

When Peers are no More: Some Rambling Thoughts on Old Age

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ABSTRACT An old German proverb is: 'An old person who is loved is like a winter with flowers'. Keeping this in perspective, this paper explores the multitudinous dimensions of old age with particular reference to India. It argues that along with myriad socio-economic measures, our policies for the old should also focus on integrating the old people with their domestic systems on the one hand and society in general on the other.

A child walks on four limbs,
an adult, on two,
an old, on three—
the third being the walking-stick

— *A Panjabi Saying Paraphrased by
Mrs. Devki R. Grover*

This paper is based on observations conducted on the old people who are made to lie at the border of redundancy in families (our own included). Material facts are extremely significant for assisting the old. The legal rights of old people should be protected. They should be saved from being abandoned by their progeny. They should be guarded against nefarious strategies hatched by their unworthy descendants to usurp their wealth and property. Their health problems need urgent attention. So does housing. Of equal importance is the issue of their integration with the family, the community, and the society, which we address here. We can take up these issues in the International Year of the Aged People which commences this year in the month of October and continues till December next year.

One of our friends, presently in his early seventies and enjoying a healthy life in comparison to others of his age group, often reminisce about his past and feels the void created by the death of his colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. He once said, "What's the idea of leading a long life when those who constitute your peer group are no more? Either all live for hundred years or

all die about the same time! This is a utopian thought. As in a social get-together, where all start with a drink, and then each drinks according to his desire and capacity, similarly in life, we all start together but part at different times, at different phases of life.

"Eventually when your peers are not alive, with whom do you identify yourself? All around you are young, middle aged, or people in their fifties and early sixties. They have something to look forward to — their career, post-retirement benefits, insurance payments, marriages of their sons and daughters, or grandchildren. What about those who have discharged their responsibilities, those who are widowed? The young think of them as relics; for the middle aged, they're senile; and old man is misfit in their company and his own peers are gradually departing from the world. Such a man is left alone; it is not only healthy old age that is desired, it is healthy living in one's group that gives a meaning to life."

Our friend's discourse draws attention to another dimension to be kept in mind while discussing old age. To paraphrase this in other terms: it is the problem of integrating the old with the rest of the society, the society of ceaseless, madly hectic and intense activity in which the old may find themselves left-out, palaeolithic, and useless. Geriatric medicine looks after the dimensions of health and is geared to treat ailments concomitant with old age. Security schemes provide the old people with social and economic benefits, especially when they have been left on their own with the breakdown of the traditional system of social security guaranteed by joint families. Old-age homes have made a notable contribution giving their inmates a family-like environment; but because of financial constraints, such homes are not available to all old people and in all towns and cities. It may be noted here that in contemporary India, one in four is an old person.

Moreover, not all of those who can afford old-age homes avail these facilities. We found in our study of family systems amongst the middle class people of south Delhi that many old people do not want to announce to the world that they have procreated unfilial sons (since the society is patrilineal) who do not want to keep their old parents (or grandparents) with them. Moving to old-age homes (or aspiring to buy a one-room flat constructed mainly for the aged and retired) would amount to disclosing to the relatives and neighbours that they have been 'bad' parents, not able to bring up 'good' sons. Because of this, the old people think they become targets of ridicule. The questions that really torment them (as one of my respondents said) are: 'Why have your sons left you?' 'Did you not treat your daughters-in-law well?' 'Do your sons support you economically?' 'Do your grandchildren miss you?' 'Do you live with your daughter?' And, what is like sprinkling salt on a wound is the consolation from neighbours: 'Never mind if they (your sons) have deserted you. We're here. You may bank on us when you need help.'

The plight (and also humiliation) of old people in urban-industrial society is well known. Social systems all over the world are variably sensitive to the problems of the aged. In the last two decades or so, there has been an increase in researches on ageing. Gerontology is now one of the respected, sophisticated and interdisciplinary subjects lying at the confluence of biological and social sciences. Alongside these academic works, many institutionalized mechanisms have been improvised to help aged and to integrate them with the wider world. Voluntary organizations (and also, NGOs) have undertaken specific programmes for the welfare of old people. In the West, many voluntary agencies engage young, energetic people (of them, some are paid, others work voluntarily) whose job is to spend an hour or so talking to old people either in their houses or dormitories of old-age homes. Certain neighbourhoods (in towns and countrysides) have clubs of old people, where they assemble once a week, listen to a lecture on a popular theme organized by the club, play games, and eat and drink together. Vinay remembers one such club in Cambridge whom he ad-

dressed in November 1988 on 'India and her people'. After the meeting he spoke to the members about the importance of the club in their lives. They told him that they looked forward to attending the Wednesday meeting (that was when the club met because of which it was also termed the Wednesday Club) which gave them ample opportunity to 'socialize with old boys and girls, share with them the moments of happiness and also the tales of woes and griefs.'

One such association in Delhi we know of is of the retired university and college teachers. Although its explicit aim is academic — and the lectures delivered here are far more scholarly and specialized than in the Wednesday Club — the mere fact that its members are retired teachers also means it opens up avenues for old people to interact on a regular basis. We also know of many morning clubs of old people in Delhi, which at the latent level, perform the function of integrating the people to the group. Such clubs and associations endeavour to mitigate the loneliness and ennui of old age. But, like old-age homes, these clubs and associations are not found in all contexts and not all aged can seek their advantages.

The importance of institutionalized mechanisms (such as old-age homes, clubs and associations) cannot be undermined but they extend their services to few beneficiaries; and as noted earlier, because of financial constraints, it is difficult for them to reach all places and peoples. Furthermore, they are external attempts, that is to say, against the background of the problems the old face in contemporary society that these institutions have been set up. They allocate priority to health, social security, and housing. And they try to model themselves after extended families. Our submission is that along with these external agencies (which should be further strengthened and their economic base widened), the traditional institutions (family, neighbourhood) should be revitalized; the need is to have a 'social revolution' so that even after the peers are no more the old do not feel left-out and miserable.

In a seminal paper, Beteille (1991) argues that amongst the middle, professional class of India (consisting of civil servants, teachers, accountants, army officers), family (as an institution) is

far more important than caste. But which aspect of family is nurtured by this fast, expanding class (which altogether comprises about twenty per cent of India's population)?

Children are important in all societies, but in middle class families they become the foci. The parents talk about their children, highlight their achievements (particularly in studies) in gatherings of relatives and friends, they invest the family's fortune on their children's education (paying school and private tuition fees); in some cases they take heavy loans from banks (or from affluent relatives) to support their children's education in well known (and expensive) boarding schools or abroad. We are not sure if all parents — in all cultures and at all points of time — want their children (especially sons) to fair better than themselves, but certainly middle class parents are more particular about it. They invariably desire not only that their children do exceptionally well in studies and jobs, but also that they qualify for commanding positions in the Civil Service or any other sector which brings both prestige and money (managerial jobs, for example).

In addition to the focus on children, a middle class family is often nuclear (comprising husband, wife, and their unmarried children). The parents of the husband live separately, in the old house, and the grandchildren are brought up without actively sharing the company of their grandparents. Visits of grandchildren to their grandparental houses are 'fun visits' without having any consequences for the socialization of young ones. However, in our study we came across a number of households (we called them extended) of which the wife's widowed mother was a permanent member, and the old parents of the husband, living elsewhere, were unhappy with this arrangement, which they thought was antipodal to the ideal of a patrilineal family.

Focus on children with the aim that they do qualitatively better than their parents, which also leads to their temporary separation (because of enrolment in a boarding school or in an outstation college), itself sows the seeds of fission in the family. Many parents told us that once the children are separated (because of education or job considerations which make them geographically mobile), they will never become a part of the extended family; they will have a nuclear

family. An old widow narrated the case of one of her sons, who after marriage continued to live with her in the traditional house. Then he started looking for a better job outside Delhi. He got one in Ahmedabad where he moved with his wife and daughter leaving behind the old mother (who was looked after by her daughter living in the neighbourhood). A couple of years later, the son got a Delhi posting. The mother was pleased to know this, for she thought there would be a family reunion and she would not have to worry about the crises of old age. But alas, the son came to Delhi and decided to stay in a small company-rented accommodation. The poor widow now lives with her daughter — neither the son nor the mother ever talk about a joint living; the mother knows her son does not want to keep her and the son knows that if he ever raised the issue of bringing his mother to his household, his wife may oppose it vigorously.

We know many parents in Delhi whose children are settled abroad and the old couple (living by themselves) keenly await a phone call from them. Some of our respondents squarely blamed their daughters-in-law for not agreeing to live with (or keep) their parents-in-law. In many cases, they said, since the son lived independently (in a distant town or country) even before marriage and is joined by his spouse after marriage, his wife does not get an opportunity to share a household with her parents-in-law. She does not naturally develop the same sentiments for her husband's parents as she has for hers. The outcome is: the parents live alone, after marriage the sons move away and become involved in raising their children according to middle and upper class standards, and the daughters also move away with their husbands. The solidarity of the conjugal group gives a meaning to the life of old parents. Once one of them dies, the other finds it onerously hard to live alone. At this point the children may come to the rescue of their surviving parent, or the latter may continue to live alone, or move to an old-age home. We found in our study that at this juncture the daughters also decided to keep their widowed mothers (and not fathers) with themselves, thus violating the so-called patrilineal ideal.

Earlier we said that traditional institutions (patrilineal family, for example) are to be

strengthened for integrating the old with the wider society. Change is irrevocable. It is possible that some nuclear families may become extended over time and the aged may feel secure in the traditional system. But the process of fissioning of large families and the emergence of small family systems is world wide, and this process as a whole is irreversible. This obviously means surfacing of problems for the aged, because once society emphasizes the values of individualism and small family, the old are likely to be left in their own, small, mostly conjugal families or one-person households. In years to come, the sufferings (psychological and social) and loneliness of the aged will compound. Longevity also means an accentuation of the sufferings of the aged.

The solution to the problems of the old lies ideally in reviving the traditional, extended family — in which the old man is the head of the household and his wife commands the domestic realm. All males (sons and grandsons) are under the authority of the old man and all women (husband's younger brothers' wives, daughters-in-law, unmarried daughters and grand-daughters) are supervised by his wife. Both the head of the household and his wife are important for functioning of the family. They are the storehouse of knowledge. Their role in socializing the young has often been praised in literature. Because of their positions of authority (decision-making) in the family and the constant company of grandchildren (and great grandchildren) they have, they do not feel alienated. Death of a peer is a sad occasion but not the cause of thanatomania in them. They breathe their last in the company of their kin. There are also cases of the old people (from the religious folds of Hinduism and Jainism) who renounce their families (thus entering into the vocations of *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*) to lead the life of austerity and penance.

The above sketched model of the extended family is not a figment of imagination. Even today — amidst the catastrophic changes occurring in institutions — such families are found in villages, towns, and cities; however unless requisite economic and social factors are available, extended families can not result or survive for a long time. For instance, for a large family to live

together, a big physical space is indispensable. The type of housing structure (one bed, two beds, or even three beds) which is in vogue does not implicitly favour a large extended family. For the head to be really effective as a decision maker, the sons must be economically dependent upon him. He should be the *de jure* owner of the family property, which should remain intact not only during his life time but also after his demise when his eldest son (primogeniture) replaces him, taking up his role-set. Marriages must be arranged according to traditional principles, caste endogamy for example, for this would not only create homogeneity but also reduce the individualism of the daughters-in-law which may become instrumental in the breakdown of the family. In addition, traditional knowledge is respected and is saved from being eroded by the onslaught of modernity.

But all these prerequisites of an extended family are far from being realizable today, which explains why we cannot hope to have a large number of extended families and why the problems of the aged are bound to multiply. It would be unrealistic to preach that people should live in extended families when factors which collectively cause and support them are absent. However, it does not mean that we give less importance to family while discussing the problems of old people. We know the aim of the International Year of the Family (1994) was to draw the attention of the world to the importance of family in the lives of people and the problems surfacing with its decline. In the last decade or so, there has been an increase in the number of research centres specializing in family studies and the cause of many ills plaguing modern society is sought by researchers in the decline of the family system and values.

Is the amount of attention given to old people in a family equal to the one given to children? Certainly not; as said earlier, the children are the foci of attention. Since the reigning desire is that the children do substantially better than their parents, they (and especially the male) are obviously preferred in the allocation of resources. The modern family is child-oriented. The progress of children — their settlement in life — is its central aspiration. In a child-oriented family, the old are marginalized. They are

considered a burden on family resources. Especially when they are an economic liability (in the words of the modern capitalist ethic), their plight is far serious as compared to when they have enough to fend for themselves. In the latter case, the descendants have the consolation that after the demise of their parents/grandparents, they will inherit their wealth.

In this context, we have come across many tales of clever old people who throughout their lives kept their descendants under the illusion of inheritance after their death. One such folktale Vinay heard in Rajasthan (and variants of this are available from other cultures) concerned an old grandmother who had a big, ponderously heavy trunk with rusted Aligarhi locks hanging from three of its sides. Everyone in the family believed that it stored jewels, gold, currency notes, expensive saris, and crockery. The old woman kept this trunk near her bed and would not disclose where its keys were hidden. She also would not encourage any conversation on her personal effects, the objects in the trunk. Her pithy reply to questions on her wealth used to be: 'All that's mine will be yours after my death, or of the person to whom I decide to give all that I own'. Her descendants did not want the wealth being transferred to a remote relative. They competed amongst themselves to serve as handsomely as possible the old woman, meeting her demands and bearing her idiosyncrasies. She enjoyed an extremely fulfilling old age with her sons and grandsons (and their spouses) looking after her until she died.

Immediately after her mortuary rituals were over, the descendants started fighting amongst themselves to gain control over the colossal trunk. To avert acrimony and bloodshed, they consented to divide the ancestral booty equally; then began the search for the keys. Unable to find them in any conceivable place, they decided to break open the locks. After real sweating work, they succeeded in their mission, waiting to be face-to-face with the mine of jewels, but instead were greeted by pebbles of all sizes. Frantically — paroxysmally, to be true to their feelings — they threw one pebble after the other out of the trunk hoping its bottom would be layers of wealth. Alas, the box was emptied, not a penny, not a jewel, not even a handkerchief or duster,

but a note that read: 'Thank you for looking after me so patiently. My blessings are with you'.

After narrating this story, Vinay's Rajasthani respondent added: 'The old woman was really shrewd but not all are like her?' She was quite right. Not all are able to resort to manoeuvres in their old age. Many end up in the lanes of misery after having distributed their wealth in their life times. Then, they are regarded as 'good for nothing', and their loved ones wish their early departure. This explains why many turn miserly in their old age. Even when their sons and daughters face financial difficulty, they may not extend an iota of help. We remember one of our old, wealthy female neighbours who was notorious for her mean parsimoniousness. She lived frugally and ran her own kitchen. Her son, who was an assistant to a lawyer, was addicted to liquor and gambling and spent his entire salary on vices. Often, he borrowed money from his friends. His wife and five children invariably slept on an empty stomach. When the creditors tormented him, he asked his mother for a loan; when his family was hungry, he requested help from his mother; but she never complied to the demand/request of her son. When his repeated requests fell on the deaf ear (of his mother), he would threaten to kill himself. But the mother did not yield to her son's temper tantrums. Although the son knew that eventually the wealth would come to him (and later, after his mother's death, he inherited several kilogrammes of gold and silver besides currency notes), he criticised his mother for not rescuing him at the hour of need. It was not that the mother was greatly upset over her son's bad habits and company, so she did not want to help him, but because she believed that she was going to live long (and in fact, certain astrologers had predicted a very long life for her) and her son, being worthless, would not be able to render her assistance, therefore she needed to save money and spend it as little as possible. While hurling abuse at her son, during the tirades of arguments, she described herself as 'miser and fly-sucker' (*kanjus makkhichus*) and did not mind being called these terms by others.

During the course of fieldwork with the middle class families, we came across many sons (and also daughters) complaining against their

parents for not extending them financial assistance in times of dire need. One of our respondents said: 'Whenever I and my husband talk about monetary difficulties we are facing because of spiralling prices, my mother, if she happens to be around, listening to the conversation, quietly leaves the room or busies herself in other errands pretending as if she heard nothing. Another said: 'I am under heavy debt because of the house I bought this year. My parents know about it but not even once do they ask me how both ends are met by me.' The worst we heard was of a heart patient whose parents wanted to excuse themselves from making a contribution towards his by-pass surgery. As young parents, perhaps, they did everything possible to raise their children, but as old, they appeared selfish, more worried about their illnesses than about their son's. There were many other cases of unhelpful old parents which we documented in our notes.

We talked to the old people on this matter. While many vehemently denied the charge of stinginess, some acknowledged to be thrifty, for their sources of earning were limited, confined mainly to pension, interest on savings, or meagre rent from a property. They needed money for food; for medicines and pathological examinations; for giving gifts to relatives and friends on life-cycle occasions; for contributions to religious and welfare organizations; and for pilgrimage. These respondents were unsure if financial assistance would ever come to them from their children. It was thus, imperative for them to stand on a steady financial ground. While they endeavoured to meet each demand of their children, they did not expect the latter to help them out on each occasion. Not only that, some aged respondents thought their children would grumble over rendering physical help (such as spending long hours with them in case of hospitalization, cleaning or washing them if they are confined to bed). 'The old should die before they become perennially dependent (in physical terms) on others,' one of them said. The fears of being physically dependent on others (an idea conveyed by the Urdu word *mohtaji*) were real. Who would look after us when we are chronically sick, was the question that tormented the old. The diseases - such as Alzheimer's, Parkin-

son's, amnesia - frightened them; the thought of urinating and defecating in bed, or suffering from the loss of control over bladder and bowel, made them worried souls.

Our respondents felt that old age was a curse, a punishment, an unfortunate phase, but had to be endured. Although they all wished to sire sons when they were young, later they all seemed to be disillusioned with male progeny in general. An observation shared by many of them was that after marriage the sons come under the 'wiles' of the wives and are, thus, alienated from their families of orientation (of their parents and siblings). The parents have to fend for themselves. But they also felt that daughters were closer to their parents. One of our respondents said that she more frequently received phone calls from her daughters than her son. (Incidentally, all her children were abroad.) This would also explain why many old widows are constrained to live with their daughters, and why middle class families are becoming more and more matrifocal.

Why is old age such a horror? When all know its inevitability, when in the aged around them the young see their future, and when grey hair is a sign of maturity, experience, and wisdom. In the traditional Indian society, people looked forward 'to get some age on themselves,' to quote a phrase from John van Willigen (personal communication, May 1995). Often, while behaving the young stepped into the roles of the aged. Vinay remembers a teacher of his who, at the age of thirty, addressed his female students (some of them only six years younger to him) not by their names but by the kinship appellation, *beti*, the north Indian word for the daughter. Grey hair was a symbol of respect. Then, why is it now that people hate going grey? Wrinkles on the face worry them, so do sagging bosoms. Like the new reproductive technology, many techniques have come into existence to slow the process of ageing or make one appear younger. Face-lift, dyeing, beauty-creams, diet-fads, liposuction, silification, are the terms one hears these days. People conceal their actual ages. There are stories of women who made clean breasts about everything except their respective ages. We know an astrologer in Delhi who claims to predict from the date (and not

month or year) of birth. Have a look at the visual media, the television and films. It is saturated with stories of the young. Everything revolves around youthfulness. The aged are marginal to these stories and are mostly depicted as extraordinarily gentle, helpless and hapless (remember the Hindi cine-star A.K. Hangal), or peevish, brutish, and haughty (like the old-timer Lalita Pawar), or as a laughing stock, a butt of jokes (like the comedian Asit Sen). In none of these characters do they appear normal humans, they are caricatures.

If in the traditional Indian society the old were at the centre of the family, and were the decision-makers, in its modern counterpart, they are tolerated (as we said earlier) if they are of productive value, and if their descendants think they would inherit wealth and property after their demise. If the old are penniless after having distributed their savings (and property) to their kinspersons, they are made to lead an ignominious existence. Often, their worst enemies are their children and their children's spouses. Primary groups around them acquire secondariness of relations. Many old people told us that their children's spouses wished them dead, for they were a liability. An old woman weepingly said, irrespective of what she did, she was always chided by her daughter-in-law. One of the abuses hurled at an old man by his family members was 'an enemy of grains' (*anaj ke dushman*) because he was simply a consuming member.

The needs of the old, their interests and treatment of their illnesses, are given a secondary status. The 'consuming old' are not a part of the family discourse. Their good lies (in this changing family ethics) in remaining huddled in a corner of the house, sitting quietly and watching, expressing no demand, no disgust, and waiting for the final departure from this world. We hear tales of the old being thrown out of the main living quarters to occupy a nook in the garage or the porch. None in the family really desires to share moments with them. The old are considered redundant, a type of refuse, and 'like any other refuse, they should be disposed of,' to recapitulate a respondent's words.

The 'productive old' (those who have a respectable bank balance and have property in their names, or are working) are definitely better

placed in extended families of their descendants. However, marginalization of the old is an inevitable concomitant of family dynamics. Because of increase in the life span (as a result of the invention of life saving machines, improvement in hygienic levels, health-conscious ideology), the number of the aged is exponentially rising, and with this is increasing the contemptuous treatment meted out to them. Yes, there are structural variations. The old in middle class families of Delhi are treated in a different manner as compared to their counterparts in villages. Economic factors play an important role. We have seen in the villages of Rajasthan the pride that accompanies old age. The ignominy to which the middle class old are subjected would be news to these villagers in Rajasthan (and also in many other parts of India). But there has been a decline in the status of the old in Indian society as a whole. An administrator friend of ours, Somesh Kumar (personal communication, January 1997), told us that in the drought-stricken Kalahandi (Orissa), the migrating people abandoned their old kin behind to fend for themselves. Satwanti Kapoor (personal communication, September 1995) narrated to us cases of parent-beating from her fieldwork in rural Haryana. She said it was quite common in her field area that old women (and also, men) would be slapped (or punched, their hair yanked, or punished by being denied food and water) by their sons (and also, daughters-in-law) in case they faulted at work or were careless in discharging their duties. We learnt in Ranchi that many sons (and grandsons) and other relatives bring their old parents, grandparents, and other folks to mental hospitals with an intention of getting rid of them. We have witnessed situations where the old are cursed with death because 'they are a burden, good for nothing, demanding, and even baleful'.

The January 20, 1997 issue of *Time* carried a highly informative article (by Kluger) about the scientific researches on ageing. It showed that there has been a phenomenal increase in the life-span of people. In the United States in 1900, a child could be expected to live forty-seven years, and today (in 1997), the average life expectancy for an American child is about seventy-six, an increase of twenty-nine years. The author hopes that in years to come, there would be further increase in life-span.

It may be tripled, or even quadrupled, or the very concept of life-span may be eliminated from our discourse. Equally interesting were the letters to the magazine which appeared on February 10, 1997. One of the readers (Gale Gibney) wrote: 'While science seeks to prolong people's lives the rest of society is making clear that old people are increasingly undesirable.' Another reader (Joanne Pileski) wrote: 'How much easier life would be for everyone if the emphasis were on how to grow old gracefully rather than how to stay young forever.' This is the point we develop below.

Old age is a biological concept. Wrinkles, grey hair, sagging skin, weak reflexes, reduced sexual desire, and many others, are biological changes. At the same time, old age is an attitude of mind. Precocious children often speak like matured people, but they are not adults. A young man may be as wise as the old are, but biologically he is not aged. We can make a theoretical advance by conceptualizing old age in biological and sociological terms. At the first level, life is an inevitable normal distribution curve. We all grow and develop, reaching the maximum that could be attained by us. Then begins the process of decline, disintegration, and death. We all have to die, and we all have to live. Our instinct of preservation is very strong. Man desires to live even when he becomes foul-faced, leprous, mutilated, penniless.

No one wants to be unhealthy, depleting or old, but the natural law is that we descend from a healthy state to a less healthy one. We develop to decline; we live to die. This is integral to the developmentally oriented view of ageing to which all humans must react positively. We are told time and again that many find it impossible to come to terms with advancing age. Old age is welcomed rather negatively. As the gynecologist counsels a menopausal woman to accept the changes in her body as natural (and normal), in a similar way we should all accept positively the bell-shaped curve of human life. Biological changes in the body should be accepted as inevitable and we should combat their ill effects (if they are any) with renewed mental energy and thought pattern. Life is not a frozen entity; it is a continuum. We should learn to age gracefully.

Conceptualized sociologically, a society di-

vides its people in separate categories. From each one of them, a distinct behaviour is expected. Stereotypes of different age groups are constructed by societies. As a cultural type, old age is associated with a repository of behavioural expectations. 'Act your age', is what we are taught; so old people are expected to behave in a particular way. The title/label 'old people' or ('senior citizens') is imposed by culture on a certain set of people. The old, for instance, are not supposed to fall in love; sexual thoughts are a taboo to them. We know various jocular phrases common in our society which chastise them for behaving the young way: for example, 'a bubble in an old pan' (*purani karhai mein ubal ana*), 'a red bridle on an old mare' (*burhi ghorhi lal lagam*), 'a lecherous old man' (*buddha tharki*), 'youthfulness descends on an old man' (*charhi jawani buddhe nu*), are some invectives from north India and one may discover many of their equivalents in other cultures. Kumkum knows an old widow who is often ridiculed by her daughters-in-law for wearing lipstick. This person (widowed ten years ago and now in her mid-seventies) has maintained her health and appear to be far below her age. That may be the reason why she does not hesitate in opting for make-up and costumes which are for married women. The concept of widowhood has changed tremendously in contemporary age. The widows are no more shunned. They no more lead an isolated life with shaven head and clad in widow's garb. But, the problem comes up, when, in changing times the old are expected to conform to the way of life of their counterparts in the past.

Cultural imperatives make people old. Have a look at the following proscriptions and prescriptions: the old should transcend libido; they should squelch passions; they should lead a simple life of austerity and penance; they should devote themselves completely to religious pursuits. These cultural values impose upon the old the fact of redundancy. The old are told indirectly that there is no meaning in their existence. They should know: 'The young will live long; the old will die soon'. In this value system, old age is a preparation for one's funeral.

Values are contextually meaningful. It was in a traditional society that the old could be made to

lead a resigned life, preparing for their departure. They were not denied economic benefits; they were not made homeless. If they left the house for a permanent abode at a religious place, or accepted a renunciatory life, it was of their own accord. Their position in the family was secure. Now the old values can not be accepted because the economic foundation on which they rested has shaken. We need a new set of values, a new repertoire of strategies, new ideologies.

Two sayings are relevant for our discussion here: first, 'if you are not cared by your parents, you will not be a caring parent yourself,' and the second, 'if you mistreat your parents, you'll receive the same treatment from your children'. The type of social patterns we desire depends upon our investment in the process of learning, and inculcating the values and norms in our progeny. If the all-powerful media, which considerably shape the social thoughts, assign a peripheral place to the old, then it is not expected that people in general would ever seriously discuss the problems of ageing. If the media paint the old as clowns, or as helpless folks, or fit them in any of the stereotypes outlined previously, these are the images in which all others will see them. Change is brought about not only by altering conditions, but also by furthering a particular ideology. A lot depends on what the society thinks about the old in general.

Let us have a look at some of the suggestions usually given to solve the problems of the aged. We are told that the care of the aged is not today a family responsibility wholly because of the breakdown of the family system. Therefore, the voluntary associations (and the NGOs) should take up the task of helping the old. The gaps created by the weakening of the family can not be fully filled by various informal and formal units, but collectively, they constitute a viable alternative. As said earlier, they should be greatly encouraged so that they operate over a large area and reach different segments of the society.

Retirement constitutes a break from a set schedule continuing for years, which has implication for the individual's life-span. The retired undergo the trauma of living without 'work'. (Work, as opposed to leisure, is defined as an activity which always takes place away from

home for which the individual is paid.) During the post-retirement period, many become easily irritable; they feel crestfallen; and in fact they age fast. Not only that, we have observed that many become unusually serious, sad, irritable, and sullen when approaching the time of their retirement. During this period, some of them start speaking caustically to their junior colleagues. In one case, the farewell (the rite of separation) given to a university teacher by his institution and friends was considered by him as structurally equivalent to a 'funeral'!

At the time of retirement, many are in sound health and can easily work for another five to ten years. An argument, favouring the old, is that the age of retirement should be raised, but the counter-argument that it would lead to increasing unemployment has often silenced it. A balanced approach would provide part-time employment to the retired as long as they are able to work. This will serve two purposes; first, it will not harm the interests of the unemployed, and second, the aged would be gainfully occupied.

Let us take an example here. The retirement age in the university is sixty (and in some central universities, a five years' extension is generally granted to those desirous of it). Those retiring at this age (sixty or even sixty-five) are often intellectually sound, in good health, and can easily work for some more years. Academic institutions need experienced scholars: thus the retired teachers may be employed on part-time basis (or on lecture-basis) to undertake, relatively speaking, lighter work. Such an arrangement will not obstruct full-time appointments. The academic institutions are benefited by the experienced academicians and a continuity is maintained for the retired. Because of this arrangement, the institution would become a kind of an extended family. The old will not be in a state of limbo once their routine breaks down. In Japan, companies employing people in the age group 55 to 64 receive financial benefits and other economic supports from the government. This is not only to help the old but also to get the best from experienced minds and bodies. Sreenivasan (1997) reports: 'In 1993, the American Association of Retired Persons and the Society for Human Resource Management published the results of a survey exploring older

worker recruitment and retention practices. According to the 1000 managers who responded, older workers bring significant benefits to the workplace — overall workplace skills, flexibility in scheduling, low absenteeism, high motivation and mentoring abilities useful to the younger workers. They are seen as motivated, loyal, and respectful.' Such studies defy the prevalent idea that the old people are a spent force. By considering the old for employment, we can save them from becoming redundant.

We have immensely liked the Wednesday Club of the Cambridge village and the association of the retired school and college teachers in Delhi. Although we have not studied their respective social organizations, what we have learnt from their meetings is that they are viable arrangements to combat the loneliness of the old (and the retired) people. Purportedly, the manifest function of their regular meetings is to introduce the members of the group to an interesting topic, at the latent level, they work towards integrating the old with the group, and thus with the society. The old themselves are aware of the latent functions of their group activities. None of these groups was founded by, or is an extension of, a voluntary association (or NGO). The people themselves see the need for such arrangements. None of them is highly structured, which explains why its functioning has not slackened due to bureaucratization. The members know they have a 'circle of friends' whom they meet regularly for two to three hours every week in a sort of formal arrangement, but with whom they cultivate a plexus of informal relations, on whom they depend for help. The particular agemates of a person may predecease him, but his peer group will not come to an end because with the passage of time new members will join the group and see themselves as sharing the same identity. The ties of integration with the group will not loosen although members invariably change. Against this background, one may urge upon the voluntary associations and the NGOs to promote such groups of old people, and if possible, arrange for vocational training for the rural old who in turn will become productive members. Such groups are indeed important; they are the functional alternatives to the declining family system. The aged want to have people around them to whom they talk

and share their problems. What could be better than their own 'peers' arranged through the mechanisms of groups like the Wednesday Club?

We saw previously the representation of the aged in the media. We are not aware of the content analysis of these representations, but from an accidental sample, it may be hypothesized that these images do not evoke an intellectual understanding of old age. They may evoke sympathy and compassion, but the old do not want these sentiments. They need a response (whatever we may call it) which emerges from a processual understanding of life, where in an old man I visualize my future, where in a young man, the old sees his past. While behaving towards the old I should keep in mind how I would like others to behave towards me when I am of the same age. Unfortunately our media fall short of presenting the process of life in a proper perspective. The result is: the old are shown as nauseatingly ridiculous, or as flint-hearted, or as the mammoth icons of conservatism. They are depicted as constituting the *zamana* (the world) against whom the Urdu poets have often registered their vehement protests.

Benedict (1946) says that the Japanese are perhaps the only people in the world who are extremely conscious of their system, with the result that their school text-books have chapters on the family, its virtues, its place in the Japanese culture, and how it combats the evils of modern living. The children unconsciously imbibe the familial values by reading (and revising) such chapters. In a similar manner, we can introduce chapters in our language texts on the process of life in which the aged are represented as a repository of experiential knowledge. At a moral level, we may submit in rather selfish terms that if we want to be looked after in old age by our progeny, then it is imperative that we care for our aged ascendants. We may, in these texts, remind our readers the lines from the Talmud: 'When we teach our son, we in fact teach our son's son.'

There is also a need to publish popular booklets on the medical problems of the aged, the legal help that is available to them, the alternative sources of income for the old; and in them we should refrain from offering moral suggestions. The old should not be depicted as useful, in the mould of good Samaritans, as baby-sitting grandparents.

The old are rather an ever-dynamic stage in the continuum of life. We should respect the continuum, its ebbs and flows, for the natural law determines it. What the old are today is what we will be tomorrow. By nursing their today we safeguard our tomorrow. A revolutionary change is required in our patterns of thought. If this occurs, then none of the old would be thanatophobic on hearing of his peer's demise.

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