

LETTER

60+

Life expectancy in Western countries may have increased over the past several decades but the ratio of elderly people is rising faster in the developing world than in industrialized countries. In 50 years, 80% of the elderly will be in these countries. Unlike the West, most elderly people in developing countries either have little or no social security protection.

In the early 1950s, life expectancy at birth for the world as a whole was approximately 46.6 years. For 2010-2015, it is projected to be 68.9 years. In Asia, where life expectancy was just 41.2 in the period 1950-1955, it is now expected to reach 70.3 years for 2010-2015. In addition to increasing life expectancy, birth rates have also decreased in many parts of the world, resulting in a demographic shift where the population of people over age 60 is growing rapidly. However, in developing nations where this population ageing is happening, governments with limited resources now have a relatively short span of time in which to ensure that they have effective retirement income schemes in place.

India is an interesting example, with nearly 80 million elderly people today, a number set to increase considerably in coming years. There are numerous reasons for this sharp demographic change, but advances in education, medicine, sanitation and family planning have a lot to do with it.

As well as affecting how long people live, these advances have also changed some of India's social dimensions, particularly one of the most distinct features of Indian culture: the joint family system.

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