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Are senior citizens an asset or liability?

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The tag senior citizen is generally given to a person who is between 58 and 65 years of age and has superannuated from active service. This age band fixed for retirement was based on the old system followed decades ago when longevity was lower than 60 years. With the advance in medical sciences and health supporting systems, longevity now goes up to 75. Perhaps, **the retirement age needs revision to make use of the services of experienced people for some more time** in the interest of national development.

Some senior citizens have the right attitude, take things in their stride, plan well their post-retirement life and keep their body and mind in reasonable good trim. They largely have a positive approach. There are others who take a dim view of life and think of retirement as something of a punishment. While the optimists keep themselves busy with productive work, the pessimists become dejected, feel neglected and find fault with everyone.

Family situations and financial position do play a part in influencing the lives of elders. Some are fortunate to live with their children or within their reach in the same city/town. They lead a relatively satisfied life. **The longer the distance, the greater their feeling of insecurity and loneliness.** If the children are within the country, the parents are fairly satisfied — they can visit them or the children can come home for occasions like marriages and festivals. The pangs of separation and the fear of loneliness, on the other hand, increase if the children live abroad. Thus the elders' lives are situation-dependent.

The presence of relatives and old-age homes, however comfortable, cannot provide for emotional needs. Some people overcome the blues by taking recourse to cultural and social activities but others suffer silently. Low income and poor health aggravate the misery.

Thus arises the question whether senior citizens are an asset or liability to the families and society at large. My answer is **they are undoubtedly an asset if they have the right attitude to life.** The present-day elders truly represent the generation of the pre-Independence era known for a value-based life. They were accomplished, humble and honest and practised to a large extent what was taught. As most senior citizens are highly experienced, they can contribute tremendously to the welfare of society. Their service can be for free or for a nominal fee.

A strong forum of senior citizens drawn from different walks of life can undertake coaching/counselling to students, youth and women to cope with their day-to-day problems. The elders have the responsibility to guide the youth and instill the much-needed confidence in them.

Source of solace

Local administrations, educational/research institutions, the corporate and business sectors and social organisations like the Rotary and Lions clubs can avail themselves of the services of the elders as consultants and advisers. Their services can be tapped to tackle a variety of problems — poverty, hunger, health, rural/tribal backwardness. The poorest of the poor, the physically challenged and the destitutes need support. The seniors are the right source of solace to this.

At present less than five per cent of seniors are engaged as consultants and advisory committee members in various sectors, whereas the potential exists to draft the services of 35 to 40 per cent more. Therein lies a great opportunity to convert the elders into a national asset.

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