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# DIGNITY

D I A L O G U E

THE MAGAZINE FOR PRODUCTIVE AGEING



## PICTURESQUE AGEING

**OSTEOPOROSIS IN MEN**

**WHY IS MOTHER  
FORGETTING**

**TROUBLED  
GRANDCHILDREN**

**GROWING OLD  
IN SINGAPORE**

# PICTURESQUE AGEING

**S**omebody once asked an old woman, "what is old age?" and she replied, "the years are like sugar in your cup of tea. The last sip is the sweetest." A thousand words could not have put it more eloquently. One smiles in wondrous understanding of this facet of ageing as Amrita Pritam, sitting among numerous sketches and even more books defines ageing. As we walk through the exhibition of Samar and Vijay Jodha we get to know of many other facets of ageing and the aged. The brothers are just in their twenties and they take on this vast intergenerational challenge. One is amazed at the medley of destinies in

**As a forerunner of the much-needed age integrated society in contrast to the existing age differentiated society, people of the younger generation reach out to the old. Jodha brothers in their 20s and early 30s are travelling India — with their photographic exhibition *Ageing in India***

**a treat distinguished as much for its visual impact as for its depth and purpose. An interview with DD's Assistant Editor, also in her 20s!**

**SHALINI SETH**

— but also invite you to their world in kind hospitality and make friends with you. At a glance one is made aware of a life, a personality and what he/she holds dear. ...The second thing you notice is the richly produced text which carries the introduction a step forward as you nod in understanding of these individuals and the uniqueness of each of their lives. In a few well-crafted sentences we strike acquaintance with the person in the photo and his/her view of life.

Then there are the brothers, Samar and Vijay, modest, realistic, professional, with a vision to trace the footprints of individuals that would have otherwise got obliterated and made elusive in a rapidly changing world which has little or no time for them. In a world divided across generational lines theirs is an attempt which links them and us with not only



Amrita Pritam

**"Books of my inner awareness are very different from my prose and poetry. My best writing is after 60 and what I have written after 70 is even better.**

**Fruits sweeten only when they ripen. Old age is one such fruit.**

**What does it mean to be aged? I don't know. Can you ask the flower what is the meaning of its blossoming? Why does it sweeten the air with its scent?"**

*Amrita Pritam, Writer, born Gujranwala, 1919*

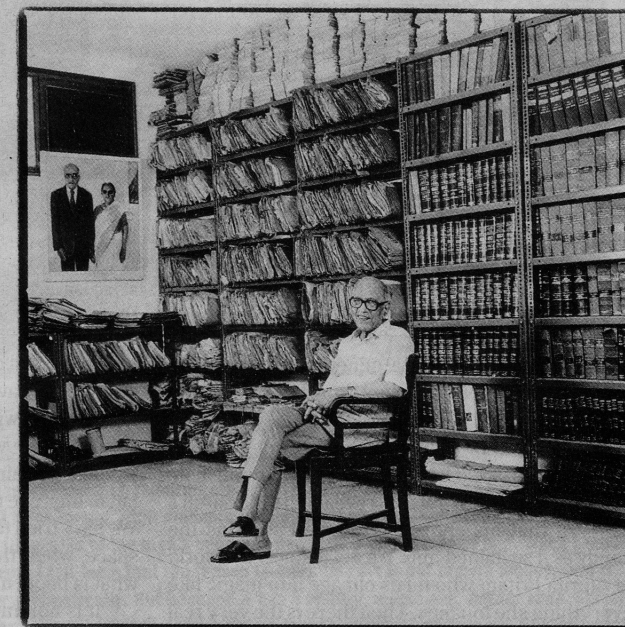
one's own country — people from various regions, professions, and walks of life with only a thread of age binding them — that and the unique bond they share with the two youngsters who have brought them to us.

For seven years Samar and Vijay have been meeting older people, taking photographs, doing research, going back to authenticate their data and putting it across so it is relevant to non-specialist institutions, business corporations and others who do not have to deal with this subject and who are quite ignorant and largely uninterested in the problems and needs of the elderly... How was it that the project came to be self funded? "For us sponsorship was never an end in itself. Even if we did not get it we wanted to take the message to the people," says Vijay.

Behind the spectacular exhibition of a selection of 35 photographs out of 400, each accompanied by a biographical sketch life

is painstaking research indeed of over 400 people, an understanding of their lives, an overview of the issues related to ageing. Theirs is also a perspective that acts on the UN declaration "Outreach to non-traditional players is being made and these include: youth, enterprises, the media, development agencies and the arts. These players, not traditionally attentive to the ageing issue, are being challenged to look into the lifetime and society-wide implications of the demographic revolution." The Jodhas' intensity of purpose is the demonstration of the need for an age-integrated society and how it should value its elders and their experience. Indeed a fitting way to commemorate the International (1999) and the National Year of Older Persons (2000).

There are many things about this exhibition that strike you. First, there are the photographs. Not only do they speak for themselves — as pictures are wont to



Justice Tarakunde

**"I have got a formula on our present scenario — darkness is coming from above, but light is spreading from below. The government, the parties and the state are getting worst but people are getting wiser. Each election is an educational process."**

*Retd. Justice V M Tarakunde and human rights activist, born Saswad, Maharashtra, 1909*



Behram Contractor

**"I think at a young age itself you can see how a person will be when old. Like people at office who make one excuse or other for taking leave."  
Behram Contractor, journalist, born Bombay, 1930.**

older people as part of a generation but also as spokespersons for the many worlds that they inhabit.

The *Widow in Vrindavan* makes us aware of Sheila Devi's world where *thakurji* is her only family. The *Khandekar family* reveals the patriarch's concern that his chosen profession sustains the family as it sustained him. We get to know the world of Amrita Pritam who turns old age into magic like everything she touches. Then there is the very real world of Justice Tarakunde who can through his experience sense some hope even in the bleak socio-political scenario of today. Says Samar about their selection, "Each story represents one or more facets of ageing. Some of the subjects are more productive and well known today than anytime in their long careers, others are doing something quite extraordinary, often against great odds and usually away from the limelight, while some even if lead-

ing a very ordinary life, represent a significant, larger issue related to ageing in India. Together, more than a comprehensive survey, they form a picture of the way we are or will be."

As we move from photograph to photograph we realise that in stark contrast to the photographic idiom where more wrinkles on face means a better picture, Jodhas' pictures carry no exaggeration of any sort, save the hugeness of the life the pictures speak about. Clearly the attempt is to understand not mystify. The world of mass communications is infamous for exploiting the very population it wishes to represent. Says Samar while answering my anxious question about relationship with their subjects, "Stock pictures evoke stock reactions, begging sympathy. Dignity is very important. We have really tried to keep that in mind. We have never landed at anyone's house

with a van full of lights, three assistants and a generator! We have made sure that the person feels comfortable with us, with the idea. The second or third time we would go with the camera. Then we would go again. Get inputs on the shots taken so far, to improve upon them when people are relaxed. We have tried to take photographs of people in their space, when they are very very comfortable with what is happening. We don't even take a recorder."

"It is not imposition of our vision but capturing them in their space. One does not show the photographer in the picture. A section of our shots capture issues related to their elderly. For example, there is one of a woman who suffers from Alzheimer's. A person who is suffering from Parkinson's is taking care of her. He is a family friend who offered to come, stay and help her. There is no need to highlight the problem or exploit the misery. We avoid doing the obvious. So the photo-

graph shows human bonding, caring. It is so positive, we tried to highlight that in the photograph. Whether it is begging, poverty or any other problem, we have to scratch the surface and go deeper."

Samar and Vijay also cherish their relationship with their subjects. Vijay sees it as an enrichment to the treasure house of friends they have. "We feel privileged to know so many good people. Usually the year ends and you can count your friends on your fingertips. And here we have met 100 good people."

The intensity of the Jodhas in their treatment and understanding of ageing persons is touching. Let me quote them, "During the course of this project, we had once gone and met Asharfi for a calendar we were doing for the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. At 100 plus, (her family said she was 106 while newspaper reports put her age at 103), she was Delhi's oldest voter having exercised her franchise in the elections of 1998. One of her grandsons explained how winter was the hardest part of the year for her, as she sat quietly on a charpoy in the courtyard, soaking in the sun and surrounded by her great grandchildren and grandchildren excited at the sight of our camera cases and photo equipment. She couldn't see very well but acknowledged our presence, as one of the women from the household came and affectionately draped a shawl over her head.

"The calendar never got published and when we

wanted to visit her again many months later, we learnt that she didn't survive the winter. Although the sight of her being carried in her grandson's arms to the polling booth was immortalised by many newspapers during the elections last year, much of her story – what she thought of her long



V N Khandekar

**"I am teaching watch repairing since 1962...My first student was a postman and till now I have taught 7000 students including advocates, ladies, police inspectors; from illiterates to the highly educated and from 9 to 65 years of age. When I teach students I tell them that the reason to learn this art is not to earn money, that will come automatically. But because it has a history, unlike say, *batata vada*. Shivaji Maharaj didn't have *batata vada* before launching attack on Raigarh. But the watch was there."**

**I want you to take a photo of my family because my wife, both my sons, and daughters-in-law have expertise in this art. The two newcomers in my family are also getting acquainted. I am old and I don't need publicity but for them something good will come out of this encouragement.**

**V N Khandekar, horologist and clocks collector, born Ghativale, Maharashtra, 1932, with his family.**

life, her large family, old age or the state of our democracy, is forever lost. Much like the voices of many other elders, whether abandoned widows in temple towns or forgotten freedom fighters, yesterday's champions of sports or ordinary folk who are only subjects for statisticians, they are passing away each day."

"It is to capture some of these parts of disappearing worlds such as that of the shrinking Jewish and Parsi communities that gave us the urgency to keep our project going despite our limited resources, when we could not convince any individual, institution or business house to support this effort.



Widow with doll (Thakurji)

**"I don't know anything about this widow remarriage business, I only know my Thakurji, he is my god, husband, swamy, property, everything. I have no grief or fear and I am very happy with my Thakurji. You should not print my photo in your book, but picture of my Thakurji because whatever is here in Brindavan is because of Thakurji."**

*Sheila Devi Saha with Thakurji, place of birth not known - C. 1934*

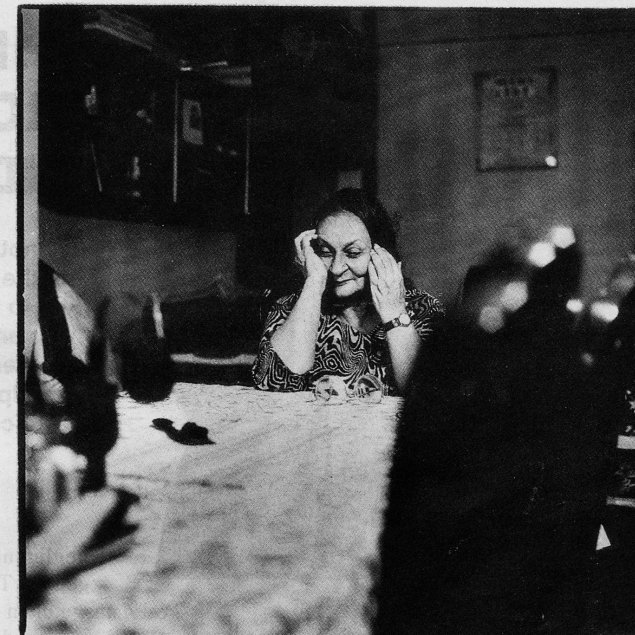
Elders had a place in the Indian family and society that is rapidly changing. For instance, before the coming of modern schools and professional colleges, elders were the only source of learning. A part of this system still survives in certain fields such as with musicians and artists, and this has also been our focus.

We met all kinds of aged - ones who had wizened and some whose prejudices had deepened with age. There were some who didn't mind sharing their views but did not want to be photographed, some who would readily pose but wouldn't respond beyond monosyllables. A 127 year old man who had witnessed in the last century the coming of bicycles, cars, trains and gramophones, ("people used to come from far to offer grains to this object emanating all these voices"), but was rarely photographed and least interested in any record books. Elderly, who had never met us before but at the end of the interview insisted that although they couldn't help us with money, we should save money on our hotel bills by moving into their home while we were in their town. Others who had organised a special meal for us or offered to take us out the next time we were in town and less busy. There were those, such as Dr Mulk Raj Anand, who without our saying had sent out a cheque to Delhi office. Then there were freedom fighters bitter with their dreams about the country hav-

ing turned sour. The biggest reward for us in this whole exercise was that almost all the elderly, especially when they were totally unexposed to the lime-light, who had seen much and been through many things and had no self-interest in what we were doing, were most enthusiastic about it and said that if they had the money, they would have surely helped us. That they opened their homes and hearts to complete strangers who had no press accreditation or represented any organisation. That they all blessed us for what we were doing. These are our rewards."

The exhibition is a travelling one. And the work does not stop at the exhibition.

Says Vijay, the younger of the duo, "We want to take the exhibition to smaller towns. Apart from information on ageing we want to include a list of local NGOs too. All this will be relevant only in the local language. So this activity goes beyond a two-week exhibition."



Nadira

**"I have never had that star thing even though I was treated like a star. I never had the tantrums. There's a woman downstairs. She pays somebody two hundred and forty rupees every day for twelve hours, just to watch her sleep. If I pay that kind of money I won't be able to sleep. And I am not being miserly."**

*Nadira, actress, born Bombay 1922.*

Indeed there is this visionary quality in these two youngsters bypassing the generational divide to make a long lasting human chain of the young and the old. Samar concludes: "There are so many issues in India, major issues of all kinds. The issue of ageing is more relevant because demographics are changing. Issues need to be addressed. I wish people of various professions - writers, businessmen, filmmakers, mainstream communication specialists could spend just 5% of their time, on any one of the issues. It could transform things."

**Exhibition Venues**

The dates of their travelling exhibition are not yet fixed. If there are Dignitarians who want them to visit their town do contact them at:

*Ageing In India' Project*

*E-58, II Floor, GK-I Enclave, New Delhi 110 048,*

*Tel.: (011) 646 0148 Fax: (011) 621 8687*

*Mobile: 98100 68930*

*email: samar@jodha.com or vijay@jodha.com*

**Cities in Jodhas' itenerary**

Agra	Ahmedabad	Bangalore	Baroda	Bhopal
Chandigarh	Calcutta	Chennai	Ernakulam	Goa
Guwahati	Hyderabad	Jammu	Jaipur	Kanpur
Lucknow	Madurai	Mumbai	Vishakapatnam	Nagpur
New Delhi	Pondicherry	Pune	Thiruvanthapuram	