilot study was conducted in the two selected villages to prepare the list of people aged 60 years and above. A total of 210 aged people i.e., 118 aged women and 92 aged men were enumerated in the two villages. The Kapahua village has 102 aged persons those are 60 years and above, of which, 46 are males and 56 are females, as per 2011 census. The Barbam No. 1 village has 108 aged persons those are 60 years and above, of which, 46 are males and 62 are females, as per 2011 census. For this study all of them i.e., 210 respondents were taken out of which 102 respondents from Kapahua village and 108 respondents from Barbam no.1 village by employing census survey method.

The present study is a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative approach. For qualitative approach, structured interview schedule with both open and close questions has been used to collect primary data. Moreover, in depth interview, focus group discussion has also been conducted with the respondents. On the other hand secondary data were

collected from census report, various books, journals, official reports and records, newspapers and internet etc. The collected data have been classified and tabulated in a systematic manner and objective wise analysis has been done. The study employs exploratory research design to examine the problem under study.

**3. Elder Abuse: A Curse of Life**

It is evident from the table 1 that out of 210 respondents, 92 (43.8 percent) are male and 118 (56.2%) are female. The study also reveals that more number of female elderly has been faced abuse as 42 or 58.33 percent of them reported to have suffered from abuse while the corresponding figure for male elderly is 30 or 41.67 percent only. The findings of the study are corroborated by the findings of Tarreque *et al.*, (2008) wherein it shows that because of the life expectancy for females is higher than that of males; therefore, they are more subjected to abuse and live their later lives in isolation, widowhood and ill-health.

As regards to the age of respondents, it depicts that majority of the abused elderly belongs to the age group

between 80-84 years, followed by 65-69 years. This finding is contradictory to the findings of the other investigators who mention that the abused elderly were young old between 60–69 years Tarreque *et al.*, (2008).

In regards to marital status it is evident from the data that majority of the respondents are in the category of married i.e. 135 or 64.29 percent. The study also depicts that widows are more vulnerable to abuse. Similar findings have also been observed by Achhhapa *et al.*, (2016) and Tarreque *et al.*, (2008).

Data on educational qualification reveals that majority of the respondents are found to be illiterate (83 or 39.52%). The study also reveals that majority of i.e., 29.05 percent female elderly are found to be illiterate as compared to 10.48 percent male elderly. The study depicts that the elderly who are illiterate have been more vulnerable to abuse than the elderly who are literate.

**Table 1: Socio-Economic background of the Respondents**

Socio-Economic Characteristics		Sex		Total
		Male	Female	
<b>Sex</b>		92 (43.8%)	118 (56.2%)	210 (100%)
<b>Age</b>				
i.	60-64	17 (8.1%)	47 (22.4%)	64 (30.5%)
ii.	65-69	31 (14.8%)	41 (19.5%)	72 (34.3%)
iii.	70-74	18 (8.6%)	15 (7.1%)	33 (15.7%)
iv.	75-79	12 (5.7%)	8 (3.8%)	20 (9.5%)
v.	80-84	8 (3.8%)	5 (2.4%)	13 (6.2%)
vi.	Above 85	6 (2.9%)	2 (1.00%)	8 (3.8%)
Total		92 (43.8%)	118 (56.2%)	210 (100%)
<b>Marital Status</b>				
i.	Married	74 (35.24%)	61 (29.05%)	135 (64.29%)
ii.	Unmarried	1 (0.48%)	9 (4.29%)	10 (4.76%)
iii.	Widow	17 (8.10%)	48 (22.85%)	65 (30.95%)
Total		92(43.8%)	118 (56.2%)	210 (100%)
<b>Educational Qualification</b>				
i.	Illiterate	22 (10.48%)	61 (29.05%)	83 (39.52%)
ii.	Read upto Primary Level	35 (16.67%)	41 (19.52%)	76 (36.19%)
iii.	Read upto Higher Secondary Level	3 (1.43%)	3 (1.43%)	6 (2.86%)
iv.	Read upto Graduate	2 (0.95%)	2 (0.95%)	4 (1.90%)
Total		92 (43.8%)	118 (56.2%)	210 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

In this study, the acts such as using bad words and scolding of any family members on aged person have been considered as verbal abuse. Physical abuse is an act carried out by any family member on elderly person with an intention or

perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury (Rao, 2007). The following table shows the self stated abuse and causes behind elder abuse.

Table 2: Nature, Type and Reasons for Elder Abuse in Assam

1.	Physical Abuse	Male	Female	Total
i.	Beating	1 (1.39%)	3 (4.17%)	4 (5.56%)
Total		1 (1.39%)	3 (4.17%)	4 (5.56%)
2.	Verbal Abuse	Male	Female	Total
i.	Scolding	27 (37.5%)	38 (52.78%)	65 (90.28%)
ii.	Using Bad Words	2 (2.78%)	1 (1.39%)	3 (4.17%)
Total		29 (40.28%)	39 (54.17%)	68 (94.44%)
3.	Abuser	Male	Female	Total
i.	Spouse	2 (2.78%)	2 (2.78%)	4 (5.56%)
ii.	Son	14 (19.44%)	13 (18.06%)	27 (37.5%)
iii.	Daughter-in-law	12 (16.67%)	18 (25%)	30 (41.67%)
iv.	Daughter	1 (1.39%)	00 (0.00%)	1 (1.39%)
v.	Sister-in-law	0 (0.00%)	4 (4.56%)	4 (4.56%)
vi.	Siblings	0 (0.00%)	2 (2.78%)	2 (2.78%)
vii.	Nephew	1 (1.39%)	3 (4.17%)	4 (5.56%)
Total		30 (41.67%)	42(58.33%)	72 (100%)
4.	Reasons for Abuse	Male	Female	Total
i.	Poverty	8 (11.11%)	10 (13.89%)	18 (25%)
ii.	Economic Dependence	10 (13.89%)	15 (20.83%)	25 (34.72%)
iii.	Money	4 (5.56%)	3 (4.16%)	7 (9.72%)
iv.	Burden	2 (2.78%)	5 (6.94%)	7 (9.72%)
<i>Cont'd...</i>				<i>Cont'd...</i>
v.	Health Problems	6 (8.33%)	9 (12.5%)	15 (20.83%)
Total		30 (41.67%)	42 (58.33%)	72 (100.00%)

Source: Field Survey

Note: Of the total 210 samples, the statistical analysis has been done in this table for only those 72 respondents who have been abused by their family member.

Data on table no 1 reveals that of the total study sample i.e. 210, only 72 (34.28 percent) respondents reported abuse by their family member. While 68 (94.44 percent) of the elderly reported being exposed to verbal abuse, 4 (4.56 percent) mentioned physical abuse by their family members. Variations in the type of abuse by gender have also been observed. It is found that both verbal and physical abuse have been more often directed toward aged women than aged men. The findings of earlier studies by Punia & Sharma (1987); Srinivas & Vijailakshmi (2001); Rao (2007) concur with these findings. Among the verbal abuse, 65 (90.28 percent) respondents have been abused almost always in the form of scolding, of whom, majority (38 or 52.78 percent) are aged women. 3 respondents (4.17 percent) have been abused in the form of using bad words. Of these, aged men outnumber aged men. The remaining 4 or 5.56 percent respondents report use of physical abuse in the form of beating against them by their family members. However, physical abuse towards aged women (3 or 4.17 percent) is found to be comparatively higher than aged men (1 or 1.39 percent). Most of the aged women face verbal abuse, i.e. scolding both by their son and daughter-in-law and physical abuse, i.e. beating by their husband and brother. Among the aged men, majority of them face verbal abuse that is scolding and using bad words by their son and daughter-in-law, daughter, wife, nephew and siblings.

As regards the abusers, the results of the present study indicated that most of the abusers were daughter-in-law (30 or 41.67 percent), followed by son (27 or 37.5 percent), spouse (4 or 5.56 percent), sister-in-law (4 or 5.56 percent), nephew (4 or 5.56), siblings (2 or 2.78%) and daughter (1 or 1.39%). The study reveals that most of the aged have been abused by their sons and daughters-in-law.

Regarding the reasons for abuse, it is evident from the study that most of the aged have been faced abuse due to their economic dependence (25 or 34.72 percent), poverty (18 or 25%), health problems (15 or 20.83%), money (7 or 9.72%) and considered as burden (7 or 9.72%) by their family members. The study reveals that most of the aged men have been abused because of their economic dependence on their family members. However, the reasons behind the abuse of aged women were mainly their economic dependence, poverty, burden and their physical illness.

A glimpse of abuse and the reasons of abuse can be had from the selected stories of elderly persons residing in Assam, being presented in the subsequent paragraph.

Mrs. H is 65 years old married woman, belong to OBC category. Her family comprise of her husband, one married son and daughter-in-law, one 2 years old grandson. She is illiterate and has no income of her own. She and her husband both are economically dependent on their only son who works as a home guard. She said that a few years after the marriage of her son, she has to face both physical and verbal abuse from her daughter-in-law. She stated that "My daughter-in-law very rude to me when I am not doing household works. No respect is given to me by my daughter-in-law. Sometime my son also did not treat me well and abuse me verbally. Therefore, she felt very sad at the behavior of her own son".

Mr. J, aged 80 years, married. He belongs to OBC category and staying with his wife in their own house. He studied up to primary level and belongs to poor class. Though he has two sons and three daughters' still he has been working as agricultural labour on other's agricultural land. His sons do not take any kind of responsibilities of their old parents and they do not even listen to his words. His sons are in the habit of taking alcohol and verbally abused almost always in the form of using bad words and scolding. He stated that the attitude of his daughters-in-law is very rude and always abuse me verbally. His daughters-in-law did not give any respect to him. His son always sided with his wife. So he said that it is difficult to live with their sons and daughters-in-law and therefore he is living only with his wife.

Ms. R is 63 years old unmarried woman, eldest among five siblings. She is staying with her younger brother, sister-in-law, their children and her unmarried sister. She is illiterate and physically handicapped. She belongs to ST category. She has no income and totally dependent on her brother and unmarried sister. She belongs to the lower class. She said that "My brother, who is the only earner of my family treating me as a burden on them. Her sister-in-law did not pay any attention to her and often treated like a servant. She also did not give her enough food and sometime she has to remain empty stomach. She used to abuse her verbally. They found it difficult to take care of my health and there is no one to take care of my health. I have been spends most of time simply sitting alone and lying on the bed waiting for my death".

Mrs. D is a widow aged 65 years, staying with one married son, daughter-in-law, grandchildren, two unmarried sons and one unmarried daughter. She gets the pension of her husband for livelihood. She said that her sons and daughter-in-law all are very busy in their own works so they refuse to take care of her health. Her daughter-in-law made her to do all the household work like cooking, cleaning of the house and looking after her children. From morning till night she has been engaged in household work. She stated that she hardly got any leisure time. Her son always sided with his wife. She reveals that she is verbally abused whenever she failed to complete the household works on time. She is very upset and curses herself for supporting the family members who rejected her.

Mrs. P, a widow, aged 82 years, belongs to ST category and staying with her only son, daughter-in-law, their children and one unmarried daughter. She is blind. She is illiterate and has no income of her own and dependent on her only son who

works as a daily wage earner. She belongs to the poor class. Due to her health problems she is totally dependent of her family member. But the son and daughter-in-law do not take care of her in any way. They always abused her verbally. Hearing such comments from them she feels very sad and depressed. She felt very sad at the behavior of her own son. Nobody spoke with her. Even if her grandson spent time with her, her daughter-in-law abused her saying that she was spoiling her children. She feels lonely and rejected most of the time and would cry, as she feels like a prisoner in her own home. She has become extremely weak and her hearing was impaired. She feels very dejected about the young generation's selfish attitude towards the old people.

Mrs. J, 82 years old widow. She studied upto primary level and she belongs to ST category. She has five sons and four daughters but she has to live alone. She gets the old-aged pension from the state government, but it is not enough for her as the amount is very less. She has no other income source; however, she tries to compensate it by doing various day-to-day works. After the death of her husband, the relationship with her son worsened and his daughter in-law was to a large extent responsible for this. Her sons and daughters are well settled but all are busy with their respective families and there is no one to take of her responsibilities, they found it difficult to take care of her. She suffered abuse of verbal nature by her own family members. No respect is given to her by her sons and daughters-in-law and they always mistreated her. Her daughters-in-law did not pay any attention to her. She is very upset at the behavior of her own sons. So, she said that all this disturbed her and it becomes difficult to live with them. Her life has been full of agony after the demise of her husband. Psychologically she feels very lonely in life. But at the same time she is satisfied and happy to live alone. Therefore she decided to live alone and peacefully instead of listening harsh words from her sons and daughters-in-law. She no more wanted to be a burden of anybody. She said that "I am physically fit; I can lead my own life"

These case studies give us a glimpse of elderly abuse prevalent in Assamese society and its effect on the physical and mental health of the elderly persons. These case studies suggest that abuse of the elderly in the family is increasing day by day. Earlier study also suggests that the worst sufferers in the society are elderly people (Khan, 2004).

These case studies also clearly shows that selfish and individualistic attitudes of the children. They hardly care for the physical and emotional needs of the elderly parents. These case studies also depicts that the elderly are not safe within their own house, abuse occurs within the blood relationships where there is an expectation of trust and dependent for every type of support. From this study, it can be said that the elderly widows faced greater abuse than those who have their spouses living with them. It clearly shows that after the death of the husband a women loses her identity and respect is the family. This is in conformity with the findings of Nair (1980), Mahadevan & Sumangala (1986).

Data regarding interrelation between socio-economic characteristics and abuse also reveals that female elderly who

are widow, unmarried, economically dependent on other and illiterate have been more vulnerable to abuse. On the other hand male is most susceptible to elder abuse those in poorer health and economically dependent on other. It is interesting to note that most of the abusers of the elderly are sons and daughters-in-law with whom they live and economically dependent.

Researcher has face difficulties in discussing the subject with the respondents as often there is persistent denial by the family members that abuse takes place within their homes. In fact, most the time the elderly persons those experiencing abuse it remains silent and indifferent for the fear of being thrown out from the home and for the lack of confidence, especially in the case of elderly women.

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## 4. Conclusion

The above findings of this study reveal that in Assam, abuse of the elderly in the family has been increasing day by day. In fact, it goes unreported more often and remains largely hidden from the public for various reasons linked to culture and circumstance. Among the abused, the majority of the respondents are verbally abused by their family members. But it is found that verbal abuse has been directed more towards women than men. Female elderly who are widow, unmarried, economically dependent on other and illiterate have been more vulnerable to abuse. The study also significantly reveals that economic dependence, poverty and health problems are the main reasons for abuse.