Reverence and Neglect: Forms of and Approaches to Elder Care in India

"Old age homes are evil. To be most respectful and right, it is compulsory to have parents in the home with the family." These words violently and forcefully spewed from Karthik's mouth, a local supervisor at the fish market, as he climbed down the stairs from Kranthi Old Age Home. Disgusted by the "abandonment," as he referred to it, of all of the elders in the home by their families, Karthik continued on a ten-minute rant about what type of care both elders deserve and children should give. Elder care is a familiar subject for Karthik; it is an exchange he participates in everyday with his seventy-five year old mother, who lives in his home with his family, a form of care for his mother that Karthik "had no choice" but to choose, in his opinion.

But in the past thirty years, and more significantly in the past ten, old age homes, as both private and public institutions, have been popping up all over large cities in India, providing an additional choice to the traditional option of at home care.[1] This relatively recent phenomenon has served as yet another rapid change to several of India's longstanding cultural traditions. But elder care, among other adaptations India has seen, is a particularly heated and moral debate.

Elder care is a family issue in India, and conversations about family brink on, or in some cases are, the religious, as seen in the language Karthik uses, "evil" and "right." And as India's elder population is the second largest in the world, most, if not all, families are finding themselves personally invested in this elder care dialogue.

[1] Lamb, Sarah. 2009. "Aging and the Indian Diaspora: Cosmopolitan Families in India and Abroad." Indiana University Press, 53-89

Encoded in much of the discourse surrounding this debate on old age homes and the preferred form of care is a very similar viewpoint Karthik presents: old age homes are evil and at home family care is good.[2] The language is highly rigid and intensely strict, clearly associating moral attributions to each form of care.

Much of the morality concerns a return to "old values," as old age homes have been an institutional innovation bound up in the waves of the modernization and urbanization of a once agricultural India. One of the most significant changes old age homes represent in India is the change in structure of the family from the joint family unit to the smaller nuclear family model.[3] With several generations under the same roof in the joint family, elder care was built into this family structure through the extensive network of support it provided. Newer nuclear families, which have adapted to city life, have lost that network of support and have found it more difficult to find the time and personnel to take care of elders. These nuclear families and their elders are keeping old age homes in business and are creating large markets for these institutions.

The growing supply of old age homes in India is quite surprising considering the harsh rhetoric that has been so commonly adopted about these institutions. Why are old age homes increasing when they are being so fiercely accused as immoral forms of elder care? Are these old age homes as evil as the discourse suggests? And is at home care as respectful as tradition depicts it to be? Through a cross comparative study of the stories and words of elders in both old age homes and in their family's homes, it becomes clear

[2] Gentleman, Amelia. 2007. "India Moving to Punish Neglect of Elderly Parents." http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2007/03/04/india_moving_to_punish_neglect_of_elderly_parents/

[3] Gore, M.S. 1990. "Urbanization and Family Change." Ramdas Bhatkal for Popular Prakashan 3-28

that the morality of elder care, in the elder's perspective, has less to do with the actual form, either an old age home or at-home care, and more to do with the elder's involvement and participation in family life.

These elder's words and experiences challenge the discourse on elder care that is largely articulated. However, while the discourse may not be wholly accurate, it is still significant. The discourse suggests that both forms of elder care in India are culturally symbolic and are embedded with values and themes that are morally charged and meaningful. The discourse does not convey the whole truth, but it certainly provides a gateway into understanding the complex issue of elder care in India.

While both valuing the importance of the discourse and the real experiences of elders and their family members, this study attempts to understand how India's elders are being cared for and treated and how its families are navigating their way through discerning and providing the best form of care for the older population.

Old to New: Elder Care in Larger Cultural Themes

"I've been thinking about her since the past few months. I've been having recurring nightmares of her being… old, feeble, and helpless. I have blundered. I now feel very guilty that I have neglected her and haven't been able to look after her. I have become selfish."

So begins the popular Hindi movie *Swades*, which follows the valiant journey of Mohan, a NASA engineer in the States, from America back to his homeland India to rescue his "second mother" from an old age home. Mohan's heroic mission is a moral quest to correct his "blunder" and to relieve his guilt from his "neglect," as he attempts to institute in his life a more traditional, respectful form of elder care for this woman: at-home care.

The catalyst of the movie is this issue surrounding elder care. And while *Swades* is certainly not an expose on elder care in India, it is a powerful introduction to the movie's larger themes.

As the movie unfolds, it becomes clear that *Swades's* artistic purpose is to explore the rising tension in India between old and new, traditional and modern. Mohan's journey from the modern and urban America to the rural and traditional India is a metaphor for a return to old Indian values. And Mohan's first action to return to such values is to rescue his mother figure from an old age home and to take care of her in his home. Chosen as the first image of Mohan's reversion, this artistic decision to concentrate on the transfer of these forms of elder care is evocative of the power and prominence of what these two elder care forms represent.

As *Swades* suggests, the issue of elder care is bound up in much larger cultural debates, namely the conflict arising between the new and old in India. Through modernization and urbanization, the face of India is drastically changing. Once a primarily agricultural nation, India is now sporting some of the largest, most populated cities in the world. And so intertwined with much of the elder care discourse is not only the weight of family politics, but also the salvation of a nation as it once was known.

Understanding the larger context of elder care is crucial to navigating the issue's more subtle and complex intricacies. Fueling the heat in this already charged debate is this larger, always testing concept of change. As India adapts to this city life, and increasingly propagates it as a lifestyle choice, a shift has occurred in the family unit. While joint families have been and are widely practiced in rural India, the size of such a family is simply not feasible in crowded cities. When families move into larger cities,

they typically break down into smaller, nuclear units, a model that has largely defined the family structure of Western nations. This change in the family unit has been a catalyst in the shift in elder care.

One of the more popular Bollywood films of the decade, *Swades* artfully establishes the larger context of the issue on elder care: the intense debate between old and new values. And this shift from the old, agricultural to new, urban India is but the first domino in the line of change. The next domino, and the most significant to understand concerning this elder care issue, is the family unit.

The Shift in the Family Unit

Rama, an elderly man in his late seventies, used to live under the same roof with all of his three sons and their families. As the eldest of the sixteen members living in the house, Rama, a farmer by trade, was the ultimate advisor. “In those times, they come to me for all.”

Rama would sit all day in the kitchen, located in the middle of the house. He was, as he put it, “at the middle.” Children would race in and out of the kitchen, the mothers would cook and clean, and he not only witnessed much of this activity, but he also participated in it, too. When family members rushed by, they would dote on Rama by feeding him bowls of gulab jamun, his favorite sweet. He was sought out for advice and he often gave it freely. And as the house excitement mounted and reverberated around him, Rama remained the fixed point to which all hinged upon. He was indeed at the “middle,” physically, authoritatively, and symbolically.

But Rama's position changed drastically when he moved with his eldest son and his family to Visakhapatnam, a large city. As both his son and daughter-in-law rush off to work, towing their school-aged children behind them to catch the school bus, Rama is left alone in the house all day. He sits in his room, which is at the corner of the house, and fumbles through books and glances at the television every once in a while. But he mostly sits in the darkness of the house in a plastic chair with his feet propped up on the nearest cardboard box. "I am never talked with…. Lonely. I am lonely. I want my family."

While Rama does live with family members, this new home structure in Visakhapatnam is not what he would consider family. Before Rama came to the city, he lived in a joint family unit, where all of his sons and daughters were living under the same roof. The joint family is a family structure that the Indian nation has been built upon and that Rama has known for most of his life.

Joint families are marked by several characteristics, those that directly affect Rama and elders. The joint family is authoritative in structure, permitting the heads of family to control most, if not all, of the family decisions.[4] And the heads of family are determined by age; those who are eldest are in power. Men like Rama, eldest of the household, were not only consulted for family practices, but were listened to intently for orders as well. With such a powerful role subscribed to elders in joint families, their care was central to the family's function. It was done out of respect for the elder and their authority.[5]

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[4] Raina, Jawahar Lal (1989) *Structural and Functional Changes in the Joint Family System* Ashok Kumar Mittal Concepter Publishing Company 14-20,

[5] Qureshi, M. U. (2006) *Social Problems and Social Welfare* Anmol Publications 127-150

But like Rama's family, the face of Indian families is changing. In Jawahar Raina's book, *Structural and Functional Changes in the Joint Family System,* he discusses the catalyst and effects of this family shift when he writes, "The rise of industrialization affects all social units whose members become involved in serving industrial goals. Larger, closely-knit family groups disintegrate, giving way to more flexible and less committing nuclear families. Traditional family power collapses providing more freedom of movement for all family members."[6] As family members move into large, industrial cities, the joint family unit is simply not feasible. Space is limited, households are more expensive, and smaller, nuclear families are a more convenient, logistically accurate form of family living.

The nuclear family, unlike the authoritative joint family, is egalitarian in structure.[7] As this age hierarchy is dropped, elders, like Rama, lose some of their own personal power and influence in the family. This role shift has drastic effects for elders, especially concerning the care they receive. As Raina astutely points out, nuclear families are "less committing" to the family as a whole. Since family members understand themselves as equally-contributing individuals, the elder care paradigm shifts. An exchange that was once based upon duty and respect in a power structure is now formatting itself into a freer, more non-obligatory pattern. Elder care becomes an issue that lies outside the responsibilities of an individual family member, instead of being inherent in a family member's role and function.

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[6] Raina, Jawahar Lal (1989) *Structural and Functional Changes in the Joint Family System* Ashok Kumar Mittal Concepter Publishing Company 14-20,
[7] Lee, Gary R. 1982. Family Structure and Interaction: A Comparative Analysis" University of Minnesota Press 114-156

The sheer size of a nuclear family has also greatly influenced the care elders receive. With several generations in the home in a joint family, there is a network of support instituted to take care of the elder. When Rama lived jointly, he had several daughters and daughter-in-law's looking after him throughout the day, and several sons to seek out his advice. But the shift to a smaller nuclear family caused Rama to lose such an extensive network, leaving him lonely and isolated.

However, while this structural shift of the family is becoming increasingly common in India, especially in urbanized areas, the respect for elders that was so deeply instituted by the long-standing joint family has ingrained a great regard for elders in the values and relationships of much of India. The change from joint to nuclear families does impact the role of elders, but it does not erase their long instituted authority and positioning. And so nuclear families and elders are left to live within the tension of two conflicting models: the tradition of an authoritative elder in the joint family, and the more equal elder in the nuclear family. Questions arise and torture these families, leaving them wondering whether it is their primary responsibility as a family member to take care of their elder, or whether their elder is beyond their responsibilities as individuals. And the paradigm shift also causes an identity crisis for the elder, forcing them to question whether their role is to advise and play a key role in the family, or to sit on the periphery and be a passive agent. The stress between living in the old, traditional model and the new, more modern model has transfixed nuclear families as they navigate this issue on elder care.

Old Age Homes: Their Cultural Symbolism

As nuclear, middle class families in urban India are stuck in between the clash of upholding old, traditional values of at-home care and the pressures of their increasingly busy, modern lives, a solution has been adapted to ease this rather discordant state: the establishment of old age homes. In the past thirty years, old age homes have begun to surface all over urban India, providing answers and options to middle class families in need of relief. Most notably in the past ten years, old age homes have made a rapid boom in cities – in Andhra Pradesh, the state Visakhapatnam resides in, there are close to two hundred old age homes, many of which have reached maximum occupancy and are confronted with the issue of a waiting lists, sometimes eight or ten people deep.[8] The desirability of these homes reflects their utility to middle class urban families. Old age homes are able to provide an option of care for elders that lie outside the home. Families no longer have to tend to the day-to-day needs of their elderly in the midst of their hectic city lives; they have old age homes to do it now.

But while old age homes are useful, they are intensely controversial. As a rather recent development in Indian cities, old age homes contradict and clash with the way elders have been cared for in India for hundreds, even thousands, of years. And this change is not viewed as neutral, either; it is seen to be quite devastating.

"It's like you are throwing them away. In India, we have a saying: out of sight, out of mind," remarked Ravi, a Church of South India priest, who was quite adamant

[8] Bose, A.B. 2006. "Social Security for the Old: Myth and Reality." Concept Publishing Company, 221

about his views on placing elders in old age homes. “It makes me heartbroken and very unsettled.”

Old age homes were, for many people, a difficult topic to broach. Like a raw nerve, old age homes illicit intense emotions from many, mostly because they are such radical institutions. For a nation that has always placed elders at the center of the home, removing them completely from the house is quite baffling and enraging. And since the home is such a foundation for Indian society, changing the infrastructure has dramatic effects. Like Ravi said, taking them outside of the home is like “throwing them away.” And more than just discarding elders, Ravi believes that placing elders in old age homes is relinquishing all connections to them; they are like black voids that swallow the elder up, making them invisible and therefore forgettable.

Old age homes are symbolically challenging. Not only do they remove the elder from the home, but they also put the elder under a stranger’s care. The family essentially releases any form of responsibility or duty to the physical care of the elder, and finds that one of their primary responsibilities to their elder now is to pay their facility bills instead of personally feeding them or bathing them. Since elder care has largely been a function of the family, the absence of the family in any of this daily care proves to be highly disturbing. Families seem to not be doing their job; they just passed it off to someone else.

But while these old age homes do change the structure of care significantly, reformatting essentially every responsibility a family has to their elder, the shift has been widely and universally marked as negative. “Abandonment” and “neglect,” are two terms that are often thrown around when talking about old age homes. And to recall Karthik’s

previous discourse on old age homes, they are seen as "evil" institutions. Their evilness is often juxtaposed against the divinity and sacredness of at-home care. Creating such a strict moral binary for these two forms of care has created cultural assumptions on the quality of care these two forms offer, supposing that elders in old age homes are widely neglected and elders in their family's homes are praised and respected. However, the elder's experiences in these old age homes are certainly not so universal and the stories of elder's in their family's home are nothing short of complex.

Diverse Stories in Old Age Homes: Pushing the Discourse

The room was just big enough to fit two twin sized beds and two coffee tables, but with the few personal items both Rahima and Alapati had, the limited space was not an issue. The windows were cracked open, a light breeze filtered through the hot room and graced the roommates faces as they were intent on their own preoccupations: Rahima with her passed-down version of the Bhagavad Gita and Alapati with her fixed, sullen eyes on the ceiling. Although they lived in such close proximity to one another at Age Golden Homes, a Hindu-run old age home in the center of Visakhapatnam, their feelings on living in the home were drastically different – their physicality showed it.

Rahima's contour was proud, as straight and as solid as it could be for a ninety-nine year old woman. Every once in a while, she would look up from her text and flash a gummy smile, displaying the few teeth she had managed to keep. Her jolliness and content was due to both her success in the past, as a prominent music professor and mother of two sons, who were also professors, and her happiness in the present at the old age home. She once lived with her eldest son, a biology professor, but was moved to the

home because he and his family were never at home with her and could no longer provide her with the care she needed. “This home is wonderful. I sit and read, sit and read. And eat rice and samba all the time and talk to neighbors.”

When asked about her relationship with her son, Rahima related that he visited her at least three times a week. “He come to ask about what he should do with the children. And he asks about teaching. I was a professor, you know. He looks to me a lot.” And when she finished, a huge smile mapped across her face. “I like to live here,” she said; and it was obvious.

But her roommate, Alapati, was not so well adjusted. Slouched in between the crevice of her bed and the wall, she stared at the ceiling, and then back at a picture she held in her hand, with a miserable expression. The picture was of her eldest son and his family, who she once lived with a year ago. Her son, a prominent businessman in the city, placed her in the home because his wife did not want to look after any longer. The family visits only once a month, and hardly stays for longer than an hour.

“I want to be before the eyes of my son when I die. I want to go back home.” Her words were not the only marker of her unhappiness - she looked sad, too. Frail, because she would sometimes refuse to eat out of rebellion to the staff at the home, Alapati carried his resistance physically; she looked weak and tortured, and Rahima suggested it was her own doing.

“She sits and moans all day. ‘I want my son.’ She is lucky to live here and eat. She gets everything she wants,” Rahima said this about her roommate, but also to her roommate, indirectly.

"I want my son," Alapati quickly refuted, and the quarreling ceased. When the conversation muted, both roommates looked at the pictures of their families, which were on their bedside tables. One smiled and one was overcome by sadness; opposite emotions for varying experiences, but both were in the same old age home.

These two accounts at once verify, contradict, and push the discourse on old age homes, proving once again that the common discourse on old age homes is relevant, but not wholly accurate.

Rahima, happy with her residence in the home, provides the often overlooked, ignored, and squashed story of content elders in old age homes, of which there are many. The typical "abandoned elder" role did not come close to mapping onto her experience; she actually enjoyed living in the home, her strong physicality and upbeat words revealed this. Rahima, like many elders, was put into an old age home, because her family did not have the proper resources, or time, to take care of her well. Rahima, once alone in her son's home, is now surrounded by elders similar in age and equal in time to talk and to socialize with. She is able to do what she pleases, "sit and read," and live in a place where she "gets everything she wants."

Rahima, contrary to what the discourse suggests, did not feel abandoned at the old age home. More than just being satisfied with the quality of life and care she was receiving at the home, Rahima was quick to urge that her relationship with her son, and her family, was still strong. She acknowledged the fact that her son had very little choice but to put her in the home, and his decision in no way was motivated by a desire to get rid of her. As an elder figure in the home, she was still treated like one when she was in a

different location: Rahima was being consulted on family and professional matters, and the advice was eagerly sought out and well received.

Rahima's continued family involvement proved to exist as the largest difference between her and her roommate, Alapati. Both were receiving similar care and were accessing the same resources in the old age home, yet their family connections were markedly disparate. Unlike Rahima, Alapati not only felt abandoned, but would be understood as an abandoned elder culturally.

Alapati's son was well off financially, as he owned a prominent business in the city, and therefore did not need his wife to work. With the availability of the daughter-in-law's time at home and the abundant financial resources, Alapati's family had the means to contribute to her care at home if they wanted, but they chose not to. She was placed in the old age home because her daughter-in-law did not wish to take care of her; it was a matter of desire, not resources. Since it is the moral "duty" of children to take care of their parents, fleeing this responsibility was seen as foul, especially when the means are present to fulfill this role.[9] Eisenlohr, in his book *Little India* interviewed a Hindi teacher who remarked that capable children who flee the duty to their elders are "on this inside all hollow."[10] Alapati sadly understood that her son and family had this missing morality, this missing substance; she yearned for his moral return, exclaiming, "I want my son."

Alapati was not pining to leave the old age home; she did not specifically demand to return to her family's home, either. Rather, she desired for the return of her son. The

[9] Yadav, J.P. 2004. "Aged in India." Anmol Pulications, 375-384
[10] Eisenlohr, Patrick 2006. "Little India: Diaspora, Time, and Ethnolinguistic Belonging in Hindu Mauritius." University of California Press.

old age home as a place was not troubling for Alapati, but what it represented – her abandonment by her son, her family's neglect – was.

The discourse suggests that respectful elder care is situated in the locality of that care – that old age homes are evil institutions and that they universally produce unhappy, abandoned elders. Yet, through the diverse stories of Alapati and Rahima, the validity of placing a universalized experience on the locality of care becomes questionable and unmerited. If old age homes do not cause elders to be unhappy, than what does?

The stories of both Alapati and Rahima suggest that respectful elder care has less to do with the form than it does with the role elders are able to maintain in the family. Alapati yearned for precisely what was making Rahima content – involvement and interaction with her son and her family. Is family involvement a key requirement in providing exceptional care for elders? To discern this, the narrow focus of elders in old age homes needs to be broadened to the other form of care so commonly practiced in India: elders receiving care in their families homes.

At-Home Care: An Ideal From Years Past

The clattering of dishes, the smell of hot dosas, and the hectic, loud movements of harried children rushing off to school woke Manoj every morning; at the prime age of eighty-seven, Manoj was the last to wake in the family, a privilege he felt he deserved for his age. Once stirred, Manoj would get dressed for the day and gather his comb, mirror, and dish of water to his plastic chair situated outside of the front door of the house. He sat there, fixating on his image in the mirror, until his daughter-in-law called him for

breakfast. When he finished breakfast, he would return to the same seat outside, continue grooming, and every once in a while, stop to talk to passers-by.

Manoj would continue this pattern all day, grooming, then eating, followed by the occasional nap. His daughter-in-law would often join him outside in between her household chores, and they would talk about the children and family matters. Manoj's son came home after lunch from work, and would spend the rest of the day with his father outside the home, reading newspapers, sometimes quietly and sometimes aloud to Manoj. They would then discuss the topics.

The elder was beyond pleased with his life in his son's home, where he lived with his son's wife and three children. He was fed regularly and fully; he always had at least three curries to choose from at lunch and dinner. And he was engaged by his family and with his family, still playing an integral role. "My family gives me the best life," he said. "This is how parents should be treated."

As Manoj said this, he looked out to his panoramic view of the land around him. In the middle of the scene, there was a tall, run-down apartment building. This is where Ragu lived.

Ragu had quite a different lifestyle. Although Ragu lived with his son, daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren like Manoj, the interaction he had with his family members differed quite drastically. Ragu had what seemed to be developing Alzheimer's. Some days he would wake up and be completely aware and present, but other days he would forget his son's name or feel lost in his own home. Since both his son and his daughter-in-law worked, Ragu was often locked inside the house during the day, just so that he wouldn't wander off outside alone and lose himself like he had once done.

The large, yellow padlock was placed on the outside of the door. If Ragu wanted to go somewhere during the day, he would have to wait for his family to come home and release him. Although he was given everything he needed for the day, a jug of water and lunch and a snack, Ragu wanted much more than that. Sometimes newspapers and television shows were not enough engagement; he craved human interaction. “You can’t have a conversation by yourself,” he remarked.

At-home, family care is discussed as being the most morally stable form of elder care, and while Manoj’s case is certainly a testament to this common belief, Ragu’s situation questions its legitimacy.

Manoj’s family had the time and resources to be with him often. Since his daughter-in-law did not work, she was able to cater to many of his needs, to talk with him occasionally, and to be present with him in the home everyday. He also was able to interact frequently with his son, who left work early on in the day. The lifestyles of Manoj’s family members made his care convenient. Manoj’s contentment in his care was no doubt caused by the constant interaction he had with his family members: their close attention to him and his needs was a by-product of not only their love for him, but also their ability to be in such close, constant proximity to him. Living in the same home as his family members made the care easier and more interactive.

However, while living at home certainly makes engagement easier between families and their elders, it does not always deliver such close interconnectivity, as seen in Ragu’s story. Although Ragu did live at home with his family, his family was never at home. Busy because of work schedules, Ragu’s family was forced to leave him alone for most of the day, and not just alone in the home, but locked in the home, as well.

Because of Ragu's debilities, namely his erratic confusion, living alone in the home was not ideal. To ensure that Ragu stayed safe in the family's absence, they were forced to lock him inside the home. A decision that was made on behalf of his isolation isolated him to an even greater extent. Manoj was not only separated from his family, but he was also unable to interact with the rest of the world during the day. Cooped up inside the home, Manoj yearned for dialogue; as he so accurately pointed out, you can't converse on your own, especially when you are locked behind doors.

Ragu and Manoj's story only confirm what Rahima and Alapati's stories revealed: that the form of elder care, whether it be at-home care or old age homes, is certainly not the determinant of how respectful the care will be; the most important factor in respectful elder care, understood through the desires of how elders themselves would like to be cared for, is how well elder's are integrated and engaged in family life. As seen in Manoj's case, an elder's interaction in family life is made easier when they are living at home; the proximity of the elder to their family makes the interaction opportune. However, Ragu's story shows that living at home with the family does not always equate close interactions.

Respectful elder care in the Indian context requires time and resources. Manoj's family had plenty of both; his daughter-in-law did not work outside of the home and his son came home for half of the day. The family had the option of being at home with Manoj and had the privilege to take care of him financially. Ragu's family, unlike Manoj's, did not have the resources to spend the time with him. Both his son and his daughter-in-law had to work to upkeep family life.

Having the whole family work is becoming an increasing reality for urban, middle class Indian families. The nuclear structure is established upon contributions from every family member, and these contributions are increasingly being sought outside of the home in the workplace. Homes are empty during the day as all disperse off to their jobs, and elders are finding themselves alone. What has always been the ideal in elder care, having your elder at home, is now not only unfeasible, but also highly questionable. But the ideal still courses through the discourse, creating unbearable tension in and social pressure on these families, who are grappling with how to be most respectful to their elders in their context.

Grappling With the Discourse and Looking Past Forms: Respectful Elder Care

The discourse on the forms of elder care in India reflects India's national ideal for elder care: having elders live at home with their families. This idea is historical, crafted upon centuries of living in joint families, and religious, as it deals largely with family values. Because of this, it is an ideal that is strongly rooted. But as times are changing in India, as families are moving from the fields and villages to the streets and cities, so are the capacities to live by such ideals. Smaller nuclear families often do not have the resources available to translate this ideal into their newly configured lifestyle. Old age homes have appeared to help solve the problem.

For many Indian families, these old age homes are not only viable options, but they are also moral options. However, they are intensely radical. They question the nation's ideal of elder care and urge it to consider broader options. But as much as this new option brushes up against this firmly fixed ideal of at home care, the ideal does not

move. No matter how important a role old age homes play in India, they are seen as less than ideal, and, probably more accurately, as immoral, in comparison to its at-home counterpart. The discourse on elder care reflects this tension.

The discourse, however, is missing the point. Respectful elder care in India has less to do with the actual form of elder care, either at-home care or old age home care, than it does with how the elder's are integrated and involved in family life. Seen through real experiences of elders in both old age homes and in their family's homes, their happiness and contentment largely rotated around their continued role in the family. Elders want to maintain an integral role in family life.

Listening to the discourse has serious repercussions. Families who are unable to live up to the national ideal on elder care are stuck in a rut, feeling neglectful and immoral. And as millions of families are forced into placing their elder in an old age home logistically, no matter how much their elder feels content, society assures the family that they are not; urban, middle class families with elders in old age homes are in a lose-lose situation. And families who would benefit from placing their elder in an old age home are pressured into not doing so, usually at the elder's expense. Elder's who would greatly benefit from that care are not receiving it.

The discourse is dangerous because it itself has not adapted to the shifting life of the Indian nation. It glorifies the past, assuming that at-home care, because of its historical roots, is the best, and it discriminates against change. It concentrates too heavily on the symbolism of forms and fails to listen to the real experiences and stories of individuals. It assumes universality in the midst of complexity, and in so doing, it obscures truth.

If the Indian nation hopes to deliver the best, most respectful form of care to their elders, than the discourse must be re-evaluated. Conversations on elder care will broaden from simple moralized forms of good at-home care and evil old age homes to more complex dialogues on how families and elders can exchange in respectful ways. The simple assumptions of the discourse are detrimental to the elder care issue in India and, for a nation that has the second largest elder population in the world, more intricate, accurate, and involved conversations must be explored.

But perhaps more constructively, India must look to their elders. For a nation that has placed great value in the experiences of its old people, India has cultural permission to seek out advice and guidance from them on what is the most respectful care. In Rama, Ragu, Manoj, Rahima, and Alapati's view, the continued familial interaction is it.

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