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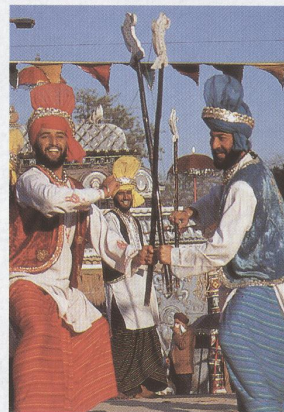
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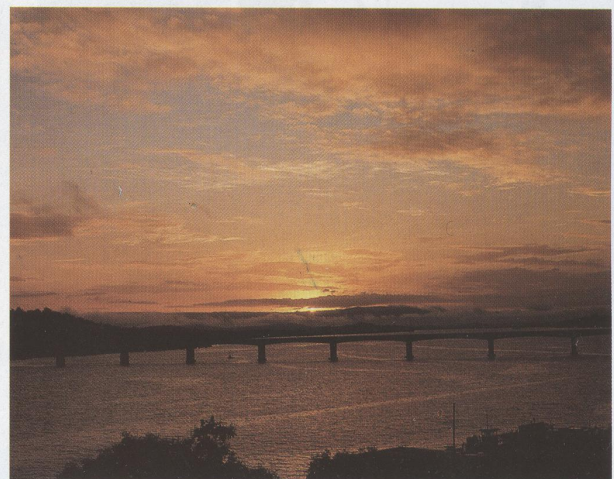
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Despite rapid industrialization and apparent urbanization that threatens its age-old social insitiutions, India today still remains at heart a traditional society that treats its estimated population of more than 50 million old (above the age of 60) with some measure of respect and deference.

Text: Nihal Mathur
Photographs: Amlan Paliwal

In India, to listen while the elders speak, is an unwritten social norm. Perhaps this is the reason why the continuity of 5000 years of Indian culture is largely attributed to the oral traditions where information has been passed from the older to the younger generation by word of mouth. Hence in India, the old have always been considered repositories of wisdom.

Once upon a time, in Indian villages it was the assembly of the elders — the *panchayat* — that held court sitting in judgment over local issues. This village council was not merely a forum for discussing development or dispensing justice but also to provide counselling where required, whether it was to question the suitability of industrial fertilizer or to deliberate the marriage of a handicapped daughter or son. But party politics, elections and money



Wisdom of the Ages



Above: Children still get their values in traditional homes from their grandparents.

Below: In India senior citizens are still looked upon as the symbolic heads of the family.



Above: In nuclear families grandparents also fulfill the function of baby-sitters.

Facing page: The twilight years...



power introduced by a democratized India has debased this once sacrosanct body by bringing in the pliant and corrupt where originally the old and the just held sway. Even though much of the former glory of the *Panchayat* has waned today, tradition-bound villagers still call upon their elders, not necessarily *Panchayat* members, to settle disputes and accept their verdict as final.

In a society that holds age in high esteem, it is natural that the word of the

elderly is unquestionably accepted as law. From the great Indian epics — the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* — we learn of many characters and stories that portray the elderly in positions of great eminence and power. Virtuous or even villainous, the epics tell us that the old are always a venerable people. Such an outlook for the old may not be true in the urban context, but in the soil of India's vast rural hinterlands where tradition is most deeply rooted, that feeling for the old is still alive.

The traditional way of life continues to exist within the many folds of the joint family system where the old are looked upon as symbolic heads of the family. Occupying that top position, the old enjoy a special status without really exercising their authority. This ambivalent situation arises not because the old are unable to or do not want to compete with the adult anymore but because they are influenced by Indian philosophy and ethos, which dictates a gradual withdrawal from worldly affairs. With passing age the old begin to relinquish control they once enjoyed paving the way for the succeeding generation to take over.

This does not necessarily mean a life of solitary retirement for the old who, on the contrary, as intrinsic members of the family, play a useful role whether it is in keeping the grandchildren while the parents are away working or doing small jobs in the house. So, although the old do not remain decision makers anymore in the day to day family or business affairs, their tacit approval is certainly sought. They do, however, retain their authority in all the important events of the household, a wedding, a childbirth, death, where all matters of ritual and ceremony must have their stamp of sanction.

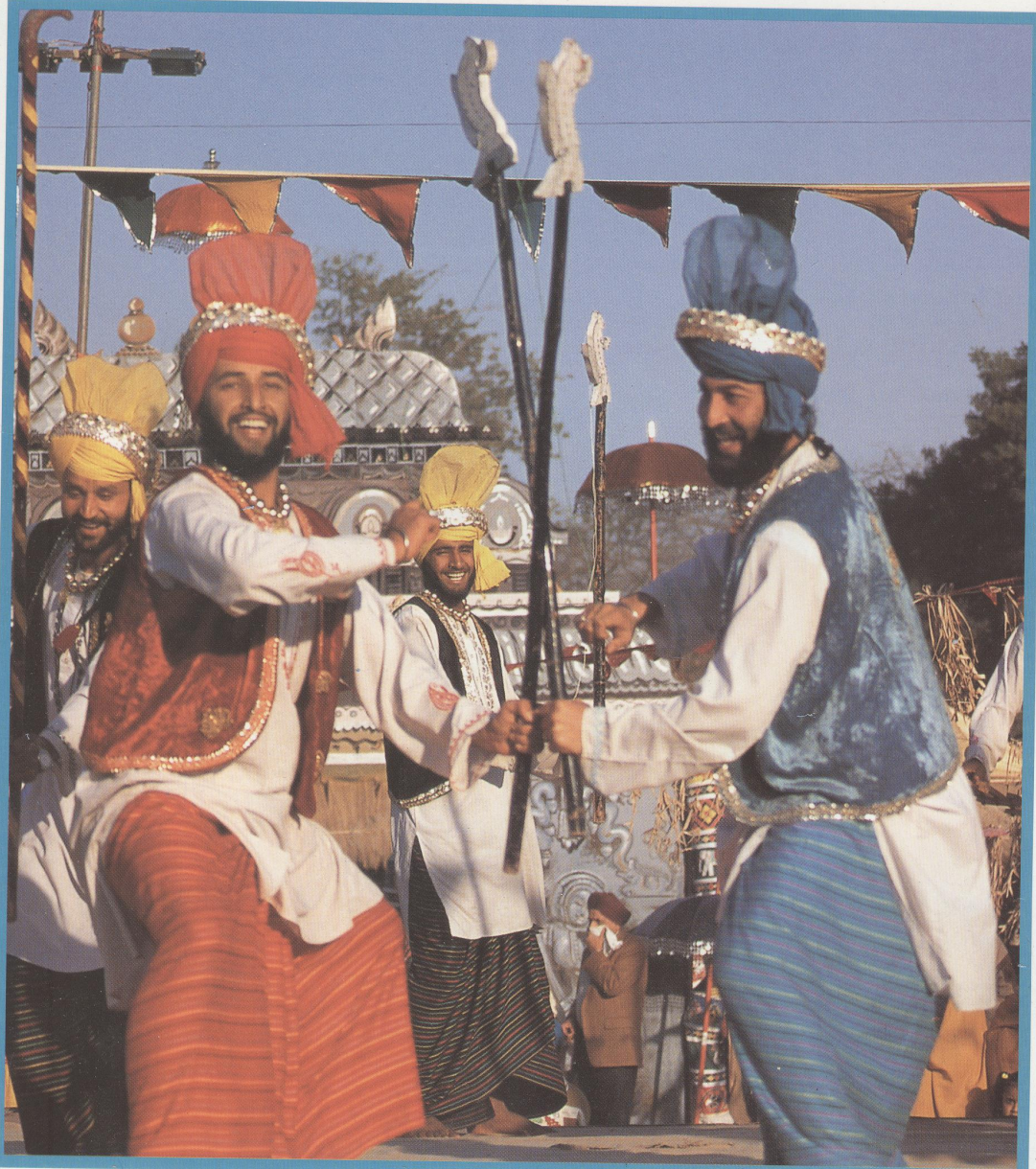
Sanctified in the scriptures, parents are often seen as divine representatives on earth, worthy of reverence. To obey and look after the parents is seen as a moral sense of duty. In India every school going child reads the famous story of Shraavan Kumar, paragon of a dutiful son who took his aged and blind parents on a pilgrimage, carrying them on his shoulders all through a long and arduous journey. Although such supreme sacrifice serves only as a legendary example, in real life, children especially the sons, on whom the onus falls in a joint family system, do go to some length to look after and carry out the wishes of their aged parents. Surrounded as they are by sons, daughter-in-laws and grandchildren, the old receive due care in their time of failing health and infirmities.

However, to assume an India of these values alone, is a romantic view of a reality where mindless exposure to new ideas and lifestyles has brought about, among other things, serious disruptions in the joint family system. Economic pressures compel nuclear

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Senior citizens listen to recitation from the epics.

families into existence in metropolitan cities where the old find themselves increasingly alienated. And if the old are in the unfortunate position of being broke at that critical point in their lives, then chances are that they find themselves at the mercy and charity of their adult children or relatives. In some acute urban situations the old find themselves abandoned and alone to fend for themselves — often at the level of the street. Helpless in the twilight of their lives, the old continue their struggle for existence without respite, till the very end. But by and large, even where the joint family breaks down, it is usually the eldest son in the family who takes the responsibility of keeping the aged parents with him.

With advancing age there is a definite proclivity towards the spiritual, the hereafter. Increasingly, more and more of time is taken up in devotional activities like reading the scriptures, doing the *puja* at home, visiting the temple, going to religious gatherings or undertaking pilgrimages. Only in some cases, the old take the final step

of *sanyas*, the fourth and the last stage in a Hindu's life marked by complete renunciation of the world. Bidding their final farewell to their family, the old leave their homes to go and live in *ashrams* or the hermitage for the rest of their lives.

Although there may be anxieties of failing health and illness, there is little fear of an impending death which is not seen as a final end but just another stage in the timeless journey of the self, as it continually moves in the cycles of death and rebirth. Hence the old look not at death but at liberation and regeneration. In India it is not altogether surprising to hear from the very aged a prayer to the gods to lift them from this earthbound existence. There isn't that feeling of despondency of the future since there is hope of a new life.

That vision of new life the old see in the simplicity and beauty of the grandchildren that mill around them. In a world where the adult is too busy to interact, with either the young or the old, a special relationship forms between the two, both of whom find themselves in the same latitude. There

is real development for the child for whom the grandparents have nothing but love and indulgence, perhaps with the realization that it is futile to either advise or admonish the very young who cannot help but be their own innocent selves.

I vividly recall that afternoon when I went to see my old aunt. Matriarch of a large joint family, I found her sitting supremely in her courtyard, with a great grandson on her lap, telling him a story from the epics. Intermittently, there were pauses when the grandmother administered spoonfuls of rice pudding to the child who was hungry not for the food but for what happened thereafter. Skillfully, and perhaps without design, the great grandma fed the child not just with food but centuries-old myths and legends that carry within them the values and traditions of an ancient civilization still dear to contemporary India.

I was convinced that as long as that relation between the old and the young remains in this country, India's unique culture would endure the winds of change and never die.