**Elderly: Cared for, or Abandoned**

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Hubert H Humphrey, former Vice President of the US once remarked that the moral test of a government is how it treats children, the elderly, the sick, the needy and the handicapped. The truth is that it is not just the government’s moral test but that of all living human beings as to their attitude towards the ones mentioned here in addition to animals and plants. Eastern values concerning the elderly are quite different from those of the West. Whereas the former insists on taking care of the aged with religious fervour, in the case of the latter this is more to do with an individual’s perception rather than as a matter of duty. These days, however, with a greater influence of the western way of life and a race for material wealth, some of us here in Pakistan have learnt the art of neglecting our elderly abandoning them or confining them to old age homes developed by the government and philanthropists.

When children are born, they are dependent upon the love and care of the elders otherwise if left on their own they would simply perish but these babies are so cute and helpless that they draw the attention of even those who may not be related but possess enough affectionate feelings to attend to their needs. We are well aware that the instinct to care for the young is not restricted to just humans but animals as well. They too are naturally inclined to nurture under certain circumstances. Many incidents have been reported where human babies were raised by animals. Of course, humans also love to share their lives with animals which they keep as pets in their homes or the sanctuaries of zoological gardens and safari parks.

A crisis arises when babies grow up into adults while their parents or guardians become old and feeble. Since the duty of caregiving switches to the younger lot, the elders expect to be given the same treatment as they once gave to their offspring but this in the majority of cases may not be possible because of many reasons among which the most common are perhaps relocation of the young ones, professional/career engagements, peculiar family situations, poor finances, paucity of time or merely couldn’t-care-less outlook. According to some youngsters, kids are easier to handle compared to grown-ups who are more difficult, cranky and do not pay heed to instructions/requests. Besides, since they are more experienced why do they need any assistance in the first place unless they are handicapped or bed-ridden? Agreed, but what about returning a good gesture? After all, the leading principle is to be grateful to those who bestowed kindness which can only be done through action and not mere words, and what if the people are one’s elders, then? The obligation is far more imperative.

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Yet this is conveniently forgotten and elders are left behind by the ambitious young lot overwhelmed with its prospects of a glamorous future with little or no concern about those without whom they could not take a step forward, at one point in time. Other than meeting them on a few special occasions, they hardly ever visit or telephone to find out how they are doing.

The good thing in Pakistan is that culturally families are close-knit living together in homes regardless of their sizes. This implies at least two to four generations huddled in one place. This arrangement may come with a few disadvantages but the fact is that one, there are countless benefits and two, it goes a long way in glueing parents, children and grandparents. In this process, the children whose parents are pursuing a career get to be supervised by the elderly and likewise are cared for in return which means that they enjoy the presence of their family members till their last breath. This is a matter of immense comfort for those who gave the best years of their lives to their young loved ones.

Having said this, there are some old age homes in the country, housing elderly who are either alone or abandoned by their families for different reasons but when compared with the population the total number constitute a minuscule percentage. According to Helpage in 2019, the population aged 60 and above numbered 14,885,000 out of which total occupants of existing old age homes (6 run by the Punjab government and 10 private while 6 in Karachi in addition to those run by NGOs) should be a few thousand. Despite being aware of these facilities, the majority of elderly feel more secure living with their families except chronically ill and ones who are alone.

Till the time that our society observes its values, our elderly will remain protected and cared for minus a few isolated cases which invoke sympathies of the noble who come to the rescue and who know that more than treatments, what these people require. In ‘The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2015’, Rebecca Skloot writes concerning the elderly and sick: “You don’t have to spend much time with the elderly or those with a terminal illness to see how often medicine fails the people it is supposed to help. The waning days of our lives are given over to treatments that addle our brains and sap our bodies for a sliver’s chance of benefit. These days are spent in institutions-nursing homes and intensive-care units-where regimented, anonymous routines cut us off from all the things that matter to us in life.”

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