

Life in the Golden Age in Two Different Continents **- Jharna Chatterjee, Ph.D.**



One of the most common experiences in old age is loneliness, especially after losing a spouse or for people in poor health or with a disability. Without a conscious effort to overcome these difficulties, it is easy for them to fall into the depths of social isolation and depression too. In India, often people in this situation move into their grown children's homes – if the children are willing and able to accommodate the elderly parent. In North America, where both husband and wife have to pursue their careers, this is rarely an option. Besides, many of the young men and ladies of the next generation are married to North American spouses. Parents sometimes feel like outsiders in their homes – for no one's fault; it is due to a combination of generation gap which affects each and every parent and child all over the world, as well as cultural gap. It is an awkward feeling for parents - always being uncertain about what or how much to do or not do; what to say and not to say, and where to draw the line. Being married to an American young man or a woman naturally tends to reinforce the North American, individualistic side of their personality, whereas mostly, the parents remain Indian in their core values, likes and dislikes and many of their day-to-day habits, including food habits. Whatever the case, in India or in North America, most often it feels like a peripheral existence for the parents, especially a parent who has lost his/her spouse, best expressed in a poem by Rabindranath:

I roam around all alone among the multitude of people who surround me (sohar majhe ami phiri ekela).

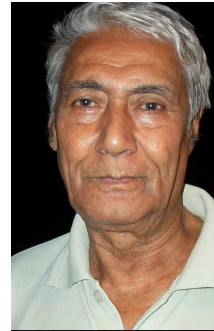
Senior citizens' homes hardly constitute a satisfactory solution. In India, living in a senior citizens' home may not assure acceptable, good quality care. In North America, it may not be psychologically satisfying. Even after spending almost all of their adult lives in North America, many of these lonely, elderly people do not feel a sense of belonging among their North American contemporaries and are not totally comfortable to live with them on a daily basis. To complicate the matter, many of these first generation immigrants are not accustomed to North American food, including meat dishes and even soups that are mostly meat-based. This does not mean they do not have very good, genuine friends in the wider community, but permanent living arrangement is another matter. So this in-between population faces a big challenge in their golden age. However, regardless of this challenge, people in their sixties or seventies may find happiness,

enjoyment and a sense of purpose in their lives in many different ways – and we have chosen a couple of examples to provide a glimpse.

Two young men studied in the same field at the same well-known educational institution in India since they were in their late teens, and in late 1950's sailed ship together to the United States of America for higher studies. There, their paths parted. After obtaining a postgraduate degree, one of them returned to India and was appointed at a prestigious position, married a local young lady, had a lovely family and settled down happily. The other gentleman obtained postgraduate degrees from two of the best American universities, settled in North America, had a lovely family and started his own independent practice after holding many highly acclaimed positions in many cities. But these two individuals have always remained close friends and kept in regular contact with each other.

The two following accounts of their typical days present an interesting insight into their daily lives, their habits and their places in their own worlds.

(1). A Day in the Home of My Daughter- Gopal Krishna Choudhury



I have been staying at my daughter's and only child's place in Mumbai for the major part of last year, as is the custom in India. I am in my mid-seventies, retired – a widower. The lifestyle that I have here is quite typical for people in my situation.

Pigeons at my window-sill wake me up everyday to enjoy the beautiful sunrise, and to feel the cool sea-breeze. I eagerly look forward to their arrival as the quiet eyes of those pigeons remind me of the silent, deep and expressive eyes of my late wife. After leaving bed and getting ready, I sit before the altar in a corner of my room and try to meditate for sometime. It is a typical Hindu home-altar with pictures or small statuettes of deities including Lord Krishna, and pictures of saints, an oil-lamp, an incense-stand with sandalwood sticks in it and a vase of fresh flowers. To me, Krishna is a concept, an embodiment of pure love. After meditation, I go out for a long walk. By this time my daughter usually goes out for her walk while my son-in-law settles down with the newspaper. Even at that early hour sometimes I find my grandson making arrangements for his studies.

My son-in-law is a big and successful executive and a loving husband and father. My daughter, by nature, is disciplined, loving, supportive and hard-working. Raising the family in the best possible manner is her only goal. After coming back from a long walk and serving breakfast to her husband who then leaves for his work, my daughter serves breakfast to her two children and me, and joins us. She instructs the maid about the preparation of the midday meal, and then goes out for shopping in their chauffer-driven car. When she returns, on holidays we listen to recorded music of the 80's and the 90's, both Western and Indian, for long hours. Then I generally browse through the daily news-paper, watch T.V., attend to my personal mail, take a bath and perform the 'puja' (worship of deities) in a simple way and ask for divine blessings for all.



Grandson and grand-daughter

All of us sit around the dining table for a sumptuous meal around 1:00 PM and most often afterwards we take a 'siesta'. However, my grandson usually goes back to his studies. He is a charming boy aged 15, with good health - both physical and mental. He is exceptionally good in his studies and adept in the use of computers. My grand daughter is our little angel. All of 10 years, she has a soft heart full of affection and sympathy for all those who are around her. Indeed, her older brother is her role-model, and she is equally interested in studies, play, dance and music.

Around 5:30 we have our evening tea, and then almost always watch the Bengali T.V. programs. After sundown, it is time for me and my grand-daughter to go out. Before leaving the house, I clean the altar, light a lamp and a sandal-wood incense stick and again pray for divine blessings. While my grand-daughter plays with her friends in the play ground within the condominium complex downstairs, I take a stroll in the garden or sit on a garden-chair and talk to my friends, using my mobile phone.

When evening falls, we both come back home, wash up and sit for our dinner along with my grand son. Thereafter, I recite the last prayer of the day, "In one salutation to Thee, my God, let all my senses touch Thy feet," and slowly drift into pleasant sleep. Every night, before I fall asleep, I receive a very special gift from my 10 year-old grand-daughter: a soft touch of her lips on my cheeks!

(2) A Typical Day In The Life Of An Indian-born American - A. N. 'Shen' Sengupta



Indian-born Americans are a special lot. Unlike their children, who were born in USA or the late arrivals, this rather elderly generation has strong emotional ties to both shores. When they left post-World War II-India for the promised land, India was yet a developing country, with all its social values intact, a mellow land, which was not overwhelmed by the crush of people, vehicles, noise and dust-and-shoot-laden air. They made a mark in their careers and were bursting with endless energy and self-confidence.

In USA, they carried their careers to newer heights, taking advantage of the open-arm policies of their adopted country. They went for the top degrees and landed coveted positions with ease. They married, either a local boy or girl or one from India. They became the most successful minority community in USA, be it in education or in income. Being mostly professionals, like doctors, professors or engineers, they had a high social standing. More often than not, they bought large homes in affluent areas. Progressively they retired, while their children, born in USA, took the main stage. Through all this they became an integral part of the new land.

A typical day for a retired Indo-American begins in a leisurely way in their spacious master bedroom, looking at trees and the lawn and listening to a virtual concert by song-birds.

Alas, unlike in India, no maid or servant is there to serve bed-tea, nor cook lunch and dinner or wash and dry the clothes and no gardener to mow the lawn, water the plants, no washer-man to wash and iron the clothes, no vendors to bring to your door fresh vegetables, fruits and even fish, no chauffer to drive and maintain the car and no secretary to do the errands. And so, our friend picks up the newspaper from the driveway and he and his wife prepare tea together and have their breakfast, while dreaming of how it would be if they were in India.

They carry on with their daily chores on a do-it-yourself basis, in spite of the many aches and pains. They share. Usually, the external affairs are handled by him, while the internal affairs by her. The external affairs include book-keeping of all kinds, usually taken care of with the aid of a desk-top computer. Naturally he is, by necessity, mostly sedentary.

She is not and the physical strain takes its toll. They both do stretching exercises and pranayams (breathing exercises), but when it comes to any spiritual activities, it is limited to the community Pujas (worshipping) held periodically in community halls. Their primary social activities are to have their grand-children visit them during weekends and monthly get-togethers at the local senior center, where they also take classes for Spanish language, computers, car-repair and painting, the monthly get-together lunch of an 'Evergreen Group', and the many parties which crop up fairly regularly. At these lunches and parties, wine flows and all the usually forbidden foods are consumed with gay abandon.



With daughter-in-law and grand-daughters in his own home, Atlanta, Georgia

As the day winds down, they have an early dinner, while watching 'World Focus' or BBC on T.V. They usually catch up with their e-mails, since that constitutes a vital window to relatives and friends in India, USA, Canada and elsewhere. Before bed-time they watch some favorite movie for an hour or so (they take time to see the whole thing over two or more sessions). Finally, they fall asleep, while watching fireflies through their large windows and listening to the mysterious music created by the crickets.

Through it all, their minds wander far and near to places where they have been and to people they have come across during their six or seven decades. Their minds also engage in the many problems facing the world as well as their own families. They wish that they were young again to start it all over.