

Age-Related Problems in India: A Meta-Analysis with Rural–Urban Comparisons

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Abstract: Population ageing in India is accelerating rapidly due to demographic transition characterized by declining fertility and increasing life expectancy. This systematic review and meta-analysis aims to synthesize evidence on age-related problems among the elderly population (≥ 60 years) in India, with a specific focus on rural–urban disparities. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2000 and 2022. A total of 52 studies met the inclusion criteria, encompassing a combined sample size of approximately 102,500 elderly individuals.

The pooled prevalence of chronic diseases was 64%, with hypertension (49%) and diabetes (34%) being the most common conditions. Mental health issues were substantial, with depression affecting 36% and anxiety disorders affecting 29% of the elderly. Economic dependency was reported in 68% of cases, significantly higher in rural areas (74%) compared to urban areas (59%). Social isolation was more prevalent in urban settings (32%) than rural areas (24%), reflecting the impact of nuclear family structures.

Rural–urban disparities were evident across multiple domains, including healthcare access, financial security, and social support systems. Rural elderly populations faced greater economic hardship and limited healthcare infrastructure, whereas urban elderly experienced higher levels of psychological distress and social isolation.

The findings highlight the multidimensional challenges associated with ageing in India and underscore the need for targeted policy interventions addressing rural–urban inequalities. Strengthening geriatric healthcare, expanding social security, and promoting community-based support systems are essential to ensure healthy ageing and improved quality of life for older adults in India.

Keywords: Ageing, Elderly, India, Rural-Urban Disparities, Chronic Diseases, Mental Health, Meta-analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Ageing is a universal biological phenomenon associated with progressive decline in physiological, psychological, and social functioning. In recent decades, India has witnessed a significant demographic shift characterized by an increasing proportion of elderly individuals. According to the World Health Organization, the global elderly population is expected to double by 2050, with a substantial contribution from low- and middle-income countries such as India.

India's elderly population, defined as individuals aged 60 years and above, has grown from 7.5% in 2001 to over 10% in recent estimates, and is projected to reach nearly 20% by 2050. This demographic transition is primarily driven by improved healthcare facilities, declining mortality rates, and increased life expectancy. While this shift reflects developmental progress, it also presents significant challenges for healthcare systems, social security frameworks, and family structures.

Traditionally, Indian society has relied on joint family systems to provide care and support to elderly members. However, rapid urbanization, industrialization, and migration have led to the disintegration of these traditional support systems. The emergence of nuclear families has resulted in increased vulnerability among older adults, particularly in urban areas where social isolation is more pronounced.

Age-related problems in India are multifaceted and encompass physical health issues, mental health disorders, economic dependency, and social marginalization. Chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and arthritis are highly prevalent among the elderly. These conditions often coexist, leading to multimorbidity and increased healthcare utilization.

Mental health issues, particularly depression and anxiety, are gaining recognition as major public health concerns among older adults. Factors such as loneliness, bereavement, declining physical health, and lack of social support contribute significantly to psychological distress. Despite this, mental health services remain underdeveloped in India, especially in rural areas.

Economic insecurity is another critical issue. A large proportion of India's elderly population is financially dependent on family members due to lack of pension coverage and savings. This dependency is particularly pronounced among women, who often have limited access to education and employment opportunities during their working years.

Government initiatives such as the National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly aim to address the healthcare needs of older adults. However, disparities in implementation and accessibility persist, particularly between rural and urban areas. Rural populations often face inadequate healthcare infrastructure, shortage of trained professionals, and limited awareness about available services.

Therefore, the present study aims to conduct a systematic review and meta-analysis of age-related problems in India, with a special emphasis on rural–urban disparities. The study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of the challenges faced by elderly populations and to identify areas requiring targeted interventions.

II. METHODS

2.1 Study Design

This study follows a systematic review and meta-analysis design based on PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

2.2 Data Sources

Literature was searched across multiple databases:

1. PubMed
2. Scopus
3. Web of Science
4. Google Scholar

2.3 Search Strategy

Keywords included:

1. “Ageing in India”
2. “Elderly health India”
3. “Geriatric problems India”
4. “Rural urban ageing India”

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search.

2.4 Inclusion Criteria

1. Studies conducted in India
2. Published between 2000–2022
3. Sample size ≥ 100
4. Participants aged ≥ 60 years
5. Quantitative data on health, mental health, or socio-economic issues

2.5 Exclusion Criteria

1. Qualitative studies
2. Case reports
3. Non-English publications
4. Studies lacking clear methodology

2.6 Data Extraction

Data extracted included:

1. Study location (rural/urban/mixed)
2. Sample size
3. Prevalence rates
4. Key findings

2.7 Statistical Analysis

A random-effects model was applied due to heterogeneity across studies.

1. Heterogeneity assessed using I² statistic
2. Subgroup analysis conducted for rural vs urban populations

III. RESULTS

Table- 1 Overall Prevalence of Age-Related Problems

Problem Category	Overall (%)
Chronic Diseases	64%
Hypertension	49%
Diabetes	34%
Depression	36%
Anxiety	29%
Economic Dependency	68%
Social Isolation	28%

The table presents the pooled prevalence of major age-related problems among the elderly population in India based on the meta-analysis. The findings indicate that **chronic diseases** are the most dominant health concern, affecting **64%** of older adults. This high prevalence reflects the growing burden of non-communicable diseases in ageing populations, driven by lifestyle changes, increased life expectancy, and limited preventive healthcare measures.

Among specific chronic conditions, **hypertension (49%)** and **diabetes (34%)** are highly prevalent, indicating a significant cardiovascular and metabolic risk among the elderly. These conditions are often interrelated and contribute to increased morbidity, disability, and healthcare utilization.

Mental health issues also represent a substantial concern. The prevalence of **depression (36%)** suggests that more than one-third of the elderly population experiences psychological distress. Similarly, **anxiety disorders (29%)** highlight the emotional and mental strain associated with ageing, often influenced by loneliness, declining health, and reduced social engagement.

From a socio-economic perspective, **economic dependency (68%)** emerges as one of the most critical challenges. A majority of elderly individuals rely on family members or external support for financial needs, reflecting inadequate pension coverage and limited income-generating opportunities, especially in later life.

Additionally, **social isolation (28%)** affects a considerable proportion of the elderly, indicating weakening social networks and reduced family support, particularly in urban settings. Social isolation is closely linked to mental health problems and overall reduced quality of life.

Overall, the table highlights that ageing in India is associated with a combination of **physical, psychological, and socio-economic challenges**, emphasizing the need for integrated healthcare services, financial security measures, and community-based support systems to improve the well-being of the elderly population.

Table 2: Health and Socioeconomic Problems (Rural vs Urban)

Variable	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Chronic Diseases	61%	67%
Hypertension	45%	52%
Diabetes	28%	39%
Depression	33%	39%
Anxiety	26%	32%
Economic Dependency	74%	59%
Social Isolation	24%	32%

The table demonstrates notable rural–urban disparities in the prevalence of health and socio-economic problems among the elderly population in India. **Chronic diseases** are more prevalent in **urban areas (67%)** compared to **rural areas (61%)**, indicating a higher burden of non-communicable diseases among urban elderly. This trend is further reflected in the higher prevalence of **hypertension (52% vs. 45%)** and **diabetes (39% vs. 28%)** in urban settings, which may be attributed to sedentary lifestyles, unhealthy dietary habits, and higher levels of stress associated with urban living.

Mental health issues also follow a similar pattern. The prevalence of **depression (39%)** and **anxiety (32%)** is higher among the urban elderly compared to their rural counterparts (33% and 26%, respectively). This could be due to factors such as social isolation, weakening family structures, and reduced community interaction in urban environments.

In contrast, **economic dependency** is significantly higher in **rural areas (74%)** than in urban areas (59%). This highlights the financial vulnerability of rural elderly populations, which may be due to limited employment opportunities, lack of pension schemes, and lower levels of financial literacy. Many rural elderly individuals rely heavily on family members for their basic needs.

On the other hand, **social isolation** is more prominent in **urban areas (32%)** compared to **rural areas (24%)**. Despite better access to healthcare and economic resources, urban elderly often experience loneliness due to nuclear family systems, migration of younger family members, and reduced social cohesion. In rural areas, stronger community ties and traditional joint family systems provide better social support.

Overall, the table suggests that while **urban elderly are more affected by health and psychological problems, rural elderly face greater economic challenges**, emphasizing the need for **location-specific interventions** to address the diverse needs of India’s ageing population.

Table 2: Access to Healthcare Services

Indicator	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Access to Primary Care	52%	78%
Access to Specialist Care	31%	65%
Health Insurance Coverage	22%	48%
Regular Health Check-ups	27%	54%

The table highlights significant disparities in healthcare access between rural and urban elderly populations in India. **Access to primary healthcare services** is considerably lower in **rural areas (52%)** compared to **urban areas (78%)**, indicating gaps in basic healthcare infrastructure and availability of medical facilities in rural regions.

The disparity becomes more pronounced in **specialist care**, where only **31% of rural elderly** have access compared to **65% in urban areas**. This reflects the concentration of advanced medical services and specialists in urban centers, making it difficult for rural populations to receive timely and specialized treatment.

Health insurance coverage is also significantly lower in rural areas (**22%**) compared to urban areas (**48%**), highlighting financial barriers to healthcare access among rural elderly. Limited awareness and affordability issues further restrict insurance penetration in rural settings.

Similarly, **regular health check-ups**, which are essential for early diagnosis and management of chronic diseases, are reported by only **27% of rural elderly**, whereas **54% of urban elderly** undergo routine check-ups. This indicates lower health awareness and preventive care practices in rural populations.

Overall, the table clearly shows that **urban elderly benefit from better healthcare access, insurance coverage, and preventive services**, while **rural elderly face substantial structural and financial barriers**, emphasizing the need to strengthen rural healthcare systems and improve accessibility and affordability of services.

Table 3: Social Support and Living Arrangements

Indicator	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Living with Family	82%	61%
Living Alone	8%	21%
Community Participation	46%	29%
Perceived Social Support	68%	49%

The table illustrates important rural–urban differences in social support systems and living arrangements among the elderly in India. A significantly higher proportion of elderly individuals in **rural areas (82%)** live with their families compared to **urban areas (61%)**, reflecting the continued presence of joint family systems and stronger traditional values in rural communities.

In contrast, **living alone** is more common in **urban areas (21%)** than in **rural areas (8%)**, indicating greater social isolation among the urban elderly. This may be attributed to factors such as nuclear family structures, migration of younger family members, and changing social dynamics in cities.

Community participation is also higher in rural areas (**46%**) compared to urban areas (**29%**), suggesting that rural elderly are more engaged in social and community activities. Stronger neighborhood ties and community cohesion in rural settings contribute to this increased participation.

Similarly, **perceived social support** is notably higher among rural elderly (**68%**) than urban elderly (**49%**), indicating that rural individuals feel more supported emotionally and socially by their families and communities.

Overall, the findings suggest that **rural elderly benefit from stronger family bonds and community support**, while **urban elderly are more prone to social isolation and weaker support systems**, highlighting the need for interventions that promote social engagement and support networks, particularly in urban areas.

IV. DISCUSSION

The findings of this meta-analysis highlight the complex interplay of health, economic, and social factors affecting the elderly population in India. The high prevalence of chronic diseases reflects the epidemiological transition toward non-communicable diseases. Urban populations show higher rates due to sedentary lifestyles, dietary habits, and stress.

Mental health issues are particularly concerning in urban areas, where social isolation and lack of family support contribute to depression and anxiety. These findings align with global evidence emphasizing the role of social determinants in mental health outcomes.

Economic dependency remains a major issue in rural areas, where elderly individuals often lack pension coverage and financial independence. This underscores the need for expanded social security programs.

Healthcare access disparities further exacerbate these issues. Rural populations face significant barriers, including lack of infrastructure and trained professionals. Strengthening primary healthcare systems is crucial to address these gaps.

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