

The elderly have to endure hardships in every form. From having to line up in queues to taxation policies, nothing works in their favour

Somebody once said that the moment you realise there isn't something wonderful round the corner, it is time to know that you are old. But of course old age does not come along with this realisation alone. A part and parcel of this phase of life is not only dependency but also geriatric illness, a fear of death, insecurity and loneliness, and above all a lack of strength to withstand what we call the old age syndrome.

It was to empathize with such problems of the old that the UN General Assembly, in its 45th session recommended an annual recognition of the International Day of the Elderly. While many countries recognise this day with special resolutions and concessions for their senior citizens, we in Pakistan are not that enthusiastic. Most of us believe that this is a frivolous exercise which can bring about no good. "We have a different society and different values than the western countries," says Mrs. Shehzad, the president of Help, a local ladies' social work club. "The biggest protection for the elderly lies in the joint family system and family values," Mrs Shehzad believes that provisions such as old homes are needed in societies where it is a practice to leave the aging parents when they can no longer support themselves. While Mrs. Shahzad's outlook is realistic, it does not assess the whole picture accurately for the recognition of this day is not for the provision of Old Homes alone, but to create awareness about the significance of the elderly in a society, and to allow them to enjoy dignity, respect and care as their right.

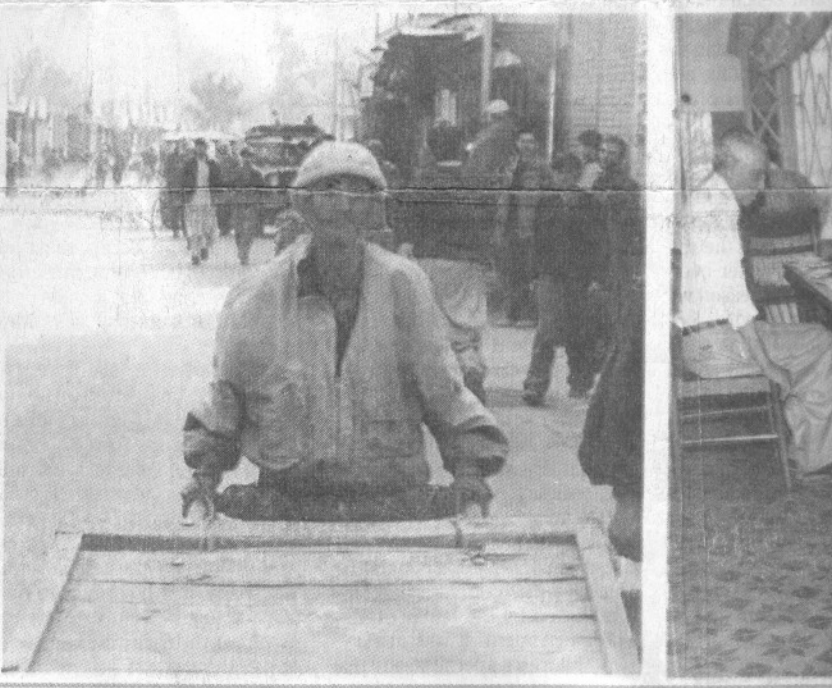
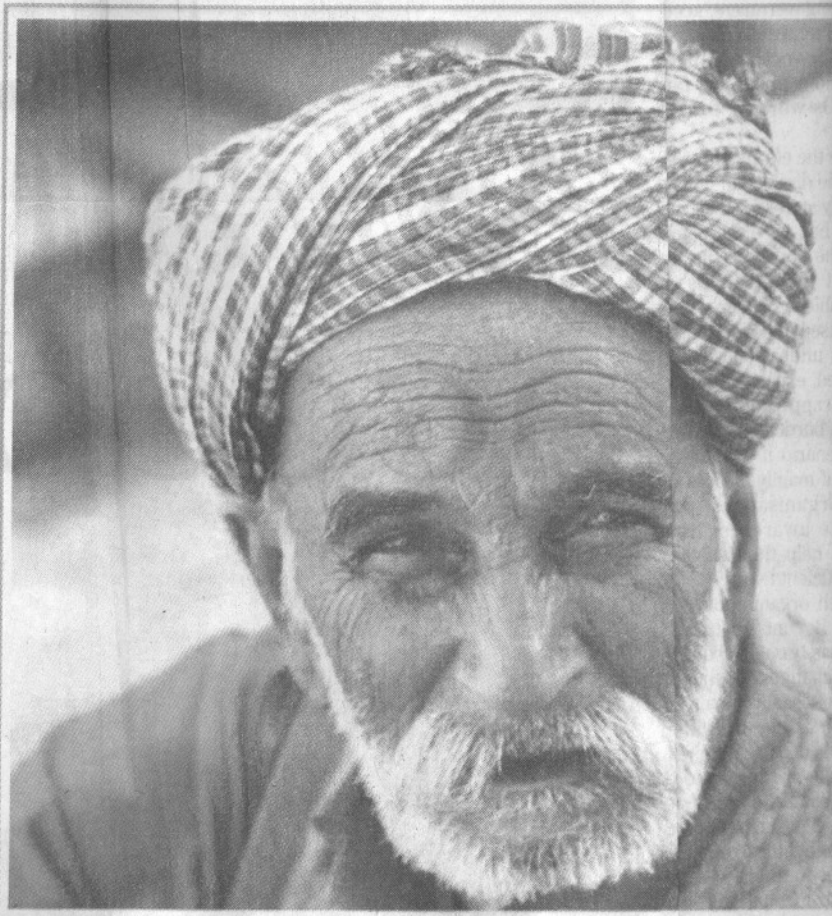
According to the 1998 census 55% of the population of Pakistan is over 60 which is considered 'old' by definition. This number is estimated to double over the next 60 years. What is the status of the old in our culture? The answer in most cases is that they are either a burden or are overburdened. Irshad Ali at 72

senior citizens

does not even enjoy the right to be treated as old, because he is the only earning hand of the family. "I married late and had

children even later and up till now they depend on me. I had to think of the education of my son, and my daughter is

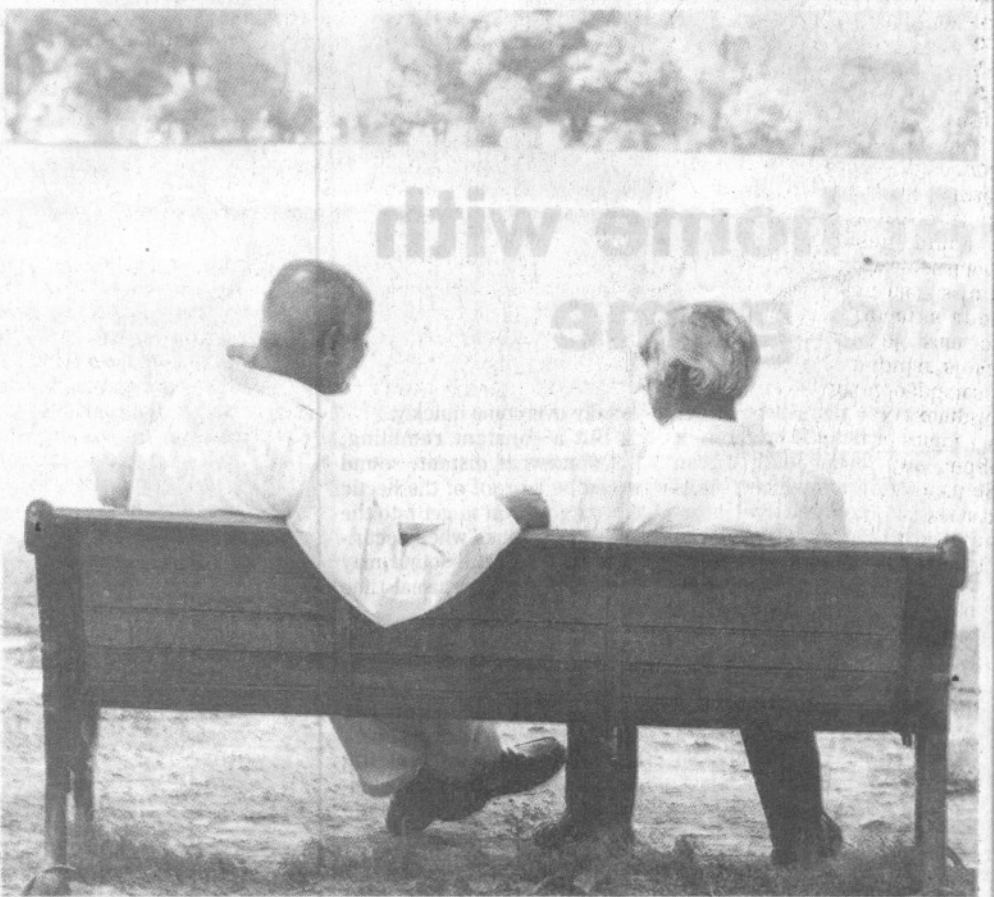
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By Adiah Afraz

... needed to the elderly



my son, and my daughter is not married yet," says Mr. Irshad. An engineer by profession. He runs his own consultancy but is ready to retire now. He expects to find a suitable match for his 30 year old daughter soon because he now intends to hand over the business to his son-in-law. "I don't know if it is a wise decision but I know my son is well settled in America and I feel too old and tired to go on." A diabetic and a heart patient Mr. Irshad looks forward to a life of retirement and ease. However, his dream of living with a big family, surrounded by his grand children is not to be materialised because he knows his son would never come back, and it is taboo in our society to live with one's daughter. Loneliness, according to him, is not something you plan for when you are young and definitely not what you desire when you are old.

With rapid urbanisation the values of our society have changed. The women are no

longer confined to their houses and the men no longer are bound with the orthodox views of the past. It is now that the age old problem of domestic quibbling between mother and wife of a man has acquired a new dimension.

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While the younger woman's desire to go out and work is justified, the older woman does not accept it easily. This rejection of the working daughter-in-law does not always come from some inner grudge or hatred but is the result of a desire to be looked after and pampered. "This problem occurs because

women have no occupation. When they forgo their domestic duties as well they become sulky and feel useless. I think the community can play a role to alleviate the problem by establishing old people's clubs or entertainment lunches. It

would give a sense of purpose to the old ladies sitting at homes and ease the pressure from the younger ones," says Mrs. Shehzad.

Many among the younger generation do not have the patience or the empathy to understand the childlike whims of the old. And if the problem goes beyond the psy-

chological and the elderly in the house suffer from some fatal or permanent illness, then more than often the question of 'who will look after them', is debated among the siblings. Khursheed Anwari Begum is a lady who has long suffered from Dementia which is a gradual loss of mental capabilities. Lately, she has been diagnosed with Alzheimer disease as she has completely lost her memory. Currently she lives with her sister who is a widow and is full of fury for the children who cannot decide what they should do about their mother. "Don't they think about how the mother gives birth to them and how she spends the best years of her life in their 'service'," she says. "The sons are all slaves of their wives. They should realise that the same thing can happen to them when they grow old." The family however has another story to tell. According to the daughters in law, they had kept

Begum Khursheed alternatively for eleven years and say she will eventually come back to them. Taking both sides of the picture into account one cannot blame one party, but there is a strong realisation that a human being should not be degraded and rejected for circumstances beyond human control. This is where the role of the government and the society comes in for the protection of the rights of the elderly who are vulnerable to mental and physical abuse in their homes and in extreme circumstances are ill-treated, neglected and even evicted.

There is an abuse of the elderly in community as well. In queues for pension, in government offices and hospitals the elderly have no protection. The community does not provide any services to the senior citizens and the government's policies are not sufficient to solve their problems. "The previous government had announced some facilities for

the senior citizens and even the present government established a task force for the cause but frankly we can do with more than travel concessions and free access to museums and libraries," says Munawwar Ali Khan, a retired government officer.

His pension according to him, even after being revised, is not sufficient to pay his bills and that is why he has invested his savings in the government's saving scheme for the elderly. "First I was reluctant to put my savings in this scheme because the policies here change so rapidly, but then I changed my mind hoping they will not reduce the profit rates for the elderly at least," he says. Mr. Munawwar stressed the need of some provision in the policies that give protection to the elderly against inflation or they be exempted from tax on their savings. "The problem is that we have no provisions especially for the elderly. The

banks have no special policies for house building or other loans; there is no job security or an increased retirement age in special cases. The budget 2003-4 ignored the senior citizens and their tax exemption policies are full of loopholes."

There is a popular slogan that to age is to blossom, but the question remains about what this slogan means to us as a society. Do we consider it a well phrased piece of rhetoric or do we actually believe that the senior citizens are like blossoms, diffusing for our benefit, their wisdom and experiences of life? In case of the latter we should not restrict our respect for these deferential human beings by only shouting slogans and writing banners on October 1, but decide it in our hearts to do a good deed for the benefit of the elderly each day, 365 deeds a year. One never knows which of these deeds come around to make our own old age worth living through.