

Living a Life of Dignity

Sheilu Sreenivasan



The crowning expression of productivity among senior citizens is self esteem – dignity. What the senior citizen in India wants is not fame, name, money, or fortune, but dignity. To be not only conscious of it, but also to be seen to be productive has an enormous amount of value addition to his sense of self respect

The concept of ‘productive ageing’ is premised on solid scientific evidence that ageing is keyed to the level of vigour of the body and continuous interaction between levels of body activity and levels of mental activity. Age-related deterioration in most mental functions can actually be reversed. ‘Cenegenics’ is the latest upcoming practical panacea, in fact a raging fad in cities such as Las Vegas that ensures its practitioner ‘Amortality’ (Time, April 25, 2011). Research in gerontology and neuropsychology shows that mental activity makes neurons sprout new dendrites which will establish connections with other neurons. The dendrites shrink when the mind is idle. To put it simply, a person who stops solving problems arrives at a point where he cannot solve problems. Lesson: Keep active. If you do, there is no ageing and its dreaded decline. It is a choice in your hands!

To hail academic theories -- The “Wear and Tear” Theory; The Neuroendocrine Theory; Evolutionary vs Life history Theory; The Genetic Control Theory; The Free Radical Theory; Waste accumulation Theory; Caloric Restriction Theory; Productive Ageing Theory --that actually help improve the quality of longer lives we are enjoying today is not a bad proposition. In fact, such knowledge

can actually pepper daily life, and senior citizens can be self-goaded into adopting such “productive” postures. I myself get so excited when I follow up on research on Ageing.

“The field of ageing research has been completely transformed in the past decade....When single genes are changed, animals that should be old stay young. In humans, these mutants would be analogous to a ninety year old who looks and feels forty-five. On this basis we begin to think of ageing as a disease that can be cured, or at least postponed....The field of ageing is beginning to explode, because so many are so excited about the prospect of searching for — and finding — the causes of ageing, and maybe even the fountain of youth itself” Guarente, L. and Kenyon, C, *Nature* 408 (magazine). Knowledge is the most basic intervention that serves to dispel “ageism” — the falsely held stereotypes and myths about older people.

These are all dominant engagements of the West. In India we are still in the stage of grappling with food, shelter, medical services, insurance, income security for the majority of the 91 million people 60+. Despite the necessity of such large scale interventions from the government that rules the country, there are still thematic areas that NGOs and groups can engage in. Those will be my themes in this article.

The author is Founder President, Dignity Foundation and Dignity Lifestyle Retirement Township. She has been a Member of various committees related to elderly like the International Advisory Committee of Experts in Healthcare Delivery and Research on Dementing Disorders and the Review Committee, National Policy of Older persons, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. She has also been Managing Editor, Indian Journal of Social Work, Tata Institute for Social Sciences.

What does one actually “do” in a society where such negative imagery of old people and the consequent discrimination is at its rampant worst? This is the basic problem. Witness, for instance, the plight of Dignitarian E A Abraham (81), Mumbai, who wanted to enrol for a course in a local college to learn Sanskrit. He was denied admission everywhere on account of his age. He, therefore, took to working for a Ph.D degree in Bombay University because that was the only possibility that did not have an age bar. He successfully obtained a degree in Sanskrit when he was 75.

Instances of denial of opportunity for productive ageing run into tomes of gerontological literature.

Structural Opportunities

Provision of structural opportunities to facilitate older people is then the challenge we face in India today, as the country’s age profile assumes trends common to the greying Europe and silvering Japan. As sociologist Dr Parthonath Mukherjea, former Director of Tata Institute of Social Sciences, said in July 1996, while presiding over our first “convocation” of senior citizens who successfully learnt computer skills in our classes open only to old people, “individual NGO initiatives in providing such top end opportunities are extremely significant in the face of India’s demographic trends. More than the government, it is the NGO sector that seems to come up with innovative ideas.”



As a social worker and a student of sociology, and running services for senior citizens' life enrichment, it is my experiential finding that, in India, the educated middle class seniors are very quick to take to the need for knowledge and practice of productive ageing activities. In sharp contrast to the western emphasis on post-retirement leisure, holidays, good food, fun and frolic, Indian seniors are eager to embrace opportunities for social work. The retired person in India places a high premium on working for a cause rather than fritter away retired life in pastime leisure and fun.

The proof of the above statement is seen in Mumbai where 663 Dignitarians, in a unique collaboration with the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC), have got into the project of *Cleaning Mumbai with Dignity*. Their morning walks have got converted

into talks with BMC sweepers on the streets; their weekly social has turned into a meeting time for sharing of civic problems and redressal methods through the municipal ward officers. The celebration of Independence Day has got clubbed with what they have titled as ‘Freedom from Garbage Andolan’! Senior citizens have grabbed opportunities provided to them to act as community leaders whereby they help residents not to throw garbage on the streets. Their own “Model Streets” are offered as show cases to other citizens to follow suit. Sorting of garbage and composting within the compound is a trail blazing social service senior citizens have demonstrated. A tremendous enthusiasm for the environment guides their need to keep active and socially integrated. They stand testimony to the finding that social participation is senior citizens’ best antidote to decline that is normally associated with age.

Or take their Helpline, for instance, where nearly 200 senior volunteers are working on providing companionship services to lonely seniors in Mumbai alone. “Sometimes elder-callers talk for over 40 minutes as they relate their life stories” says Nergish Olia (75), volunteer in the HELPLINE. The volunteers, all over 50, have been able to reach out to abused elders, where children or relatives have harassed them on matters relating to property. “By being there for older people in need of social support, we ourselves are relieved of the boredom and depression





that used to bother me so much”, said late Metrani (85).

Second Career

Productive ageing should not be restricted to the narrow limits of gainful work. Second career or post-retirement pursuit should be ideally defined as combining the best of work and leisure. When productivity is broadened to include work beyond participation in the labour force, to embrace activities undertaken with passion, (something you have always wanted to do, but could not in your first career), it assumes sociological significance.

First, it is useful in arguments of the politics of intergenerational equity. Showing that late adulthood is still productive helps to refute the notion that the elderly are only a drain on family/societal resources. Second, there are definite psychological benefits of productivity in old age – such as better health, motivation, cognitive functioning, life satisfaction or self actualisation etc. Third, it has sociological relevance -- social integration and participation, instead of living in the fringes of society.

Self Esteem

The crowning expression of productivity among senior citizens is self esteem – dignity. What the senior citizen in India wants is not fame, name, money, or fortune, but dignity. To be not only conscious of it, but also to be seen to be productive has an enormous amount of value addition

to his sense of self respect. When the grandchild sees her grandmother organising her life with meaning and purpose, the former entertains not only a certain pride in owning up the latter, but actively indulges in even exaggerating grandma’s busy schedules. The younger generation is happy to be proud children of productive parents and grandparents, who have in a manner of speaking, learnt to look after themselves, and keep themselves busy and engaged in meaningful pursuits. This is our actual finding borne out of personal meetings, correspondence, articles and interviews that Dignity Foundation has had. The senior citizen wants to live the rest of his/her life with self respect, in dignity.

Ancient and medieval visions of ageing as the “renouncing-focused end part of life” is fast changing, making way for the secular, scientific, and individualistic outlook of modernity. This is true of at least the post-independence generation of India which has benefited from the first wave of liberal education.

Gold in Geriatrics

The corollary of recognising older people as potential contributors to the productive capacity of the society is the equally important recognition that they constitute an important market. Not for nothing did *Wall Street Journal* declare that “there is a lot of gold in geriatrics”—a potential that remains largely unexplored in India by business

entrepreneurs. insurance, housing, health, holidays and culturally oriented care services need to be tailor-made for the seniors. Till that time efforts will have to be made to nurture and deliver precious services for leading the seniors into productive ageing possibilities.

It is time that the Government was cognizant of its humungous responsibilities towards the aged of India and of the ageing demographic’s ramifications. The subject is complex, very vast and requires specialised knowledge to deal with its dimensions. We request the Government to constitute a think tank for comprehending the widespread impact of population ageing. The National Policy of Older Persons, 1999, is a brilliant document, very progressive in outlook. But newer dimensions in ageing have come up like, for eg, the high growth rate of people over 80 years, touching 700 per cent. The ageing population growth rate itself is at 350 per cent compared to the growth rate of the general population. There is, therefore, an urgent need to put in action many schemes catering to the needs of the Elderly in India. Many NGOs are prepared to pool in resources with the Government and waiting for leads from the Government.

At the state level certain Governments like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, M.P and Himachal Pradesh have come up with many laudable schemes addressing issues of the aged. There is great scope of learning from each other.

Education of the political classes and of the bureaucracy could probably be an agenda for the NGOs for the coming decade. Groups of senior citizens and a handful of NGOs are indeed very active in working along with the Government for drafting policies on Ageing in India. But more sustained efforts are required to mobilize many ministries in New Delhi. To start with, the well organised NGOs, groups and associations of senior citizens could be raising a united voice and dialogue with the Government departments. □

(E-mail: sheilu.sreenivasan@dignityfoundation.com)