

Indian Ikigai: Exploring Its Roots and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

India's demographic landscape is witnessing a rapid increase in its elderly population, a trend compounded by the erosion of traditional family structures and the advent of modernization. This paper explores the challenges faced by the aging population in India, including social isolation, financial insecurity, and elder abuse, while highlighting the importance of holistic approaches to healthy aging. Drawing inspiration from the Japanese concept of Ikigai, which emphasizes finding purpose and meaning in life, and Indian philosophies such as Purushartha and the Ashrama system, this paper proposes integrative strategies for promoting well-being among the elderly. The cultural traditions of Ayurveda, Yoga, and meditation underscore the Indian perspective on balanced living and spiritual growth. This paper also examines the parallels between Indian and Japanese approaches, emphasizing community engagement, mindful living, and intergenerational connections. By addressing the socio-economic and psychological challenges faced by India's elderly and incorporating lessons from traditional Indian and Japanese philosophies, this study underscores the need for innovative policies and community programs. These initiatives aim to provide the elderly with opportunities for lifelong learning, community participation, and self-actualization. The findings emphasize the urgency of reorienting societal perspectives and policy frameworks to create environments that support holistic well-being and ensure a meaningful life for the aging population.

Keywords: Indian ikigai, Indian culture, purushartha, spiritual wellbeing

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Indian society is undergoing rapid transformation under the impact of industrialization, urbanization, technical and technological change, education, and globalization. Consequently, the traditional values and institutions are in the process of erosion and adaptation, resulting in the weakening of intergenerational ties that were the hallmark of the traditional family. Industrialization has replaced the simple family production units by mass production and the factory. Economic transactions are now between individuals. With the rapidly increasing number of aged compounded by disintegration of joint families and ever-increasing influence of modernization and new lifestyles, the care of elderly has emerged as an important issue in India (Shettar, S. C., 2013). India also being one of the countries in the Eastern Region has a long cultural background and impact on its people. Unlike Japan, the traditional culture of India has been under pressure of various external influences.

Various political and economic issues and policies have brought in changes in structure and functions of social institutions like Religion, Family etc. In addition, liberalization, Globalization has resulted in Urban – Rural Divide that has affected the perception of the general mass about the way and purpose of life. The current trend on the demographics of India suggest that India's elderly population will rise from 10.1% in 2021 to 13.1% in 2031 (National Statistics Report, 2021) Advancement in the field of health services, implementation of health promotion schemes, an increased level of concern about health in the public etc. has resulted in people living for long years. However, the increase in elderly abuse, abandonment, loneliness, and financial concerns are some of the major issues being faced by the country's older population.

With the rapidly increasing number of aged compounded by disintegration of joint families and ever-increasing influence of modernization and new lifestyles, the care of elderly has emerged as an important issue in India (Shettar, S. C., 2013). In this regard, there

is a need to understand their living conditions, health, and well-being on the one hand, and the mindset of the youth towards healthy living by drawing lessons from the elderly on the other. Thus, the country needs to understand and focus on the needs of this growing demographic urgently. With the inspiration from the Japanese novel "Ikigai," which means "a reason for being" or "a reason to wake up in the morning," which can be particularly relevant for elderly people as they seek to find purpose and meaning in their lives, Lifestyle has an impact on every stages of development of human life, and thereby on longevity, lifestyle factors could exert advantageous and deleterious effects on individual (Govindaraju, Atzmon, & Barzilai, 2015).

Few research conducted on the elderly recently as documented in a Japanese book on IKIGAI highlights on the life of a small community in Japan who are all living healthily and happily even at the age of more than 100 years. Ikigai is a Japanese concept that means "a reason for being" or "a reason to get up in the morning." It combines the words "iki" (life) and "gai" (worth) to describe what gives your life meaning and purpose Michiko Kumano (2017). the four components of ikigai namely passion, mission, vocation and profession guide an individual to find meaning in life and to enjoy life. Elderly people in Japan are effectively using the principles of ikigai, which is akin to Japanese culture, by engaging themselves in physical and mental activities like pursuing their hobbies, volunteering, part time jobs etc. spending time with family, participating in community events, or pursuing lifelong interests ensures them a sense of emotional wellbeing. Staying connected with the community by participating in neighborhoodlike gatherings, social functions provide them a sense of belongingness and security. Faith in the lifelong learning with a desire to learn a new skill, develop a new hobby etc provides a new meaning and a purpose to live.

In Indian culture, ageing is viewed as a natural process, and older adults are often revered for their wisdom and life experience. Indian traditions emphasize the importance of

connecting with nature for overall wellbeing. For example: - Ayurveda, the traditional Indian system of medicine, emphasizes the importance of living in harmony with nature and recognizing the interconnectedness of all living beings (Charaka, 400 CE). The concept of "Prakriti" in Ayurveda refers to the natural world and the importance of living in balance with nature (Sushruta, 400 CE). Yoga and meditation practices often emphasize the importance of connecting with nature and recognizing the interconnectedness of all living beings (Patanjali, 400 CE). Wellbeing in Indian traditions emphasize the importance of overall wellbeing, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual health. For example, the concept of "Swasthya" in Ayurveda refers to overall wellbeing and balance in physical, mental, and spiritual health (Charaka, 400 CE). Yoga and meditation practices aim to promote overall wellbeing by cultivating physical, mental, and spiritual balance (Patanjali, 400 CE). In Indian culture, ageing is often viewed as an opportunity to reconnect with nature and cultivate overall wellbeing. For example, older adults in India often engage in gardening, farming, or other outdoor activities that promote physical activity and connection with nature. Yoga and meditation practices are often adapted for older adults to promote flexibility, balance, and overall wellbeing. Ayurvedic practitioners often recommend natural remedies and lifestyle modifications to promote healthy ageing and overall wellbeing.

India is the land of primitive culture. The traditional extended family culture and practices has a big role in longevity and healthy aging. Important social factors like restricted dietary habits, socializing patterns, physical activity, cognitive engagement, cultural, familial and spiritual belief systems all play a vital role in a harmonious manner, which facilitates longevity and healthy aging (Bhattacharyya, 2017). According to the Vimshottari Dasha system, the complete cycle of human life span is 120 years. However, rigorous research is necessary to find out how ancient wisdom, practices and principles are related to longevity

and healthy aging. Young India needs to connect back to the roots of healthy practices and sustainable living of elderly.

Recognizing the diverse cultural contexts, unique best practices which aid longevity will provide a luminous insight for the current generation. The elderly population in India, referring to individuals aged 60 years and over, is rapidly expanding. This particular demographic encounters a multitude of physical and psychological issues. It is becoming increasingly important to prioritize ageing-related concerns and implement comprehensive policies and programs to address the needs of the aging population. Hofstede's cultural dimensions provide a broader cross-cultural frame to attend the unexplained factor of happiness.

The Indian perspective on well-being is deeply rooted in the country's rich cultural heritage and philosophical traditions. It encompasses a holistic approach, considering the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of an individual's life. By embracing these philosophies and practices, Indians cultivate a unique perspective on well-being that prioritizes holistic growth, balance, and harmony.

- **Vedanta:** This philosophy, as expressed in the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita, emphasizes the importance of self-realization and spiritual growth in achieving true happiness and fulfillment.
- **Yoga:** The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali provide a comprehensive framework for achieving physical, mental, and spiritual well-being through the practice of yoga.
- **Ayurveda:** This traditional Indian system of medicine emphasizes the importance of balance and harmony in maintaining physical and mental well-being. Eastern practices, while cultivating a deep sense of peace and internal balance, may not always provide rapid relief for acute symptoms. Eastern philosophies in mental health prioritize the notion of interconnectedness, where individual well-being is linked to

the environment and the broader cosmos. Indian traditions like Ayurveda focus on a holistic approach to health, balancing the body, mind, and spirit. Practices include dietary guidelines, herbal treatments, yoga, and meditation to maintain overall well-being. Both Japanese and Indian cultures place a strong emphasis on family and community support, which are essential for emotional and social well-being. Concern for happiness and wellbeing are perennial human concerns. The Indian notion of self extends the discourse on self and happiness by positing selfhood as porous, spiritual, and multilayered. It offers a pathway to happiness by relating to others and dissolving the self-other divide. This view also goes with creating and nurturing a viable life world that recognizes the value of sharing and cooperation.

- **Service:** Practice selfless service (Seva) by helping others in your community. This fosters a sense of purpose and connection, which is beneficial for mental and emotional health.
- **Positive Relationships:** Surround yourself with positive and supportive people. Healthy relationships contribute to emotional well-being and provide a support system during difficult times.
- **Socio-cultural Milieu:** Research indicates that successful ageing in India is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context. Older adults in India often define successful ageing in terms of personal well-being, social relationships, and the ability to maintain a sense of agency despite challenges. Themes such as the importance of family, social environment, and the balance between personal agency and fatalism are prominent. Psychological studies emphasize the role of mental health, cognitive functioning, and social support in the ageing process. Successful aging is the capacity to undergo the aging process in a positive and advantageous manner. Positive psychological outlook in later years, along with overall well-being and enjoyment, has been linked to

successful aging The Indian concept of purushartha is closer to Ikigai principles.

Ikigai, a Japanese concept meaning "a reason for being," emphasizes finding purpose and joy in life Purushartha refers to four primary goals in life that guides one's behaviour. Working towards attaining and gratifying these goals makes one to be happy.

- **Kama (Pleasure):** Similar to the Ikigai principle of doing what you love, Kama emphasizes the importance of pursuing activities that bring joy and satisfaction.
- **Dharma (Duty):** This aligns with the Ikigai principle of doing what the world needs. Dharma involves fulfilling one's duties and responsibilities, contributing to society, and finding purpose through service.
- **Artha (Prosperity):** This principle is about achieving financial stability and success, akin to the Ikigai idea of doing what you can be paid for. It ensures that one's material needs are met, allowing for a balanced life.
- **Moksha (Liberation):** This ultimate goal of life in Indian philosophy is about self-realization and spiritual freedom, which can be seen as the deeper purpose or meaning in life, similar to the core of Ikigai
- **Yoga and Mindfulness:** Ancient Indian practices like Yoga and meditation promote physical and mental well-being, much like the Ikigai principle of taking care of your body and mind. These practices help in maintaining balance, reducing stress, and enhancing overall happiness.
- **Community and Relationships:** The concept of Satsang (association with good people) in Indian scriptures emphasizes the importance of surrounding oneself with positive influences and maintaining strong social connections, similar to the Ikigai principle of building and nurturing relationships.

- **Balanced Living:** The principle of Hara Hachi Bu (eating until 80% full) from Ikigai is mirrored in the Ayurvedic concept of mindful eating and maintaining balance in diet and lifestyle. This promotes longevity and health. By integrating these principles, communities can create environments that support the holistic well-being of the elderly, fostering a sense of purpose, connection, and happiness.

Key Components of Indian Well-being

- **Spiritual Well-being:** Indians believe that spiritual growth and self-realization are essential for achieving true happiness and fulfilment. This involves cultivating a sense of detachment, letting go of worldly desires, and focusing on the inner self.
- **Balance and Harmony:** Indians emphasize the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in life. This includes balancing individual desires with familial and societal responsibilities, as well as harmonizing physical and mental well-being.
- **Mindfulness and Meditation:** Indian traditions like yoga and meditation promote mindfulness, self-awareness, and inner peace. These practices help individuals cultivate a positive mindset, manage stress, and improve their overall well-being.

Relevance of Indian Ikigai

Changing social structure in the form of rural youth migrating towards urban for employment, urban youth leaving the family and the country for their professional/career growth has led the elderly to feel isolated. The core components of Ikigai namely finding purpose and meaning, adopting holistic practices, engaging in community activities and living a balanced life need to be customised to suit the elderly Indian Community.

Some of the ways that could help the elderly at an individual level as well as at the National level (in the form of policy advocacy) are as follows.

- Reorienting one's perspective to life aligning with the ashrama and the corresponding purushartha is likely to find the purpose and meaning to one's life. Ancient Indian

Scriptures advocates adopting a perspective one should have towards life by those in the developmental stage of vanaprastha and sanyasa.

- Corresponding to the stage of development, one should set and strive towards achieving the purusharthas. The concept of ashrama identifies two stages of elderly namely vanaprastha and sanyasa. People in these two stages are expected to have enjoyed all the materialistic benefits of life hence strive towards achieving moksha (self-actualization/realization). Desire to achieve moksha provides a direction and attempts to find meaning and purpose to one's life.
- Pathanjali's ashtanga yoga act as a navigator that guides one to find the meaning in one's life. Yoga is not restricted to asanas and pranayama and is a way of life and if practiced facilitates to achieve purpose in life. Changing one's life style based one's temperamental balance (trigunas) by changing one's diet as prescribed in Ayurveda would enable the body to function towards achieving psychological wellbeing.
- At a macro level the community in the form of centres for the elderly need to strengthen the network, engaging in community activities. Providing Opportunities for life long learning by curating specific courses for the elderly is likely to make the life of the elderly meaningful.
- Keeping in view the growing population of the elderly across the globe, orienting the elderly about finding alternative ways to achieve meaning and purpose is essential. Orienting them with the Ikigai principles with an Indigenous perspective is bound to make the life of the Indian elderly happy.

Conclusion

India's aging population presents both challenges and opportunities. The weakening of traditional family structures, urbanization, and globalization have led to increased vulnerabilities among the elderly, including isolation and financial dependency. However,

Indian cultural traditions, coupled with inspiration from concepts like Ikigai, offer a roadmap for promoting healthy and purposeful aging. Practices rooted in Ayurveda, Yoga, and the Ashrama system emphasize balance, harmony, and spiritual growth, which can enhance well-being in later life.

Integrating these practices with community-based initiatives and policy interventions can address the multifaceted needs of the elderly. Establishing elder-care centers, promoting lifelong learning, and encouraging intergenerational connections are practical steps towards fostering a supportive environment. Reorienting perspectives to align with the stages of life and incorporating principles of holistic living can empower the elderly to find purpose and fulfillment.

By blending traditional wisdom with modern approaches, India can develop a comprehensive framework to address the growing needs of its aging population, ensuring dignity, health, and happiness for its senior citizens.

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