PHENOMENON OF AGEISM IN INDIA

Chandanshive S., Mokicheva N.A.

Federal State Budgetary Educational Institution of Higher Education "Yaroslavl State Medical University" of the Ministry of Healthcare of the Russian Federation

The article is devoted to the study of ageism in India, based on a cultural paradox: deep traditional respect for elders is combined with their real exclusion from key social processes. Paternalistic forms of discrimination in family practices are analyzed, leading to loss of autonomy and a decrease in the psychological well-being of the elderly. The role of media and social stereotypes in the formation of "learned helplessness" and undermining the subjective significance of the older generation is considered.

Keywords: ageism, age discrimination, cultural paradox, paternalism, psychological exclusion, autonomy, stereotypes of aging.

ФЕНОМЕН ЭЙДЖИЗМА В ИНДИИ

Чанданшиве С., Мокичева Н.А.

Федеральное государственное бюджетное высшее учебное заведение «Ярославский государственный медицинский университет» Министерства здравоохранения Российской Федерации

Доклад посвящён исследованию эйджизма в Индии, основанного на культурном парадоксе: глубокое традиционное уважение к старшим сочетается с их реальным исключением из ключевых социальных процессов. Анализируются патерналистские формы дискриминации в семейных практиках, ведущие к утрате автономии и снижению психологического благополучия пожилых людей. Рассматривается роль медиа и общественных стереотипов в формировании «выученной беспомощности» и подрыве субъективной значимости старшего поколения.

Ключевые слова: эйджизм, дискриминация по возрасту, культурный парадокс, патернализм, психологическая изоляция, автономия, стереотипы старения.

Introduction. Ageism, defined as a system of stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory actions based on chronological age, is a global social problem [1]. However, within the cultural context of India, it takes on unique, often paradoxical forms [5]. A country with a deeply ingrained tradition of venerating elders as bearers of wisdom and central figures in rituals simultaneously demonstrates the systematic exclusion of older adults from meaningful social, familial, and technological processes. This creates a specific phenomenon that can be characterized as "cultural reverence alongside psychological exclusion." The aim of this study is to analyze the manifestations of this paradox, with particular attention paid to its covert, paternalistic forms and their destructive impact on the mental health, cognitive functioning, and sense of autonomy among older Indians.

The Indian cultural paradox. Indian society has historically been built on principles of hierarchy and respect for elders (guru-shishya parampara, filial piety). In the cultural

narrative, an older person is portrayed as a bearer of wisdom (gyani), an object of veneration (pujya), and an authority figure to be obeyed. However, in everyday social practice, especially under conditions of urbanization and digitalization, this ideal collides with a reality where the decisions of older people are often ignored, their pace of life is perceived as an inconvenience, and their knowledge is labeled as outdated [5]. Respect becomes a symbolic ritual (formal greeting, ceremonial offering of food) coupled with simultaneous exclusion from substantive discussions, decision-making, and the adoption of new technologies. This gap between declared status and lived experience generates a profound psychological conflict among older adults, a sense of irrelevance and internal devaluation.

Paternalistic ageism as a covert mechanism of discrimination. The most common and socially acceptable form of ageism in India is its paternalistic variety, which masks itself as care [1]. It is expressed in verbal patterns: "Don't worry about this," "Just rest, we'll do everything," "This is too complicated for you." Such phrases, outwardly expressing concern, in reality deprive the older person of autonomy, the right to participate, and practical engagement. Common cultural patterns include making family decisions without their input, using English or youth slang in their presence — creating a barrier — and automatically treating them as fragile, even in the absence of obvious health issues. This type of ageism is particularly pernicious because it is internalized by both sides: the younger generation acts from the "best intentions," while the older generation, not wanting to be a burden, silently agrees to its own marginalization, leading to the phenomenon of learned helplessness [3].

Cognitive stereotypes and their self-fulfilling prophecy. Stereotypes widespread in society and the media directly influence the cognitive functioning of older adults [4]. Beliefs such as "old people are bad with technology," "their memory is guaranteed to decline," or "it's useless to teach them anything" create an environment of low expectations. When an older person encounters difficulties while learning, for example, a digital UPI payment system, and hears the impatient remark, "You won't understand anyway, let me do it," this undermines their confidence and motivation to learn. The sequence "young people take over tasks - older people get less practice - older people begin to avoid tasks - actual decline in skills" is a classic example of a self-fulfilling prophecy [4]. This cycle promotes cognitive inactivity, which, in turn, can accelerate age-related cognitive decline, thereby confirming the initial stereotype.

Psychological consequences. The cumulative impact of symbolic reverence and actual exclusion has severe psychological consequences. Older adults develop internalized beliefs: "My experience is no longer needed by anyone," "I'm only holding everyone back."

This leads to decreased motivation, emotional exhaustion, social self-isolation, and the loss of professional and personal identity. The problem of loneliness takes on particular acuteness, which in this context is multidimensional: emotional loneliness (lack of deep emotional connections), social loneliness (breakdown of social networks), and the unique cultural loneliness—the feeling that "I no longer belong to this era." The loss of autonomy, being a fundamental psychological need rather than a luxury, generates frustration mixed with helplessness and undermines self-respect [3].

The role of media in constructing and reinforcing age stereotypes. Indian media, including film and television, play a key role in shaping the collective perception of old age. Typical representations portray older people as perpetually sick, dependent, conservative, and confused characters, often for comic effect or dramatic contrast [2]. Such images do not reflect the diversity of aging and reinforce negative stereotypes. In contrast, healthier media representation could show older people running businesses, acquiring new skills, being active in the digital environment, and making meaningful contributions to family and community life. Since media shape perception, and perception determines behavior, transforming media narratives is a crucial condition for combating ageism at the societal level [2].

Conclusion. The phenomenon of ageism in India is a complex tangle where the cultural imperative of respect is interwoven with practices of daily exclusion, damaging the psychological well-being of millions of older adults [1, 5]. Overcoming this paradox requires a conscious shift from passive, ritualistic veneration to an active practice of genuine respect. Such respect should be expressed in authentic attentiveness to the opinions of older people, granting them freedom of choice and autonomy, the deliberate dismantling of cognitive stereotypes through engagement in learning and decision-making, and their meaningful inclusion in social and family life [3, 4]. Only by recognizing and satisfying the psychological needs of older adults for relevance, autonomy, and belonging can Indian society resolve the internal conflict between its centuries-old culture of venerating age and the challenges of modernity.

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