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MY TURN

Elders: Our Blessing, Not our Burden

Hindu traditions that honor elders are diminishing due to nuclear families

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Nearly two decades ago I left India to live and work in Kenya, Africa. On my recent return, I noticed certain changes on the shopping scene. I was looking for New Year greeting cards and, to my shock, discovered every card I liked was produced by HelpAge India to raise funds for the less fortunate elderly. No other well-known charities were represented. Why is the most popular charity in India HelpAge? In India, a country predominated by Hindus, elders--especially parents--have had a special place of honor through thousands of years of tradition. The whole household revolves around the wishes, even the whims and fancies, of seniors. Why do these aged suddenly need help? These questions are mind-boggling. The popular belief is that Westernization, urbanization and the breaking up of the joint family is responsible for this situation. Hindu elders are regarded as a burden on society, instead of holding the traditional position of receiving respect and giving guidance. In my childhood, I started my day by seeking blessings from my grandparents. That lifestyle was the norm then, but such extended families are rare in India today.

I have often observed that when a community moves to a new country they tend to preserve their culture and religion by putting them in a deep freeze. This is an effort made to maintain their identity. They do not permit their cultural values to be diluted or eroded. In Africa, I have never come across an Indian or Hindu home for the aged. Hindu old people occupy the seat of power and respect in their own households. It is very difficult for me to accept such a difference between a transplanted Hindu society on another continent and the original society in the motherland.

Equally shocking is the need for the enactment of Himachal Pradesh's law [see page 25]. It is a great insult to all Hindus. Neglect of parents is usually attributed to urbanization. However, Himachal Pradesh does not have any major city. It is hilly and backward by more than one criteria, so these reasons become irrelevant.

I believe Hinduism is not only a religion but a way of life based upon age-old religious customs, social traditions and family ties and values. Does this bill reflect the loss of all that? In my opinion this is the biggest cultural loss, greater than any bio-diversity loss of any species on this Earth.

I have been able to analyze the situation and have arrived at a different perspective. The need for homes for the elderly has arisen from the current trend for small families. Culturally, parents are not able to accept any help from daughters, especially married daughters. So, elderly with no sons end up in the care homes. Secondly, the middle class predominates in Indian society. Both parents work away from the home. There

are no longer daughters-in-law available to take care of aged parents. Thirdly, improvement in medical treatment has increased the average life span. Senior citizens (above 65) who have living parents do not have the capacity to look after their aged parents even if they have the desire. Lastly, but most importantly, it is the question of parental attitude. Young parents work very hard to raise and educate their children. But they never explain to their children what they as parents will need. Children grow up into adults knowing their rights but not their moral responsibilities.

Mrs. Bhardwaj and her husband, retired army officer Col. Bhardwaj, are former residents of Kenya now living in India.