

Will there be a policy for elderly?

Baru

During a morning walk along a sleepy boulevard one watches an occasional stirring of lean hands and callused feet out of the tattered blanket under the shade of a bus stop. Then an ageless, wrinkled face under an unkempt, sparsely covered small head pops up to inspect the colour of the breaking daylight and ducks back into the cover. If only the daybreak could freeze in its tracks and the stupor prolongs protecting this senior citizen from thinking how to earn Rs. 32, which is said to be enough to preserve the body and soul together till the next nightfall! When will the national policy on the elderly target this homeless, perennially hungry old man and imbue in him a hope so that his waking up does not feel worse than his nightmare?

I used to know this bearer who retired years before me from the same office I worked in. He used to come to my house to collect old newspapers ('raddi') for selling them to traders. He also paid the bills at the collection centres of various utility providers spread across the city in exchange for a small service charge. Any given day you could spot him on the internal roads, either riding his ramshackle, creaky bicycle between houses in our area to collect bills or walking his all-purpose vehicle loaded with raddi.

I seem to have been seeing him cycling on these roads for eternity with an intent emaciated face, come drizzles come the scorching sun. On a day or two after Diwali, he visited us for the annual *bakshish*. My wife usually gave away one of her old saris for his married but deserted daughter, who had to be supported by him. His son was living nearby but up to no useful purpose. Whenever I met him and asked him how he was doing, he always said: "Fine, with your blessings, government pension and this little *uparka* (extra) income." He must have been above 70 when I last met him and his 'retired life' was nowhere near commencement. I think he did not read newspapers, nor watched much TV (especially discussions) on a day of national contrition and future resolve on behalf of the elderly. He would have wryly thought what all this fuss was about.

When the mother of a friend started to forget names and situations and mixed up dates and faces in an album of a more recent origin, everybody said this was quite natural. She was lucky to have retained most of her memory even as late as her 86th birthday. Nobody was unduly bothered about the slow deterioration in the quality of performance of her daily functions, increasing mess up and soiling (and not even being aware of a change of state), not being able to properly button the pullover or fasten the blouse hooks appropriately. The kindly physician on monthly rounds announced reassuringly that this was just senile dementia, natural enough at her age. All her vital parameters were apparently fine and, therefore, there was nothing much to worry about. And they did not worry that books and newspapers she avidly read a few months ago stopped eliciting any interest in her, television serials were like meaningless charades and cacophony. Till one day

when she could not tie her smallish hair into a bun behind her head and on another day announced that she did not know how to wear a sari. And when required to encash a maturing fixed deposit certificate in her name, it was found that she (a postgraduate and principal of a secondary school over 30 years) had forgotten how to sign her name.

When my friend described the chronology of her demise through barely concealed tears, it felt as if the well decorated image of a goddess was partially immersed in shallow waters and had gone into an evolving state of disintegration — first the paint goes, then a few other superficial attributes, then the soil dissolves, slowly exposing the existential scaffolding. In time, that also gives way.

One hopes that in the hopeful future, doctors shall do something more than diagnosing dementia.

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Will our national policy target this homeless, hungry old man and imbue in him a hope so that his waking up does not feel worse than his nightmare?