

August 15, 2011

Protecting the elderly

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ISSUE Government should keep an eye on organisations taking care of the old.

In our society, by tradition, elderly care has been the responsibility of family members and provided within the family home. However, the focus has now shifted, and we see elders left at the mercy of non-government organisations or charitable institutions.

Decreasing family size, geographical dispersion of families, educated women who work outside home, greater life expectancy and so on are the reasons attributed to this.

Of course, there are numerous institutions that offer yeomen service — free and paid — and take excellent care of senior citizens. My outlook has always been sanguine about these service-minded establishments. However, a few instances that I heard of recently made me reconsider my earlier observation, and I believe it is time for the State to act as a watch dog on the functioning of these organisations.

I recently came to know that an elderly man, whose leg was amputated during a surgery, was shifted to institutional care, as his son was busy. The charges were around Rs. 7,000 a month, which included nursing as well. But, when the son visited his father a month later, he was taken aback as his father broke down. On enquiry, the son realised there were very few staff and no one available when his father desperately needed assistance. Moreover, the personnel had been rude to him as well. The son decided to shift his father to another old-age home immediately.

Within a few days, Yoganand approached us with a similar complaint. His friend's mother was put in a senior citizens' home. The monthly charges were around Rs. 12,000, for board and lodging, individual attender, washing clothes, etc. Nevertheless, when the friend visited his mother, he came to know there were 10 to 12 beds cramped in a room, with only one maid and one attender for 35 people. The friend took his mother home and is on the look out for a genuine organisation. Piqued by the callousness of the institution, Yoganand's friend is all set to file a complaint in the district forum for deficiency in service.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted a few principles for older persons in 1991 that discussed independence, participation, care, and self-fulfilment.

Among various points indicated, it states that older people should be able to enjoy human rights and fundamental freedom when residing in shelter, care or treatment facility, including full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs, and privacy, and for the right to make decisions about their care and the quality of their lives. They should be free of exploitation and physical and mental abuse, and should be treated fairly regardless of age, gender, background, disability or other status and valued independently of their economic contribution. Our Government has also announced a National Policy on Older Persons in 1999, which has identified a number of areas of intervention — financial security, healthcare and nutrition, shelter, education, welfare, protection of life and property, etc. for the well being of the senior citizens in the country.

It is time to give life to these principles and policy, to protect the interests of the elderly.