

ADDRESS BY HON'BLE PRESIDENT AT A FUNCTION
ORGANISED BY HELP AGE INDIA ON THE OCCASION
OF INTERNATIONAL DAY OF OLDER PERSONS

1 October 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am extremely happy to address this gathering on the occasion of the International Day of Older Persons.

Let me at the outset itself confess my bias. I turn seventy seven few months from now. Our Honourable Prime Minister has just celebrated his 80th birthday. Ms. Lata Mangeshkar celebrated her 83rd birthday a few days back. Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer is going strong at the age of 97, intellectually vibrant and deeply concerned about the welfare and progress of our nation. Many more illustrious persons can be added to this list , but I stop here.

There is in this audience and all around us a large number of elders who are making extremely valuable contributions to our country and to our society. I salute them and am proud to be one of them, an 'Elder' leading a productive and fruitful life. And, I am confident that each one of these elders has much more to do and give before they call it a day.

Today, with the advancement of medical science and technology, age is by no means a disabling factor. If you

are healthy, age is just a number. It is also possible to remain young in mind and spirit irrespective of how many moons you have seen. As summed up by the famous English writer, W. Somerset Maugham “Old age has its pleasures, which, though different, are not less than the pleasures of youth”.

Yet, it is the sad truth that elders such as those mentioned above are perhaps a minority. It is said that there are over a million persons in the world crossing the threshold of 60 years every month. The World Bank believes there is an old age crisis looming large over most countries of the world. It is with the specific intention of focusing attention on the problems of the elderly that the United Nations declared October 1 as the International Day of Older Persons. Across the world, while there is rejoicing over the fact that progress in medical science and economic development has expanded the life span of human beings, there is also recognition that ageing is amongst the major economic and political challenges of the 21st century.

India is a young nation and we celebrate the fact that more than 50% of our population is under the age of 25. We are hoping that the demographic dividend that a young population brings will assure our country's economic future. However, we must remember that there is a very significant population of elders in our country, whose needs cannot be overlooked. According to a forthcoming UNFPA report, 20 per

cent of our population is going to comprise of elders by 2050. We simply cannot afford to neglect or ignore this section of the population.

The India of our dreams is a kind, caring and compassionate society. Our Constitution, in Article 41, which forms part of the Directive Principles calls upon the State to make effective provision for public assistance in cases of old age, within limits of its economic capacity and development. I wonder how many other Constitutions would contain such specific reference to the State's responsibility to provide support to the elderly. Though the Directive Principles do not enjoy the status of Fundamental Right and are not legally enforceable, these principles are considered fundamental in the governance of the country making it the duty of the State to apply them while making laws in order to create a just society.

I have to confess my deep alarm and dismay in this context over the findings of the 20 city survey conducted by Help Age which reveals that one out of three elders have faced abuse. It is even more shocking to learn that those surveyed describe their sons and daughters in law as the primary abusers. Many report such abuse as having continued for more than five years and most do not complain to any one in order to uphold family honour. Elders surveyed have spoken of suffering disrespect, neglect, verbal abuse, physical abuse,

and emotional abuse. Worst of all, the Survey finds that the most abused are those above 80.

I hope these findings will serve as a wake-up call and goad each one of us into immediate action. We must do everything possible to ensure that our elders can live a life of dignity, enjoying the best of medical attention, economic security as well as emotional stability. Our culture, history, traditions, religion and philosophy all enjoin us to respect our elders and to fill their lives with abundant love and affection. India is what it is today because of the contributions made by our elders in their youth. If those hands steadied you when you learned to walk, then you need to support them when they need help and hope there will be others who will do the same for you when you grow old.

The majority of older persons in our country are women and among the oldest, 65 percent are women. Sadly, 58% of the older women are widows. This gender dimension to ageing is something we should recognize and address with appropriate measures. I was very pleased to see earlier the elderly “ Maasis” from Kolkatta who are being taken care by HelpAge India.

Across India, the ‘Joint Family’ is withering away and with it, the informal support structures that elders used to enjoy. This has serious implications for the economic, health, emotional and physical security of the elderly segment of our

population. These challenges should be seen in the context of industrialization and modernization, which has affected the family size, structure and its guiding philosophy. We certainly cannot set the clock back but we must evolve solutions that strike a balance between conflicting demands of elderly and younger members of the family.

The real challenges that lie in the field of health security are accessibility and affordability of medical health facilities. Elderly require special geriatric care which can be available only in the tertiary hospitals and their medical expenses increases with age whereas their income decreases or remains static despite increase in inflation. Private hospitals are reluctant to provide concessions to the elderly and insurance companies unwilling to insure the elderly. I am thankful to NGO's like HelpAge India which provide health care to more than a million elderly every year through their Mobile Medical Vans .

In the economic field, the full play of market forces in the financial markets has resulted in lowering of interest rates. Interest is the mainstay of the income of many elderly who do not get any regular pension but invest their resources in such deposit schemes that yield secure returns.

The Government of India in 1999, which was the International Year of Older Persons adopted a National Policy on Older Persons. This is a comprehensive document that

identifies principal areas of intervention and action strategies. This policy needs to be implemented in full earnest by the Government. NGOs like Helpage India and older persons' organizations must provide necessary support to the Government in this regard.

There is an urgent need to mainstream issues concerning the aged and ageing in India. The needs and requirements of the elderly should not be overlooked by society. We need to fight ageism that is so deeply ingrained in the societal psyche and reinforced by the media. Elderly should not be considered a spent force and consigned to the history books but seen as active members of the society contributing to its well-being.

Society and government should be sensitized to the fact that old age is just another phase of life with its special needs and characteristics like childhood and youth. Though the losses in this phase of life are more than in any other phase in life but still all is not lost. The younger people should get to know how the world appears to the elderly; because that is the future of the youth.

Most importantly, the elderly should be encouraged to get out of a 'retirement mentality' and think about old age as a second inning, an opportunity to complete so many unfinished tasks and expand horizons, to look beyond the self and the family and work for community. Active participation

and involvement in society is the mantra which can ensure independence, dignity and self – fulfillment.

A compassionate and caring society values each of its members. If the youth have energy, the elderly have knowledge and experience. All we need to do is provide them opportunities to be productive. Under no circumstances should elders in our society be given the impression that they are a burden and that we are reluctant to care for them. We need to ensure their happiness and we certainly need their blessings.

On this occasion of the World Elders Day, I greet all the senior citizens assembled here and pray that all of you will enjoy good health and remain blessed with a mentally as well as physically vibrant life. I congratulate all the awardees present here and express my sincere appreciation for the stellar work undertaken by them.

I compliment Help Age India's visionary founder late Samson Daniel who founded this organization way back in 1975, his successor Shri M.M. Shabharwal who spearheaded the expansion of Help Age India across the country and all its members, volunteers and supporters who have dedicated their lives to the service of the elderly.

I call upon each and every citizen of India to do their utmost to ensure the welfare of the elderly in our

country and to create opportunities for them to enrich our society and contribute to the growth and progress of our nation.

I am particularly happy there are many school children from Delhi schools in the audience. Children, I hope that each one of you will pledge to bring the maximum possible happiness into the lives of your grandparents and all others of their generation.

I would like to end my observations with a quote from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

“For age is opportunity no less
Than youth itself, though in another dress
And as the evening twilight fades away
The sky is filled with stars, invisible by day”

Jai Hind