

CHALLENGES FACED BY THE ELDERLY IN THE TWILIGHT OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Ageing is a continuous process that begins with life and continues throughout the life cycle. An aged person faces many physical, psychological and social problems and he gradually loses his capacity to lead a happy life. Many people experience loneliness and depression in this age, either as a result of living alone or due to the lack of love and care from their near and dear ones. They are unable to make an active participation in the social activities. Elderly people lose connection with their friendship networks and it is more difficult to form new friendship circles. Parents when aged are neglected by their children. They are left to fend for themselves and are not properly taken care of. As they grow older, they become frail and weak and are not able to be on their own.

KEYWORDS: challenges, depression, elderly, generation gap, loneliness, sociability.

Old age is inevitable and there is no escape from it to anyone who crosses the age of seventy and above. It is the age of maturity on the one hand and gradual deterioration of health and mental capacities on the other. Anyone who has lived a meaningful life of activity and positive mental make-up finds his old age a period of serenity and fulfillment. All of us one familiar with grace fully ageing people who become great inspiration for us to think of life as a gift of God that has to be cherished with poor deeds and thought.

In India, the elderly account for 7 per cent of the total population. By 2020, 10.4 per cent of the population, totaling 142 million people, aged 60 years or older, will be living in India.

Old age is the last stage in the life span of a person. It is the most troublesome and dangerous period, as they are senile. Ageing is an inevitable natural process and, as a universal truth, everyone has to pass through this ordeal before their natural death. There is no cut-off age limit to consider old age. A sick or unhealthy person, if he is alive, will be old at the age of 60 or more while a healthy person is likely to be old at an age of seventy or more depending upon his health and wealth.

Symptoms of ageing, especially solemnity, are seen earlier in an unhealthy person while they are seen later in a healthy person. There are different types of aged people in society. Some are healthy and poor. They work and earn till they are bed-ridden. The majority are unhealthy and poor. They have to depend on their children, relatives, neighbors or friends for financial or physical needs and they have a miserable end. The other category is healthy and wealthy. They are independent and happy till they are sick and bed-ridden. There are many people

to attend to them. The others are wealthy but unhealthy and sick. They have helpers to assist and nurse them.

The tradition of India in olden days was to consider parents as representatives of deities and they were given reverence and protection with utmost care and importance. With the introduction of modernization, globalization and western culture, the old system was toppled and the joint family system was replaced by the nuclear family system which preaches privacy, selfishness, possession utility and profit. Humanitarian values like sympathy, attachment, relationship, love and sacrifice have no place in it. Thus, the practice of taking care of aged parents as a responsibility and duty of the children was changed to a moral obligation. Recently, it is considered as a useless burden. Hence, they are avoided, rejected, isolated and forced to go to any old age home. Ironically, it is considered as a symbol of social status.

In the western countries the system of life is entirely different. There the child is free. The youngsters seek their own way of life. They select their life partners according to their will and pleasure. There is no attachment between parents and children. Parental interference is rare and children lead their own independent life. The situation in India is entirely different. Here, the children depend on their parents for financial support and live together in the same family till they are self-reliant. Here, the family members have close relationship. Here, the parents toil day and night for the welfare of the children. There the parents work and earn for their own livelihood. Even in old age they do not depend on their children. If poor, they will seek admission in old age homes established by the government. Most of the rich and middle class people live in their own houses alone or with servants till death.

Solemnity is the reverse problem faced by the aged. Other problems to be confronted by them are physical, psychological, financial and sociological. Physical problems are concerned with the health and activities of the aged person. There are healthy and unhealthy persons among them. A healthy aged person can meet his biological needs independently till he is sick and bed-ridden, while an unhealthy person has to depend on others for everything. Instead of helping and protecting them, their children and relatives often reject and neglect them as waste commodity and a "burden" to the family. They are denied proper food, clothing or medicine physically; their life is pathetic and miserable. Many of them suffer in silence as they fear humiliation or are too scared to speak up.

Some elderly people have also complained that in case of a property dispute they feel more helpless when their wives take the side of their children. According to them, a phenomenon called 'grand dumping' is becoming common in the urban areas these days, as children are becoming increasingly intolerant of their parents' health problems.

However, as one grows old, he faces problems of ageing which are peculiar to the last stage of his life. Rarely do we find ageing people approach death with equanimity and poise. Most of them are unable to reconcile themselves to the real ties of life. Hence they become irritable, quarrelsome, demanding and disoriented. Physical debility causes mental stress and aged people become psychologically shattered. Hence they find that their physical and mental caliber no most match the achievements of the earlier years, they react in the most unexpected ways. They feel unwanted, neglected and isolated. Even the children whom they lovingly brought up seem to distance themselves from them. None seems to understand their needs and comfort them. In most cases, the aged people turn melancholic, non-communicative and some turn violent in order to gain the attention and care of those around him.

A psychological problem is more complicated than a physical problem. It is based on the mentality of the aged person. They have weak minds, faded memory and low recognizing capacity. They have lost their will power and courage. Yet, they are adamant and arrogant in their dealings and decisions. They do not take into account the fact that they are aged, sick and unhealthy. Most of them boast of their past; lament on the present and brood over the future. Out of the feeling of avoidance and rejection they show over anxiety and over-indulgence in the family affairs which create panic in the family atmosphere. They doubt if their children would accept or obey their suggestions and advice. They think that the toil and sacrifice they made for their children have become a waste. They feel they are rejected, isolated and abandoned. The difference of opinion among elders and youths are due to "generation gap". Financial problem is the most striking issue among the aged. A poor person is worried that he has not earned or saved enough to meet their future financial needs like purchasing food, clothing and medicine. At the time of financial crisis, their children often curse and scold them for not saving anything. This may hurt their feeling and presence of mind as they have spent the health and wealth to nurture their children to the present position and status. The wealthy aged persons are also worried about their wealth. Their children or caretakers expect a huge portion of their wealth. Equidistribution of property at the time of partition may create discontent in the members and discord among them. After partition most of the aged parents have to meet aversion, rejection and even isolation leading to agony, sadness and even depression.

Social Problem: The feeling of isolation from the day to day affairs of the family, in which they were all in all, is the painful situation one has to suffer. A new type of culture is taking place in the society, in which old generations are facing adjustment problems with the behaviour of new generations. This is known as generation gap. This has led to the tendency of neglecting the old aged by the younger generation. If they are neglected in the decision making process, in the family affairs and social gatherings, they think that they will have the chance to attend the function and they will be happy and pleased.

Remedies: Protection and care are the most important remedies. They should be given physical, psychological, financial and social protection. Social protection includes legal and governmental protection. Physical protection means helping the aged in their daily activities. If their children help them to eat; assist them to take bath and change their dress, they will be pleased. Intolerance and irritation of the children in physical help create aversion to their children. The new generation has to adjust with the old generation in their physical dealings.

The painful truth is that there is no facile solution to the problem of ageing and the complexities related to it. As each aged person is different in his character, social background, experience and outlook on life, there is no common approach to ageing and how the complex problems can be solved.

It is meaningless to try to impose codes of behaviour on such people, as it would be counter-productive. Only through patient understanding and loving care that we can mitigate the ills they suffer and prepare them for peaceful death. First of all, they should feel, wanted in the family, although they are no more earning members. Instead of leaving them merely to the care of doctors, and home-nurses, the members of the family themselves should be available to attend to their needs. It will make them feel wanted and loved. The role of grandchildren in looking after

their aged grandparents is to be highlighted. More than good food and medicine, they expect the loving presence of their children and grandchildren around them.

The realization that everyone, in the natural process, has to grow old should make us aware of the problem faced by the elderly people, especially bed-ridden and invalid. Isn't it true that we ourselves will receive from our children what given to our own parents! While dealing with the care of age and invalid people, the watchword is love and patience. 'Dumping' the aged at Old Age Homes is no solution to the problem. There is no place like home for our aged parents.

Psychological Protection: This is based on the behaviour and mental makeup of the two generations. If the new generation hinders the interference of the old generation in the family affairs, it may create intolerance. The youngsters should realize that their parents are senile. They should admit that their parents are assets and not a burden. It will console the aged.

Financial Protection: Financial protection is inevitable in the last period of the aged persons. If the children are not capable of meeting the daily expenses of the aged people, social organizations can take the initiative to solve the financial problems by approaching the government officials concerned, to sanction financial assistance to the aged poor people. The government agencies should show mercy and a liberal attitude to allot the necessary financial aid to the poor persons. Members of social organizations can help a lot by periodical visit, enquiry on the health and life situations, protection and care they get from their children. They are able to make friendship with and engage in humorous conversations which may give solace and pleasure in their life. The feeling of rejection and solitude may be reduced to a certain extent. They can advise the young as well as the elders about the relationship and mutual understanding in life. They can pacify both the parties as mediators. They can teach the elders yoga and meditation. The problem is very simple to solve if the young and the old, the parent and the child adopt the Gandhian philosophy of tolerance, patience, understanding and adjustment.

By the enactment of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act of 2007, the government has imposed a legal validity to the moral obligation that it is the duty of the children to protect the welfare of their old parents. The law is not to punish but to compel and to remind them of responsibility. Hon. Justice K. Ramakrishnan of the High Court of Kerala while deciding a case of an elderly on 24th July 2014 reported in 2014(4)KLT page 169 observed that, "It is quite unfortunate that, now- a- days, there is a tendency not to care for the welfare of old parents by the younger generation and they are looking for help and have to take their shelter in the old age homes. Though there is a culture in India to respect mother, father, teacher and then god in their order of preference. The children are forgetting the fact that, it is due to the hard work and sacrifice that their parents have done, that they have got a reciprocal moral responsibility to take care of them in the old age and they will also one day become old and if their children show the same attitude towards them, how much pain they will feel at that time". This is the trend of modern civilized societies. His Lordship further added "presence of grandparents will be a solace for the grandchildren as they will get the moral teaching from them to build up the responsible and disciplined character to follow in their life.

Anyhow, the law is not at all a panacea for all problems. The implementation of the law has certain limitations. They have to file a suit against

their own dear children. It will naturally shatter the relationship among the members of the family and reduce the reputation of parents and children. Instead of sympathy and love, children will begin to take revenge against the action of the children which may end in broken relationship. Hence, most of the old parents suffer the hardships and abuse without complaint. Moreover, parents have love, affection and intimacy towards their children, which is the fundamental inspiration for the willful suffering. They require the presence of the children near their death bed and they want them to attend their burial rites. Hence the aged parents do not resort to any legal protection.

Both the elders and the youngsters are equally responsible for the troubles and quarrels. The aged people do not consider the difficulties of the youngsters in their family life. They are not bothered about the income and expenses of the family. They remind everyone of what they have done to their children. They expect similar treatment and protection from their children in return. If the aged persons are satisfied with what they get and if the youngsters are ready to give them maximum assistance in all respects, there is a peaceful and pleasant atmosphere in the family. If the parents are proud of their children and vice versa, there will be cordial relationship, harmony and understanding in the family. The great epic poet John Milton in his great epic poem "Paradise Lost" explains the solace and pleasure Satan had even in the inferno. He adds that it is the mind or will that makes Heaven out of Hell and vice-versa.

Religious and Social organizations have a vital role in making a pleasant atmosphere in the life of aged people. There are so many religious and community organizations which are able to stop the torturing of old parents by their children. They can approach the children and enquire about the mental or physical torturing inflicted on their own parents. Shiv Viswanathan in "The myth of happy old age" exposes that The Help Age India report (2014) on old age abuse provides an altogether different picture. He remarks that the statistics are frightening and the interviews deeply disturbing.

Social and charitable organizations can do great service to the age people, especially to those suffering from poverty and neglect. The society, as a whole, has to make efforts to mitigate the misery of such people. No society can boast of progress and development unless it becomes more 'old-age friendly.'

CONCLUSION

H.S. Doreswamy, a noted freedom fighter and activist has said," With the degeneration of the joint family system to a nuclear family, the most affected are the children and the elders. It is commendable to bring the two together."

Think on moral grounds. Why do we tend to forget that the reason we are in this world is our parents, the reason we studied is our parents, the reason we are alive all this while is our parents, the reason we survived all the diseases is our mother's care. The hands which made us walk are of our parents. When we were kids we never thought of it but we knew that no matter what, our parents will be by our side. But when our time comes to show our respect, to reciprocate the love, to show our gratitude, we back out. But the truth is that even when they are counting their last breath, they are still thinking of us!

“DO NOT TREAT YOUR PARENTS LIKE BURDEN ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY NEED YOU”.

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