

## Helping Hands for senior citizens

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Subir Kumar Chakraborty retired from the West Bengal State Electricity Board more than a decade ago. But it took him a while to discover that the secret of ageing gracefully was to embrace life, and not fade away. He had some savings and didn't want to be a burden on his only daughter. So every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, he comes out of his house in the posh Hindustan Park in Kolkata and goes to Dignity Foundation, an NGO, and follows his long-time passion-singing. Chakraborty is not a lone case.

At a time when a lot has been written about senior citizens languishing in old age homes or living at the mercy of children who have little time for them, there is a strong sentiment among organisations that work for senior citizens to make them independent. A United Nations survey says that the proportion of the elderly in India's population will rise from the present 82 million to 177 million by 2025. By 2050, one in every four Indians will be a senior citizen. In the face of these numbers, the need to change the system in order to make the lives of the elderly safer and better cannot be overstated.

Dignity Foundation is one such organisation that is involved in taking care of senior citizens. Headquartered in Mumbai with branches in all major metros, they offer what they call, "life-enriching services". "We believe in propagating active ageing. Through our various programmes, we try to inculcate a sense of self-esteem among senior citizens and encourage them to participate in life and not shy away from it," says Saikat Nasker, a senior social worker at Dignity Foundation, Kolkata.

For 68-year-old Purnima Banerjee, the favourite part of the day is the daily "chai adda" sessions at the foundation. "Some days we have meditation classes, while on others, it's yoga, music or art lessons," she says. Chakraborty, who also works as a volunteer, says, "I visit an 88-year-old and a 94-year-old. I try to give them some company, talk about what's happening and they are happy."

The harsh reality is that with old age comes the sense of being neglected and uncared for. Children have their own lives and even the ones who don't desert their parents don't necessarily have the time to be with them. According to the survey, Elder Abuse in India by HelpAge India, 51 per cent of the elderly feel neglected sometimes while 40 per cent of them feel neglected every day. "Old people just want acceptance and a little attention," says 66-year-old counsellor and psychotherapist Bharati Chowdhury, who being a senior citizen herself understands the depression and loneliness surrounding them.

Loneliness and depression may be the unwanted bedfellows of old age, but along with advancing years come much more palpable enemies. Prying neighbours, abusive children and cases of crime against elderly folk are all serious concerns. Almost 36 per cent of the elderly in India have been abused in some way or the other—Mumbai had the highest case of verbal abuse (79 per cent). Emotional abuse was the highest in Delhi at 62 per cent, while Kolkata had the highest case of physical abuse at 22.8 per cent. Sixty-year-old Shanti Swami (name changed) has been conducting English tuition classes in her house for 28 years now.

A few years ago, she was harassed by one of her neighbours. "They said that I'm running a brothel under the garb of a tuition class. They may have had an eye on my flat. That's when I sought help from an NGO," she says. Swami could well represent many like her. Nine out of 10 calls received by the Dignity Foundation are concerned with property-related abuse. The study shows that 35 per cent of senior citizens face abuse due to property-related issues, the highest being in Chennai (51.8 per cent).

"Sons (54 per cent) and daughters-in-law (43 per cent) have emerged as major abusers," says Sushmita Ghose, National Director (North and East), HelpAge India. Manas Gupta (name changed) was physically abused regularly by his alcoholic son. The situation became so unbearable for the 71-year-old that he sought help from an NGO. "I can't throw my son out of my house nor can I take legal action against him. After all, I am his father," says Gupta. Abuse by sons was the highest in Bhopal (70 per cent) followed by Patna (57 per cent). Domestic helps abused senior citizens the most in Delhi.

Extensive laws have been formulated to enforce the rights of senior citizens. The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, National Policy on Older Persons, 1998 and Protection for Women against Domestic Violence Act as well as state directives exist to help the elderly. There are also talks for the formation of a National Commission for the Elderly to give more bite to the National Elderly Policy. But only a third of the senior citizens are aware of the laws that safeguard their rights. Thirty-eight per cent feel that the police and lawyers are non-supportive.

Needless to say, legal counselling has become an integral part of organisations that serve the older generation. HelpAge India conducts free sessions to inform seniors about the various laws. "When people call us to talk about any kind of abuse they face, we advise them to take legal action. The law is almost one-sided and empowers the parents, but seldom do we see any of them filing a case against their children. Most feel that it's useless to go to the courts against their own family," says Pooja Basu, a lawyer who now works for HelpAge India in Kolkata. According to the survey, almost 53 per cent of senior citizens didn't take action when they faced abuse.

A growing number of old people live alone while their children work abroad. These senior citizens feel insecure and helpless with no one to take care of their daily needs. In 2009, Priyagopal Das was diagnosed with chronic pneumonia and had to be hospitalised immediately. His son Sandipan, who was working in the US, was at wit's end. Going home for a few days was impossible. That is when his wife Malabika found out about Parental Care India. "Parental Care took charge of everything, from admitting my father to a good hospital to buying medicines and

talking to the doctors. They worked relentlessly for the 20 days my father was in the hospital," says Sandipan.

"I conceived the idea of an organisation like ours a couple of years back when my father was going through severe depression and I was in the US," says Animesh Chowdhury, CEO of Parental Care India. "We are like family and members can call us anytime to do their chores," says Debabrata Banerjee who looks after the Kolkata operations of Parental Care. People like Debabrata handle everything, from medical appointments and treatments to bank work to even getting appliances fixed. They conduct video conferences between parents and their children who are abroad. They even accompany senior citizens to social functions.

These **Non-Resident Indian children buy their peace of mind for a price,** of course. There are quarterly subscriptions for \$174.99; half yearly ones come for \$299.99 and annual subscriptions for \$549.99. For every visit, they pay \$1 per hour with a minimum of \$5 per visit and a maximum cap of \$9 per visit. A small price to pay, the children say, for the support and help their parents get even when the distances are great.

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