

When Life Comes A Full Circle



Bhubaneswar has over 1.2 lakh senior citizens – mostly women – fending for themselves, as their children migrate to bigger cities and foreign countries to make a living. Loneliness, lack of emotional support and safety concerns make life difficult for them, writes Rakhi Ghosh

I am old, widowed and living all by myself. I am financially secure but I have one serious problem and that is loneliness. My children are settled outside the state and are busy chasing lucrative careers while my grandchildren are caught up in their studies. Brief, weekly phone calls are all the time I get with them. Every year, I fervently wish that they would come for a visit but that has not been possible yet,” says Archana Mohanty, who is in her late 60s.

Within a few months of her retirement from a government job, Archana lost her husband and ever since, she has been on her own. In fact, for her, time had simply stood still till she joined a senior citizens’ group in her area, which has brought together many elderly people who, like her, feel lonely, bored or vulnerable.

Fear of being attacked

Septuagenarian Soudamini Mohapatra, too, stays by herself in a rented flat in Bhubaneswar, Odisha’s state capital. Her children — one son and daughter — live abroad and are doing well for themselves. Both have good jobs and have settled down there. Although she keeps herself engaged reading books, performing puja, attending religious gatherings and discourses, and, of course, watching daily soaps on television, come nightfall and she starts feeling nervous and scared. “Being alone, I always fear for my safety. What if someone breaks into my home and attacks me at night? There is simply no way I can defend myself. I know my children are busy in their life and they cannot come if I need them at a short notice. However, I have connected with a senior citizens’ group of our area so that help is at hand as and when I need it,” she shares.

As per a survey conducted by the Federation of Senior Citizen Associations (FSCA) of Odisha, there are around 1.2 lakh people above 60 years living in Bhubaneswar. Of these, several are living away from their families and, surprisingly, a majority of them are women. Observes Krupasindhu Sahu, President, FSCA, “There are a large number of senior citizens staying alone in Bhubaneswar and fending for themselves. One of the key reasons for this unfortunate social reality is that there are not many career growth options for youngsters in the city so they have to move leaving their parents behind. On their part, the elders would also much rather stay in this small city as most believe that they could not adjust to a faster pace of life.”

Safety is one of their biggest concerns at present. In recent years, Bhubaneswar has been witnessing a rise in the number of incidents of attacks on senior citizens. They are soft targets and often it is the support staff of drivers, domestic help and security guards that is involved in the crime. The usual motive is stealing money, gold ornaments and other expensive possessions.

To safeguard the seniors and provide protection, particularly to aged women, the Police Commissionerate has set up special cells in its headquarters as well as key police stations across the city. Each cell is headed by an officer of the rank of Sub-inspector, designated as the Nodal Officer, who is assisted by at least one constable. The main objectives of these security cells include coordinating the security measures for senior citizens with the help of local police, sensitising them about the different ways in which they can look after themselves, assisting them in resolving their personal problems as far as possible, ensuring regular interaction of the local police through home visits and diligently conducting police verification of domestic help(s) and tenants.

Says Krupasindhu, “There is a need to set up a toll-free helpline where senior citizens can call in and seek police assistance – something on the lines of the women’s helpline number. The Kerala and Tamil Nadu police are already providing this toll-free service to help elderly people who are alone at home to access emergency medical care and other critical services.” Additionally, to facilitate better living, the seniors will play an advisory role in the implementation of citizen-centric works by Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation (BMC) through a specially constituted advisory committee of which the FSCA is a part.

Need for old age homes

Apart from the safety issue, elderly people have a major hurdle to overcome – reorienting themselves to the idea of a life that is no longer driven by hectic activity. Former diplomat Abasara Beuria, who is staying alone in the city after retirement, remarks, “As medical science makes significant advances and life expectancy increases, the numbers of senior citizens are only growing across the globe. What can make things much easier for the likes of me is being in an old age home. In India, we have to change our traditional mindset and accept that there is a demand for old age homes, even in relatively smaller cities like Bhubaneswar. Of course, being in an old age home needn’t be seen as being destitute, unwanted or unloved. Rather it can be a means of spending one’s old age with dignity and respect in the company of like-minded friends. These homes can be designed in holistic way so that they are cheerful and provide various medical services. I think it is a critical need of the hour.”

Psychologist Sangeeta Rath couldn’t agree more, “In a sense life comes full circle as people grow old. If they are able to get rid of the feelings of anxiety, fear, stress and insecurity that often grip their generation then they can actually indulge in activities that they had to give up earlier due to the paucity of time. They can revisit their hobbies and spend time with friends and community members. Unfortunately, women tend to get fixated on the fact that they are no longer able to contribute actively to the domestic sphere and then fall into the trap of self pity.”

However, while the senior citizens struggle with their physical and emotional burdens, the attitude of people around them is not exactly favourable either. “Even within the family, there’s a tendency to overlook and ignore what the elderly members have to say. Many a time, their constant complaints about feeling ill and fragile is not given proper cognisance. It’s then that a rapport with fellow seniors gives a huge sense of comfort. On the one hand, I would advise the elders to develop their own friends circle so that they can fight these feelings of worthlessness and loneliness, on the other, I would advocate for the setting up of good quality health care systems and other peripheral services to make the quality of life better for them,” she concludes.