

At Ashvasan it's future perfect



Lalita Ubhayaker of Ashvasan Foundation interacting with senior citizens

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WORLD Elders Day came and went as a feeble reminder that even though India as a whole is getting younger, senior citizens are growing rapidly in absolute numbers. We have about 75 million citizens over 60 years. In 2015, there will be 120 senior citizens, expected to live beyond 70 years. Why should that cause concern in a land that prides itself on its values, among which, respecting elders is right up at the top?

The truth, of course, is rather bitter. Forty per cent of these senior citizens sub exist below the poverty line. Fifty-five per cent of women seniors have no means of support. And even among those who are fairly comfortable, there is always the fear of becoming one more statistic in the list of elders robbed or killed in their own homes.

“If all that were not enough,” says Lalita Ubhayaker of Ashvasan Foundation, “there

is the utter loneliness to face as well.” We all know of elderly people, often closely related to us, who have to live alone and unloved or in benign neglect within the family. The usual suspects are cited for this profound social change. Migration, poverty, the break up of the joint family, women in workforce and so on. Whatever it may be, the reality for the grandparents’ generation today is that there is no fall back option guaranteed in the sunset years. You cannot rely on the family and you cannot rely on the state, as one can in developed countries.

So what are the seniors doing about it? In Bangalore, I know many remarkable men and women well past sixty, who are hardly wallowing in self pity. They have retained charge not only of their own lives and happiness; they are lending their experience, patience and wisdom to larger causes. They are the backbone of civil society, leading the charge of the Residents’ Welfare

Associations that have become so critical in the city's new political alignments.

Yet others, such as the ever-elegant 77-year-old Lalita Ubhayaker, are busy knitting safety nets for their less fortunate peers. Ashvasan Foundation, set up more than a decade ago, reaches out to the old, the lonely and the sick, through a network of volunteers, themselves able and capable senior citizens with big hearts and ready smiles. Through recreation centres, day care centres - where seniors are dropped off by working couples and picked up on their way back from work - seminars, and celebrations, Ashvasan is picking up where our traditions have left off. Not only does it help create peer group bonding, it also generates inter generational sharing. Children and seniors meet at regularly constructed sessions, to learn to enjoy each other.

Now Ashvasan is expanding the scope of its offering by building a residential old age home, for those who have nowhere to go. “We have at least 600 regular members of Ashvasan,” says Lalita Ubhayaker, “and each one of us has tried to make a difference in our own lives and that of others like us.”

Many of my columns have been about people working at the hard edge of governance and reform. The work of Ashvasan and other such groups devoted to the cause of the older Bangalorean is no less difficult. In a city falling all over itself trying to create a glorious future over the confusion of the present, there is little time to look beneath the rubble for those left behind.

Yet, the young and hurried among us would not like to become the old and buried of tomorrow’s city. So it might be sensible to support the creation of senior oriented support systems such as the one Ashvasan has built. Never know when you will need one, yourself.

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