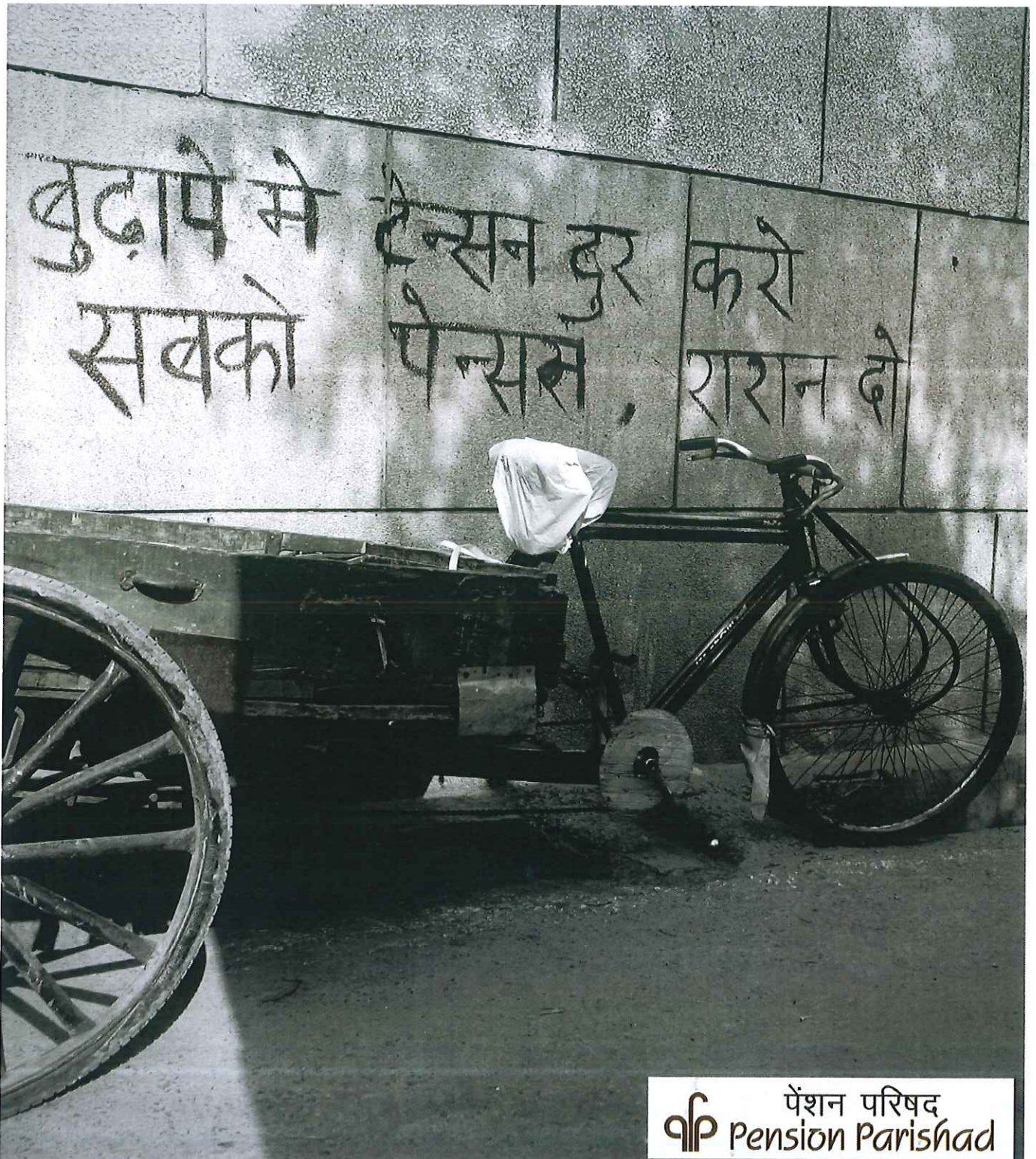


# State of Pensions in India

## Report 2018



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## **Introduction**

The National Population Commission has estimated that India's population of the elderly (age group 60 years and above) is expected to grow from 71 million in 2001 to 173 million in 2026. Women form a majority of population ageing; they are more vulnerable, more likely to lack modern work skills and income security, and more likely to be widowed.

The Ministry of Rural Development implements the National Old Age Pension Scheme given to older persons above the age of 60 years from BPL households. This scheme covers 163 lakhs older person out of the estimated 169 lakhs eligible older persons. The budgetary allocation for the scheme was Rs. 1100 crores in the year 2006 which in the current year has increased to Rs. 6564crores. The contribution of the Central Government remains at Rs 200 per month and has remained static from 2007 for the last 10 years. State Governments have to make their own contribution which today ranges from 200 Rs per month in Bihar to 1800 Rs in Goa, Tamilnadu and Delhi.

The constitutional guarantees made under Article 21 of the Constitution provides – “No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law” and Article 41 of the Constitution provides – “The State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want” have hardly had any bearings on working towards their fulfilment as reflected in the abysmal capital outlays mentioned above.

### The Indira Gandhi Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS)

This scheme under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) provides a measly contribution of Rs.200 per month. Many states do not add a matching contribution. At present old age beneficiaries get between Rs. 200 and Rs. 2000 depending on the state they belong to. Even this pension is often delayed from 6 months up to two years as observed in Bihar last year. In 2016 in Rajasthan some pensioners were repeatedly denied pensions due to linkage of the scheme with the Aadhar and in some shocking cases were declared dead because of technical errors.

At present old age pension of Rs. 200 per month reaches 22.318 million people which implies 58 million people of the 80 million people without livelihood get no pension or any other form of assistance. 93% of the workforce comes under “unorganised” sector employees and they

have contributed a large part to the country's GDP but majority of them are not covered under any pension schemes (Prof. Praveen Jha's and Nilachala Arya's JNU report of 2013).

Old Age Pensions (OAP) as a policy subject comes under the domain of *concurrent list* according to the Constitution of India. Hence OAP falls within the purview of both centre and state governments. In line with this responsibility, while the centre has formulated the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension (IGNOAPS) under a more comprehensive National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), various states are also implementing their own old age pension schemes. Also, within the IGNOAP while centre provides Rs 200 per month as pension to elderly (aged above 59 years) belonging to Below Poverty Line (BPL) family, based on the BPL survey conducted in 2002, it has also asked the states to contribute matching of the exact amount per elderly to share the responsibility of OAP's equally as mandated by the Constitution of India. While some of the states have been contributing equal amount per elderly under the scheme, some others contribute more than the centre's share and there are also others who contribute less than the centre. In addition, while some states may be contributing the same amount as centre, but have considerably relaxed provisions for identifying the beneficiaries on basis of economic vulnerability criteria and/or age criteria resulting in inclusion of increased beneficiaries than identified by the BPL survey as allowed under the centre's IGNOAPS. Also, some states have OAP programs are not linked at all to the IGNOAPS, making zero additional contribution under the same while implementing their own OAPS, based on their own identification criteria and monthly pension amount. Some other states also have a more comprehensive OAP with the centre's share or contribution under IGNOAPS subsumed under same. Hence, as a result of this concurrent responsibility of social security in India, the OAP provisions vary considerably across Indian states due to differences in additional efforts by the states to provide OAPs.

A Public Interest Litigation was filed by Dr Ashwani Kumar, former Law Minister in 2016 demanding dignity for the elderly specifically through issues of pension and income security and health and geriatric care and is currently being heard by an esteemed bench of the Supreme Court. Given the apathy displayed by the government in power and the anticipation of the judicial hearing, the time now presents an opportunity to look back and assess the policies of income security for the elderly in India.

It is in this context that we bring out 'The State of Pensions: A 2018 Report'. As India ages an exercise that assesses social protection of the elderly is highly necessary. This compilation is an attempt to bring together diverse voices that commemorate the World Elderly day by highlighting the overlooked dimensions of aging and social security. What we have attempted

to do is to begin unpacking social pensions in India not only from the perspective of the centre but also by studying state outlays and schemes. The articles in the compilation highlight issues such as the sociology of aging, everyday issues of working of the policy and the macroeconomic aspects aided by the visual representations in the report. This is the first of the many collaborations with organisations working to ensuring better social security for the elderly of this country and to truly realise the spirits of Article 21 and Article 41 as enshrined in the Constitution.

**Mathew Cherian**

**(Chief Executive, HelpAge India)**

State	Population of the elderly as percent of State population	Population of the elderly (according to census 2011)	Old age social pension beneficiaries	Percent of elderly who are beneficiaries of social pension	Monthly amount entitled to the elderly (60-79)
Andhra Pradesh	9.8	8278000	1275288	15	1000
A & N Islands	6.7	25000	4420	18	2000
Arunachal Pradesh	4.6	64000	7793	12	1700
Assam	6.7	2079000	768532	37	400
Bihar	7.4	7707000	4357164	57	400
Chandigarh	6.4	67000	2373	4	1000
Chhattisgarh	7.8	2004000	625444	31	350
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	4	14000	9598	69	1000
Daman & Diu	4.7	11000	4372	40	1000
Delhi	6.8	1147000	429706	37	2000
Goa	11.2	163000	116000	71	2000
Gujarat	7.9	4787000	604405	13	400
Haryana	8.7	2194000	1579720	72	1800
Himachal Pradesh	10.2	703000	93033	13	700
Jammu & Kashmir	7.4	923000	133858	15	1000
Jharkhand	7.1	2357000	972353	41	400
Karnataka	7.7	5791000	894692	15	500
Kerala	12.6	4193000	2159513	52	2000
Lakshadweep	8.2	5000	191	4	1000
Madhya Pradesh	7.9	5713000	1616306	28	300
Maharashtra	9.9	11107000	1096518	10	600
Manipur*	7	200000	68191	34	200
Meghalaya	4.7	139000	46698	34	500
Mizoram	6.3	69000	25395	37	250
Nagaland	5.2	103000	56010	54	300
Odisha	9.5	3984000	1449886	36	300
Puducherry	9.7	120000	38177	32	2000
Punjab	10.3	2866000	116435	4	750
Rajasthan	7.5	5112000	4986399	98	500
Sikkim	6.7	41000	16983	41	1000
Tamil Nadu	10.4	7510000	1363925	18	1000
Telangana			1323935		1000
Tripura	7.9	290000	143307	49	700
Uttar Pradesh	7.7	15440000	4192393	27	400
Uttarakhand	8.9	901000	430000	48	800
West Bengal	8.5	7742000	1374864	18	750
<b>India*</b>	8.6	103849000	32383877	31	

## INDIA'S PENSION SCANDAL

Incredible as it may seem the Union Government of India provides a pension to the elderly which amounts to the princely sum of Rs.200 each *per month*, and even for accessing this the beneficiary must belong to the BPL population which, as is well-known, is notoriously underestimated. True, the state governments may add something to this amount, but, their resources being meagre, the additions cannot be large. What is more, this figure of Rs.200 has remained unchanged since 2006-07; even the elementary courtesy of indexing it to inflation has not been accorded to the elderly.

This is truly a scandalous state of affairs, not just because the sum is laughably paltry, the beneficiary list absurdly truncated, and even elementary protection against inflation missing, but above all because of what it reveals about the government's attitude. This attitude sees the payment of pension as a largesse on the part of the State, an act of charity towards a set of mendicants. But an adequate old-age pension is actually a *right*. It is a right not just in an abstract "ought"-sense, but in the concrete sense of being an integral part of the social philosophy which underlay India's freedom struggle and upon which the Indian Constitution is founded.

This philosophy holds that the plight of an individual in society is determined by the social arrangement within which he or she lives. For instance unlike the colonialists of the pre-independence era who attributed the misery of the Indian people to their "laziness", or lack of enterprise, or subservience to tradition, the freedom struggle advanced the proposition that it was the colonial arrangement that caused the abject poverty afflicting India, whence it followed that this arrangement had to be altered by overthrowing colonial rule and erecting an alternative social arrangement that would guarantee a minimum standard of life to every Indian. The Karachi Congress Resolution in 1931, which outlined what free India would look like, held out this promise, among others. The mass participation in the freedom struggle that occurred in the 1930s was fired by this promise, which thus became part of an implicit social contract, a sort of "freedom charter", upon which the new nation was founded. It acted as a precursor to the Constitution.

Even though the Constitution did not explicitly codify a set of fundamental economic rights, as it codified a set of fundamental political rights, the former cannot just be wished away, both because they form part of the implicit social contract underlying our new nation, and also because the latter cannot be enjoyed without the citizen also enjoying a set of implicit economic rights. The assertion of one's role as a citizen in a democracy cannot occur unless one enjoys a degree of economic security. Hence even though economic rights are not codified as such in the Constitution, they are implicit and as fundamental as the explicitly-codified fundamental rights.

Adequate pension to the elderly is one such economic right. It is inherent in the implicit social contract underlying the Constitution of free India which is visualized as a fraternity of equal citizens. Within this fraternity, nobody is doing anyone else a favour in accepting a legitimate demand for a minimum livelihood.

If adequate pension is an economic right, then it must be universal, like the fundamental political rights enjoyed by all. The pension scheme cannot be either contributory or means-related. It cannot be targeted, not just because any targeting invariably leaves out many deserving beneficiaries, but, more importantly, because it violates the principle of

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universality that must characterize all rights of citizens. To be sure, in fixing the amount of pension, the fact that a person is already drawing a pension from some other source must be taken into account; and once deduction is made on that score some will automatically get excluded or drop out, but that does not amount to an infringement on a person's right. Likewise the pension paid by the State to every elderly person as a right must have nothing to do with any contribution from the person concerned. If someone is part of some other contributory pension scheme, he or she may opt out of the State-funded pension, or the pension amount may be suitably adjusted to prevent double benefits; but State-funded pension must be a right for every person, and it must be financed by budgetary sources, unrelated to any contribution from the beneficiary.

The provision of a laughable pittance as pension, as is the current state of affairs, is therefore a violation of the spirit of the Indian Constitution, a throwback to feudal times when rulers occasionally showed kindness to the ruled by bestowing favours upon them, of the sort that our governments think they are doing in providing a pittance for a pension.

What then is an adequate pension amount? The principle enunciated by the Pension Parishad that the amount should be half the minimum wage is a sound one; but in view of the multiplicity of minimum wages prevailing across states, fixing the Union government's responsibility in this regard becomes problematical. Because of this, in 2012 when there was a major agitation launched by the Pension Parishad, a modification was suggested. Since poverty in India is defined in terms of a daily calorie-intake norm, namely 2100 calories per person per day in urban India and 2200 calories in rural India, the monthly per capita expenditure at which the calorie intake just met these norms could be taken as the pension amount. NSS data from quinquennial consumer expenditure surveys were used to determine these cut-off levels, and, expressed at prevailing prices, they came, in round numbers, as a weighted average between urban and rural areas, to Rs.2000 per month. The Pension Parishad had therefore suggested that the pension amount should be half the minimum wage or Rs.2000 per month, whichever was higher.

If we take interim price-rise into account, then Rs.2000 in 2012 should be the equivalent of approximately Rs. 2750 in 2018. Likewise the number of potential beneficiaries at that time, excluding those earning pensions from other sources, and putting the pensionable age for men at 55, for women at 50, and for specially deprived communities at 45, was estimated to be around 8 crores, which by now might have increased to about 10 crores. The annual amount required for providing old-age pensions at Rs.2750 per month to these beneficiaries would come to Rs.3.3 lakh crores, which is about 2 percent of the current GDP. Interestingly the estimate even in 2012 was 2 percent of GDP; as per capita GDP has increased, so has the proportion of potential pensioners in the population, so that roughly the same percentage of GDP is required today as was required then.

The country can easily afford 2 percent of GDP for this purpose, which is less than a third of the annual *increment* that occurs in GDP at present. The provision of this amount of pension, if it is financed through taxes paid out of incomes, would not imply any decline in the average post-tax income of the non-pensioners compared to the preceding year. On the contrary it would still mean that compared to the preceding year their per capita post-tax income would increase by about 3 percent. The payment of pensions on this scale does not require any absolute sacrifice by the non-pensioners compared to the preceding year, only a smaller income increase than otherwise. Nobody needs to be absolutely squeezed for paying out pensions that provide a minimum living standard to the elderly.

We have assumed above that pensions would be paid out of taxes on incomes; but this is unnecessary. A Tobin Tax on currency transactions, or an increase in the existing tax-rate on stock market transactions, or a straightforward wealth tax would be a far more appropriate way of raising resources for pensions, since it would simultaneously serve other purposes such as curbing speculation or reducing wealth inequality. In fact if we assume, somewhat conservatively, that private wealth amounts to 4 times the GDP, and that the top 1 percent of households in India owns 62 percent of the total private wealth, then a mere 0.8 percent tax on the wealth of just the top 1 percent of households would be quite enough to finance a universal rights-based old-age pension scheme providing minimum benefits. India's pension scandal can thus be ended quite easily.

**Prabhat Patnaik**

### Comparison of Centre-State entitlement

The fact that social pension are a combined responsibility of the state and central governments often means that both accuse each other of not doing their bit. In its spirit and design the IGNOAPS is a scheme led by the central government (even after the 14<sup>th</sup> finance commission) that is to be complimented in equal measure by the state. The NSAP guidelines explicitly state that the central and state contribution should equally match to ensure a decent pension amount to the beneficiaries. The evidence runs counter to this claim of the central government. Apart from one state in the graph alongside all others contribute equally or in a much higher amount to ensure adequate entitlement to its citizens. In states like Delhi and Goa the central government contribution is barely about 10 percent of the total entitlement. In Haryana it is less than 15 percent of the total amount. Our estimates suggest that while the outlay for ignoaps for the central government is less than 6400 crores all states put together spend upwards of 12000 crores towards social pensions for the elderly.

This is as removed from the ideal of matching contributions between the centre and state as envisaged in the original policy design.

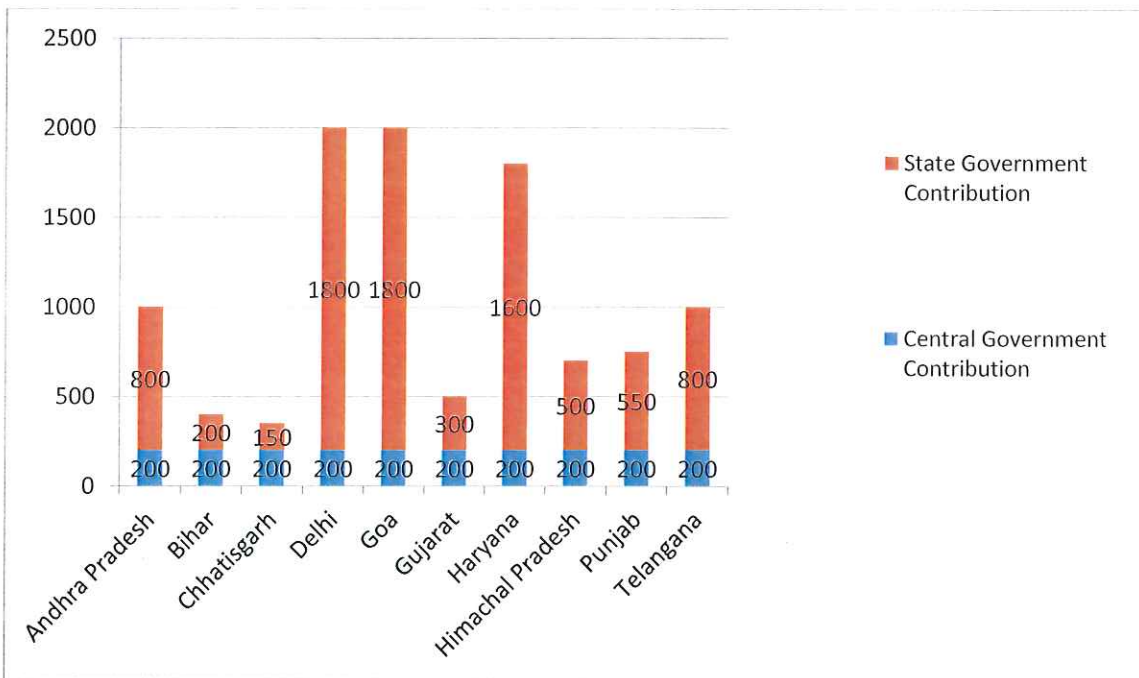
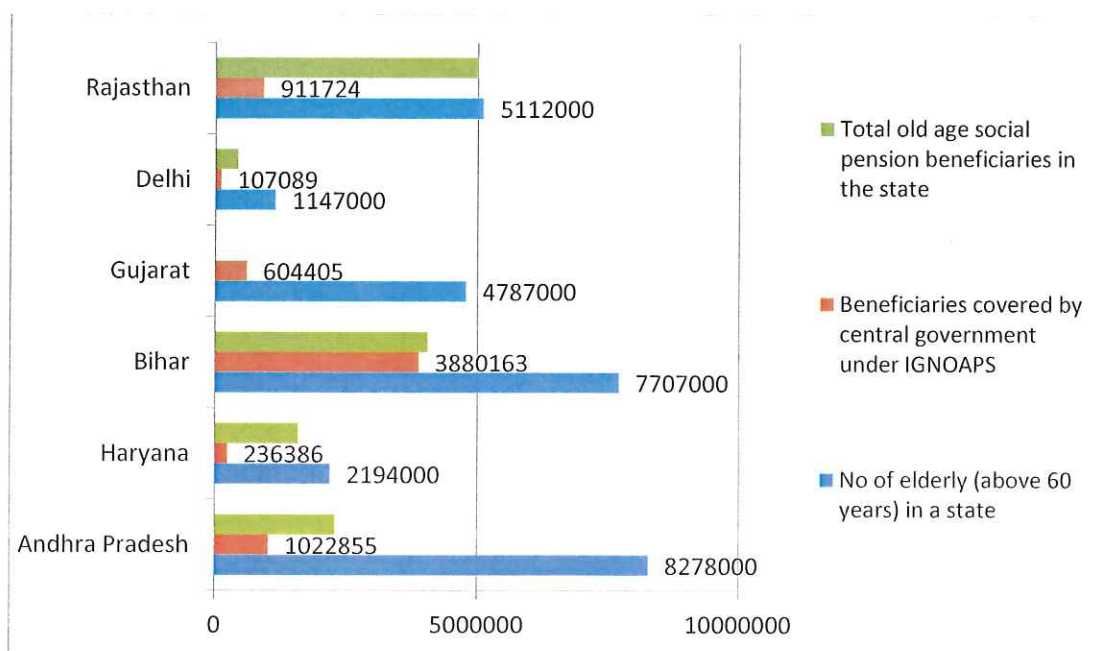


Figure 1: Contribution of Central and State governments towards monthly pension

### Comparison of Centre-State Coverage

The fact that social pension are a combined responsibility of the state and central governments often means that both accuse each other of not doing their bit. In its spirit and design the IGNOAPS is a scheme led by the central government (even after the 14<sup>th</sup> finance commission) that is to be complimented in equal measure by the state. The graph alongside tells a different story. Across most states the state governments cover more people from their own budgets as compared to the centre. Rajasthan closely followed by Haryana ensure income security for the elderly for **nearly** the entire population. Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh on the other hand lag far behind.



Each wrinkle on Sundarabai's face revealed a little bit of her story of suffering. Her unsteady hands spoke of years of toil as an agricultural labourer in the arid hinterland of Marathwada. I met her at a medical camp many years ago. When a doctor handed her a packet of tablets for assorted ailments, she looked at me straight in the eye and said, "these tablets that you have given me will help me live won't they?" When the doctor nodded, she said "Do you have anything that will help me die?" I was at a loss for words. My life as a doctor and as a trade unionist had been spent fighting for people's right to live with dignity and here was Sundarabai who wanted to end that life because she was denied that right! Her simple words were a life changer for me.

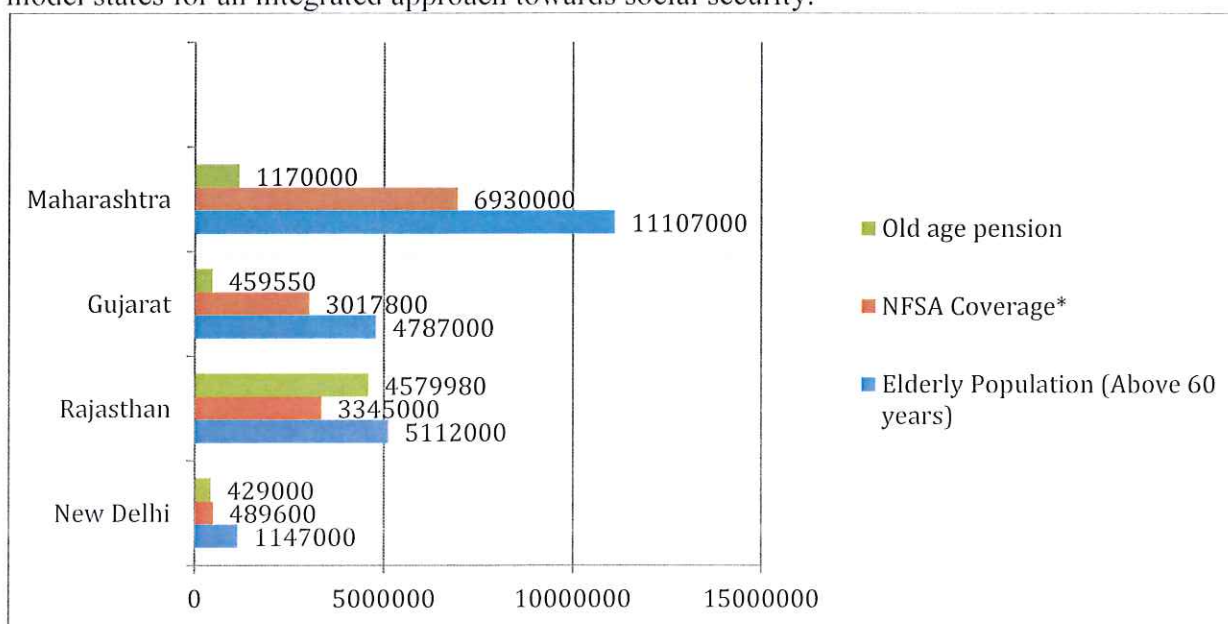
The lived experiences of the elderly poor in Maharashtra are stories of unconscionable neglect and deprivation. Maharashtra, India's commercial capital boasts of six figure per capita incomes and enviable growth rates. It is the poverty of will that keeps eligibility threshold for social security pension at a paltry annual household income of Rs.21000. Applicants spend up to Rs.5000 on documentation to establish their poverty. While academics and legislators argue over how much money it takes to subsist, the benefit amounts to only Rs.600 per month. Even Rajasthan fares better at a monthly 1000 rupees that it gives to 80 per cent of the elderly. The Pension Parishad demand for universal coverage and indexed pension at half the minimum wage is justified because the elderly have contributed to the national exchequer through their labour and through paying indirect taxes on every purchase that they make. The country is obliged to repay it from the national kitty in the form of old age pension, in the same way that it pays out pensions to government employees and legislators and parliamentarians.

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**Dr Baba Adhav**

### NFSA and IGNOAPS – The social security net

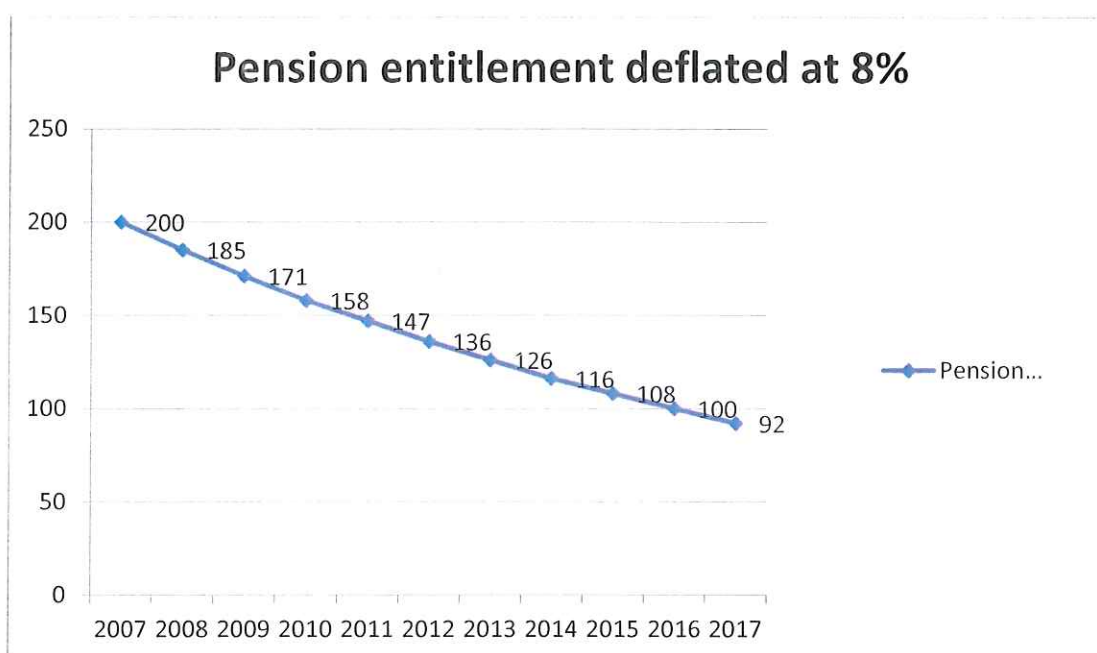
The graph alongside compares coverage offered under the National Food security Act vis a vis the Indira Gandhi National Old age pension schemes. The food security Act covers over 2-3rds of the population (75 percent in rural and 50 percent in urban). Food and nutritional security is one of the most important element of safety nets that countries design to ensure the well-being of their citizens. But safety nets are effective only if all elements work in tandem with other dimensions of income and health security. The graph shows wide gaps across states between ensuring of food security through NFSA and income security via IGNOAPS – the latter in most cases lagging far behind. The effort towards ensuring income security along with food security of the states of Haryana and Rajasthan are evident and posit themselves as model states for an integrated approach towards social security.



\*These are estimates and not reported numbers. The total beneficiaries accessed at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=175400> is adjusted for the percent of elderly population in the State as per census 2011.

## Deflation of Pension

To peg social security to inflation isn't a giant step towards social protection but a common courtesy of maintaining the actual value and purchasing power of the entitlements assured by the State. The last time social pensions were revised by the central government were in the year 2007. An amount of 200 rupees per person per month for those between the ages of 60 years to 79 years and 500 rupees for those above 80 years was assured then. A deflation at the rate of 8 percent per annum (Consumer Price Index average from 2007 to 2016) reduces this amount to 93 rupees – lower than when it was first introduced in the year 1995. Indexing income security to inflation to accommodate for price rise isn't a choice but a necessary policy design feature.



### **“Transparency and Accountability in processes of Sanction and Delivery”**

In March 2013, along with several others Dwarika Paswan from Bihar who had come for a Pension Parishad dharna joined a delegation to meet the Minister of Social Justice Selja Kumari. After issues had been discussed with her, Dwarika Paswan suddenly and desperately, broke into the conversation with his story. He was a rickshaw puller who had crossed the age of 70. His adult children were too poor to feed him and his seriously ill wife, so they were left to fend for themselves. He said he had no choice but to work and earn by carrying people around on his rickshaw. It was clear that he was in no physical condition to ply a rickshaw. He said it had now come down to begging people to climb on his rickshaw to be ferried, just so that he could earn a few rupees, come home, cook for his wife and himself and perhaps, live for another day. As he spoke he started crying. So tragic and moving was his story that everyone in the room along with the Minister herself wept with him. The Minister further said that she had the utmost empathy and could not but agree with the cause, but the system did not allow her to provide any more in numbers or amount of pensions that were being given by the Government of India. She therefore quite genuinely pulled out what money she had in her purse and gave it to him.

This however is the story of not just Dwarika Paswan but gets replicated in different ways and degrees across lakhs and even crores of elderly persons spread across India.

There is sympathy, maybe even empathy, but no rights; no entitlements; no relief. Instead, a series of norms are imposed in the name of pension entitlements and the elderly and other beneficiaries are made to suffer insult upon injury by running from pillar to post to get a grossly inadequate and unjust pension. The distress is multiplied through innumerable instances of exclusion, corruption, procedural lapses and delays. Dignified pension for all does not even enter the minds of those who occupy positions of power as if the concerns of our elderly and other marginalised groups are not a common responsibility.

In January 2016, during an accountability yatra, the Soochna Evam Rozgaar Abhiyan in Rajasthan started coming across extreme high numbers of elderly people at the grievance redress camps talking about their pensions having been stopped. It took a month of repeated and intense questioning to discover that pensions had in fact been stopped for more than 10 Lakh pensioners.

There was a list of “stopped pensions”. There were names, and there was a reason for each pension having been stopped. Out of these names, 2.5 lakh were marked dead. 3 lakh were dismissed as duplicate and the remaining 5 lakhs’ pensions had been stopped citing ‘other’ reasons. With a lot of effort, the names for one of the blocks – Bhim where where the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) works: and beginning with Devdungri, the village where its office is situated, the names of these ‘bogus’ pensioners were verified. In Devdungri village, 9 out of 11 people marked ‘dead’ were in fact alive and their pensions had been stopped for many months! In Kushalpura Panchayat (Rajsamand District), 30 out of the 50 people whose pensions had been stopped were alive and struggling to survive. In the Bhim block, more than half of the 3000 pensioners whose pensions had been struck off were alive.

In Bihar too, according to Government data as of December 2017, 10 lakh pensioners who were earlier getting pensions, had had their pensions cancelled, without any reason being given to them!



In both these cases, digitisation and requirements of Adhaar seeding, had led to mass exclusions. Enforced disbursal through banking has only added to people's woes first at the level of opening bank accounts and then for accessing pensions.

Apart from the very important questions related to the much needed increase in allocations, budget and coverage, as these stories illustrate, the delivery platforms and mechanisms for pensions to the unorganised sector, is in a shambolic state in most places. This is also an issue that causes immense pain, distress, and exclusion, of even those who are entitled.

It is therefore necessary to also examine the entire cycle of social security pensions- to work on, and reform every step of this very basic entitlement.

### **Selection and sanction:**

Pensions for the unorganised sector today, is far away from anything akin to a universal entitlement. Each person has to apply, and the onus is on them to prove their eligibility. Today, there is an increasing emphasis on digitisation, using tech solutions, updated centralised databases etc. But these are clearly being used by the state and its bureaucracy for their own convenience, rather than the efficient and accountable delivery of services. We are repeatedly asked for our biometric details, our personal data for one purpose or the other, but automatic inclusion has still not become a reality for sanction and receipt of pensions, and many other benefits. Information related to age, and other prerequisites should be updated by the states. These methods should not exclude or preclude anyone from using alternative (including) offline means of applying, so that anyone excluded by online platforms, would have accessible provisions for getting their entitlement.

### **Sanction:**

The 2014 NSAP guidelines categorically suggest that pensions should get sanctioned within a specific time frame- within a maximum of 15 days. However, in Delhi, UP, Bihar or elsewhere, there have been delays in sanction, where people have had to wait for months and years to get a response, leading to multiple applications being filed by the same person. In West Bengal, the Social Welfare offices let you know that there's a huge backlog of 3-4 years at the stage of application acceptance and sanction, because pension quotas are already full. The grievance redress mechanisms are so weak that it makes a mockery of the 15 day period outlined in the guidelines.

Often the lack of coordination and bureaucratic delays in transfer of central funds to states also leads to huge gaps in delivery. If the rights of people aren't respected and the delivery of these basic goods services and entitlements aren't regularised, it only leads to the poor and vulnerable of the country going hungry, falling sick and reaching a state of destitution . One wonders what might happen if employees of the State and in Government sectors were to face such endless delays in accessing their salaries and pensions. There is no doubt, that like the MGNREGA, pension schemes must provide for automatic payment of compensation for delay in pension payments, based on the number of days of delay.

Delivery platforms. : One of the central principles to be upheld while organising delivery of pensions, is for it to be as democratic, transparent, accountable and people friendly as possible. Centralisation and homogenisation of the delivery process through the banking system may have benefitted some groups. However, we must remember that, the three beneficiary groups covered by the national pension scheme are the elderly, widows and persons with disability. A large chunk of these people live in rural areas with bad or no roads, banks far away, low literacy rates, and debilitating social hierarchies across caste, gender, marital status, age, ability etc. Enforcing a centralised banking model upon them for accessing pensions has made life very difficult for them. Most of them depend upon pensions as their one major source of sustenance but now they are at the mercy of a nameless faceless system of centralised fund control and financial institutions they don't understand and often have much difficulty in accessing. Overburdened banks are refusing to service them. Business correspondents have mushroomed all over the place to help banks tackle the burden, and in the absence of robust transparency and accountability measures, end up making money at the cost of these helpless pensioners who have to depend on them to draw their pensions. Adhaar of course has only added to their troubles, and as has been well-documented across states has led to wide scale exclusion, mislabeling of deserving beneficiaries as 'ghosts' or bogus and duplicate pensioners.

Many states have come up with interesting and creative ways of dispensing pensions. For instance, Odisha has a system of decentralised distribution of cash payments at the panchayat level on fixed days on a monthly basis where the names of beneficiaries are read out at a public sabha and then the amounts are disbursed. It is clear to pensioners that they should be allowed to choose between banks, and door delivery through the post office. If the Orissa model were to be tried in other states, it could help serve as a concurrent audit where fraud and taking commissions becomes very difficult. One should learn from good practices and design policies with some level of flexibility to accommodate the needs of local contexts and communities.

#### **Provisions of transparency Grievance Redress and accountability:**

For pensions, like for every other public entitlement, we need a robust and responsive grievance redressal system. Helpline numbers that lead to quick and real-time problem solving, penalty measures for delays and discrepancies, mobile vans and grievance redressal camps, social audit public hearings are only some among the various measures being tried out by different state governments and civil society groups to have grievances addressed and queries answered. It is also worth promoting a single window system for receiving grievances and issuing dated receipts, beginning at the panchayat level, right up to the block and district levels.

Legislation like the Public Service Delivery Acts and Grievance Redressal Act can be used for the purpose too. In Bihar, a Grievance Redressal Camp in December 2017 carried out in Araria district, led to pensions being the subject of complaint in 50% of the total number of grievances registered by people. These had mostly to do with delays, interruptions, rejections in delivery even after their pensions had been sanctioned. The Grievance Redressal Act was introduced in the state recently. The law makes provision for the timely disposal of grievances. All of these complainants were assigned hearings with the concerned department officials within the next few weeks, and today most of them have had their pensions regularised once again. Grievance redress however shouldn't become the preferred or

dominant mode of delivery but should be resorted to for those scenarios where there has been an unusual violation of the delivery system. It is important that the system be so designed and monitored to function that there is an a priori guarantee of smooth and timely delivery of pensions.

Social security pensioners like the pensioners of the organized sector have to present themselves to the authorities once a year to prove that they are still alive. Not being recorded as alive, is often a reason for pensions being stopped as this is also a burden put on the elderly person. A camp approach to payments in public domain in front of everyone could make the disbursement point also be one of verification. Similarly, putting all the information related to pension payments in the public domain, could allow access, monitoring and support, for pensioners trying to negotiate the many glitches in this system. The management information must be converted into a janata information system (JIS) where it is online, open, and transaction based. Social audits are mandated by the guidelines, but never carried out. These could also be an effective method of citizen monitoring, especially if they are combined with one of the fixed day, monthly public disbursement in camps.

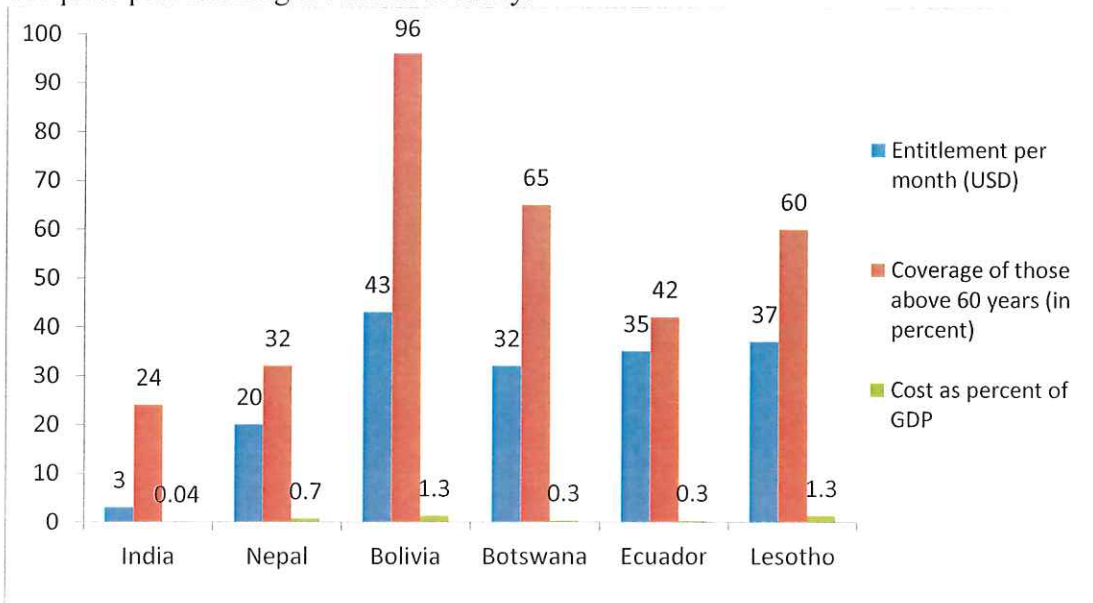
The mess in delivery of pensions, makes it necessary for those involved with implementation to consult, pensioners, and all others to think about a comprehensive legal framework that guarantees a dignified pension entitlement, and a people centered delivery system. This is perhaps something that may take some years to happen, but even the mobilization and collective effort to get such a law enacted will empower and energise this marginalized community.

Peoples groups coming together to collectively rank states on the basis of entitlements as well as their delivery practices would be a useful, empowering annual exercise.

**Aruna Roy and Sohini Shoib**

## How India Compares Internationally

The table above definitively establishes that ensuring income security for the elderly is hardly a matter of fiscal availability but that of political will. India's GDP is at very least 10 times that of the countries listed above but the pensions don't match up. In India, the proportion of capital outlay to the country's GDP has remained unchanged for over a decade. The last decade is marked as a period of high growth and often high inflation. We have transitioned from being a lower income country to a lower middle-income country. We threaten to take over the GDP of some of the superpowers and yet remain powerless when it comes to adequate provisioning for social security.



Source: <http://www.pension-watch.net/>

## BUZURGI RAHMAT YA QAYAMAT

As I sit to write this article I am reminded of a poet Tilok Chand 'Mahroom' from Mianwali in Punjab. In these days of 'hum aur woh' it is hard to imagine a master poet in Urdu with the name Tilok Chand! He wrote:

*Talaatum aarzu mein hai na toofan justju mein hai*  
*Jawani ka guzar jaana hai dariya ka utar jaana*  
 No storm in desire no tempest in quest  
 Passing of youth is flow-back of a river

To me this mirrors the melancholy of ageing.

I was 24 years old when I started working in the Geriatric Ward of a hospital in Canada. Being new to a country with a fast ageing population, I could not understand the tragedy and trauma of a inmates of this ward. The fact that several patients were referred for depression to the psychiatry department was strange to someone who had come from a culture where counselling of youth came from the elders and the popular expression was '*Ye baal dhoop mein safed nahin huey hain*'. I felt intensely sorry for these Canadian buzurgs who longed for me to stop and chat with them for a few minutes to break their loneliness. Smiling nurses and attendants who rushed past their beds, rarely stopped except speak five sing-song words 'And how are we today!'

My Canada culture shock was due to the India of the 50's and 60's in which I grew up. Age was still revered and deferred to. Fifty years later, while our attitude towards ageing has caught up with what I had experienced in Canada but the state apparatus has remained largely impervious to the changed mores of society.

According to the 2011 census, the elderly population in India is 104 million. Between 2001 and 2011, India has added 2.7 million annually to its population of senior citizens. Assuming the same growth trajectory, India's elderly population would stand at 123 million in 2018. In other words, 1 out of 10 persons in India is a senior citizen aged 60 and above. The United Nations defines a society as ageing once its proportion of those aged 65 and above crosses more than 7% of its total population. India, with an elderly population of 123 million, has already entered the world stage as one of the ageing societies of the world.

Successive governments in India have formulated many programmes and policies for the welfare of the elderly. But do the benefits reach the elderly? Many social activists have been struggling with governments of the day to give higher priority to the social security pension schemes. For instance, the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme has remained at a ludicrous amount of Rs.200 per month for persons above 65 years and a meagre Rs.500 per month for persons above 80 years belonging to BPL households.

Pensions are meant to help some disadvantaged sections of society (such as the elderly, widows and disabled persons) to live with dignity by giving them some basic financial security. They are lifeline of the elderly, as most of them are either unable to earn a living for themselves or cannot do so due to societal factors. Take the case of Vifai is an 80-year-old dalit widow from Getara village of Surguja district, Chhattisgarh. She receives a monthly pension of Rs 300 under the Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS).

She lives alone as her sons have abandoned her. To collect her pension, she has to walk all the way to the bank, 12 km from her house. As she describes it, “*Rengat rangat jaati hun, ab kya karun?*” The bank employees allow her to jump the queue, but even then the ‘up-down’ takes her a whole day. She survives on pension money and PDS. “*Sarkar paisa deti hai, sarkar khaana deti hai, bas usi par jeeti hun*” EPW May 10, 2014.

As Member Planning Commission I traveled across the terrain experiencing the country for myself before making policy and plans. While I focused on the three sectors allotted to me it were the elderly which made me linger longest at any particular spot. I was in Tamil Nadu. On my way from Paparapatti Block to Dharampuri town I saw a large number of women working by the roadside. Several of the appeared to be in their 70’s and 80’s. Mariamma, with a shock of grey hair showed me her card. Her recorded age was 75. “Earlier we used to get Rs 35 as agricultural labour and quarries paid upto Rs. 65. NREGA has proved to be a boon. But what will I do after 100 days?” How much longer can Mariamma and her friends work at this roadside for Rs 95 a day? I kept asking myself. (Hameed and Veda *Beautiful Country Stories from another India*)

Pensions are of special importance for women but the situation is far worse for elderly females. Among them, about 85-87% are economically dependent for survival on others. (HelpAge India website). Stories tumble out from everywhere with an identical script. Whether it is Vasant Kunj in Delhi or Banaskantha in Gujarat, whether it is Karamat Ali or Faqir Chand, Sakina Khatoon or Gyanwati Devi all are victims of uncaring family and society. With rampant urbanisation, as spaces shrink, elders are dumped here and there to fend for themselves. Even when compared to other third world economies, with the same per capita income, India’s social security system lags behind. Although according to media reports some states notably Kerala, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu fare slightly better in this regard.

Then there are lingering questions:

-Does linking of Aadhaar number and other new technicalities bring down the number of eligible pensioners?

-Is there enough awareness among elderly persons about how to apply and how pensions are sanctioned?

-In 2007, Parliament passed the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act. The act requires the government to set up homes for senior citizens in every district. Is this act being implemented?

-How are local-self governments helping in ensuring social security to elderly people?

So the relentless struggle by a few committed individuals on behalf of those who cannot always speak for themselves goes on.

*Khamoshi guftgu hai bezabani hai zaban meri*

The state of millions of elderly, destitute people spread across the villages and bastis all over India is horrific, almost beyond description. Even more tragic is the fact that most of these people are confined to their homes, many are sick and in so many ways remain voiceless. One would have to turn to literature or poetry to be able to contextualize the particular predicament of a set of people unable to even express their anguish...

In such a situation, the determined effort by the elderly poor to mobilise themselves and fight their own battle is extremely remarkable. What they have shown is that just by They have reinforced the human spirit of collective struggle and provided a new definition of militant protest. In their case, just gathering together in thousands in their state capitals and the national capital year after year is a powerful voice too hard to suppress. They've made it clear that this voice and its demand for a life of dignity will continue to exert itself on our collective national conscience till it is heard.

The question is, are the rest of us sensitive enough to listen?

**Syeda Hameed, Writer and Activist**