

[Our Neglected Elders; Somebody Else's Kin; Somebody Else's Problem](#)

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## Our Neglected Elders; Somebody Else's Kin; Somebody Else's Problem

Melwani, Lavina

The need of our elderly parents for support and caring continues to mount, especially in America. Can today's children, caught in a quagmire of changing values and responsibilities, meet the challenge? At a time when most aged parents want nothing more than family and temple in the comforting environs of their own community and country, many find themselves flung into a new and bewildering life in fast-paced America.

Many follow their high-achieving U.S.-based children here simply because they are their only caregivers in their sunset years, while others are drawn by the pull of grandchildren and the promise of a fulfilling family life. Yet many of the 24,000 elderly Indians starting out in America find that life in the Land of Milk and Honey is not all that sweet.

Where they had independence and mobility in India, here they find themselves rendered powerless, tripped up over by a new language, an alien culture and values. Sons and daughters are rarely at home, battling the clock, slaves to the "almighty dollar." Their two-income, posh homes are beautiful with two-car garages and perhaps a Mercedes Benz parked in the driveway - but the rooms are empty, the silence deafening.

What is an elderly parent to do alone all day on this elegant island, cut off from friends and community, from life? Most Indian seniors can't drive, many don't speak English. So, the life they inherit is one of isolation. They have to wait for their hard-pressed children to take them for an occasional visit to the temple, to the doctor, or a community get-together.

The promise of the close bond with grandchildren often does not materialize. The new generation, often born in America, is separated from the old by an insurmountable chasm - 200 channels on 24 hour television, pounding rock lyrics and differing values. Often the young ones don't speak their own native language.

Unfortunately, the problem of aged Indian-Americans is not one that will go away. According to an analysis of the census data by Little India, a Pennsylvania-based magazine, the numbers of elderly Indians are growing rapidly in America, rising more than 25 percent between 1980 and 1990, from 18,886 to around 24,000. Since Indian-Americans are recent immigrants, the elderly ranks will swell in the next two decades with the large number of Indian Americans presently in the 45-64 age group. What will the future hold for this burgeoning group? Even in America, not all Indian-Americans are affluent. Many are blue-collar workers - machinists, farmers and store employees, living from one paycheck to the next. According to experts, the abuse of elderly parents tends to increase in times of financial stress. The situation is even more dismal for elderly women, who live longer than men, and often outlive their spouses. The need for long-term care is a real possibility for them.

Dr. Prema Mathai Davis, who hails from Kerala, is Commissioner of the New York City Department for the Aging, the largest in the nation, serving 1.3 million elderly New Yorkers. Over the past 20 years, she has seen a dramatic rise in minority elderly, but she finds Indian-Americans rarely use the many services which are available to senior citizens: "In our culture, it is believed that going outside for help is bad, and that you should try to keep it within the family. It's also a whole stereotype of looking at any form of social service as a form of welfare." In order to get these much-needed services to elderly Indians and their overworked children, Mathai-Davis emphasizes: "We try to educate families that the social services are there to be of assistance. Using them doesn't mean they are abandoning their parents or their filial obligations. These services are there to help them care for their parents."

All U.S. cities have several services to help the families of elderly people - volunteer programs, employment programs, senior citizen centers and transport facilities. Depending on the population of the area, the food served in the senior centers is different, reflecting the ethnic and cultural background of the users. One person who has used the senior center in his town with great success is Sam Narasimhan, a retired attorney who lives with his daughter and her husband in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey. Because for him language is not a barrier, he has merged well with the members of this senior citizen center. There are two other

Indian members at this same center, and since they are all retired professionals, they have also fit in well. They are picked up every morning from their homes by the senior citizen bus, and have a full day of social activities, discussions and trips. When they return home, they have so much more to share with their children and grandchildren. Narasimhan says he often talks to his American friends about Hinduism, Buddhism and Indian culture, and always finds a fascinated audience.

For those not able to communicate in English, Indian senior citizen centers seem to be the ideal way to bring meaning into the lives of elderly Indians. The Indo-American Senior Program in San Jose, California, could well serve as the model for all future Indian senior centers. Started by a Hindu, Annie Dandavati, and a Sikh, Mohinder Mann, the center is non-political and open to all religions and communities of India.

Dandavati, who is a vocational rehabilitation counselor, and Mann who is an attorney, are both active in community affairs and have used their interaction with politicians and city officials to fund the San Jose program. Now 70 Indian senior citizens participate daily in an invigorating program of yoga, exercise and dance classes, gardening, and a daily lecture on social security, medical, welfare and immigration. They are given Indian and Filipino meals and taught English as a second language. There are trips to new and different places, and close contacts with Indian youth, who serve as volunteers here.

The close bonds with the younger generation can yet be forged. Says Dandavati: "I think the togetherness, the culture, the traditions really are more from the family upbringing and the family values each family holds within itself. If these basic values and philosophy are intact, then we don't really need to lose out, but if we come here and our concept of westernization is that we forget our own culture, then obviously we will lose out."

It is worthwhile to note that the greying of the population is taking place not only in America, but also in Japan, China, all parts of the world. Says Mathai-Davis, "Times are changing in India too: more two-income families, upward mobility where the children often move with their jobs to other cities. Elderly parents are left behind, or sometimes they move with their children and find themselves without friends and relatives. It's a major problem in countries where there aren't enough programs for the elderly."

Prabha Shah, a Hindu woman who lives in Sayreville, N.J., expresses the concern that is on many people's minds - planning for old age. Shah, who lost her husband six months ago, is just 52 and works in a bank. Yet she says many of her friends share this worry: "Whenever we have a get-together, everyone discusses the feasibility of buying a plot and building a home for the elderly. After retiring, it's going to be very difficult for many people. Such homes have already been set up in London and Chicago, where older Indians live together. They have kitchen facilities, movies, bhajans. Elderly Indians here will need these homes because of the food and language problems."

The Senior Center created by Dandavati and Mann is a step in the right direction, and the two are now lobbying to build senior housing. Yet it is ironical that this gift for the elderly has been the work of two ordinary citizens while our temples and priests - our moral and spiritual guides - have remained silent on this issue. Catholic churches and Jewish synagogues initiate religious classes, homes for their aged and fund-raisers to raise money for those of their faith who are in need; the priests and rabbis are responsible not only for the spiritual but for the total well-being of their parishioners.

Dandavati and Mann hope that the future will bring a similar spirit of social conscience into the management of Hindu temples across America and abroad. What better occasion for innovation than the present flourish of upcoming temples in changing times?

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