gladesh are widowed. Husbands' death is the start of their descent into almost complete dependency and gradually they lose their rank, prestige and authority along with livelihood security.

Usually they begin to live with the families of their married sons and spend their final years completely dependent on the good wishes and pity of their sons and daughters-in-law. But they take on more responsibilities in caring for their grandchildren and other household work. There is also a mistaken presumption that older persons are physically inactive, not open to new ideas and unable to participate effectively in economic activities. When considered and seen as welfare issues, older persons are regarded as a burden on society and passive recipients of care. Lack of public awareness and information about older persons' contributions, circumstances, issues or needs create negative images of ageing.

Major political parties and the Bangladesh government have shown some interest in and taken initiatives for the benefit and welfare of older persons in recent years, an encouraging trend for future age-care initiatives. Unfortunately, despite Bangladesh being a country of thousands of NGOs, the role of the major NGOs is not yet satisfactory in this regard. Only a handful of NGOs are involved in ageing-related activities as one of their side programmes. Also unfortunate is the fact that national and international donor agencies and personal donors are not at all interested to extend their hand towards age-care activities.

There are hardly any physicians, dentists, psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses, architects, journalists, social workers or any other professionals offering their specialised services exclusively for older persons. Naturally, family, kin, community, neighbours and religious guides and organisations still remain the main sources of care, service and security to the huge number of older people in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, historically the upholder of Asian, Indian, Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic culture, addressed its older people basically through family, kin, community and religious support system. Outside family, the Hindus and Buddhists introduced 'Briddhasram' (refuge for the elderly people, organised and maintained by the local community people, particularly on the basis of religion). On the other hand, Muslims maintain their elderly members within the family environment as a part of Islamic obligation. So, the family care system has traditionally been considered as the deepest reservoir of support for the older persons in this region.

Government initiatives

The then British Government introduced retirement pension system for those who retired from government service at the age of 57 years under the Indian Retirement Pension Benefit Act of 1925. There was no government-specific initiative to benefit the older people during the Pakistan period, there was only a retirement pension system.

Population ageing is a by-product of scientific development in human societies bound to remain a dominant social problem throughout the 21st century.

The Bangladesh government recognised the issue related to ageing in the 3rd Five Year Plan (1985-90) under the heading "Old and Infirm", and allocated 5 million BDT for age-care in its 4th Five Year Plan (1990-95) for the first time but could not spend the amount. Again, in the 5th Five Year Plan (1997-2002) the government allocated 40 million BDT for community based age-care services and this allocation was also not spent.

On the eve of the revival of democratic practice in Bangladesh, in the 90s, a sincere commitment for age-care programmes was observed in the election manifestos of different major national political parties. It was a historical political victory for the older