HERITAGE INTERNATIONAL XPERIENTIAL SCHOOL



# Recognising the elderly beyond their need for care.

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**From pension access and abandoned elders to storytelling and mentorship, a Grade 12 student is examining what dignified ageing should mean in India.**

Growing old should not mean losing one's sense of purpose, independence or place in society. Yet, for many older people in India, access to basic support remains a challenge, while their experiences and contributions often go unrecognised.

Sana Gupta, a Grade 12 IB student at Heritage Xperiential School, Gurugram, is working to address both sides of this challenge. Through research on ageing and pension gaps, engagement with abandoned elders, storytelling initiatives and a mentorship programme connecting retired professionals with students, she is looking at ways to make ageing more dignified and intergenerational relationships more meaningful.

In conversation with EdexLive, she speaks about her work and the changes she hopes to see in India's approach to elder care.

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**Q** **You grew up in a multigenerational household, with ageing and elder care being familiar subjects. What first prompted you to take up this issue, and how did that personal interest evolve into research and action?**

A I grew up in a multigenerational home, and my father's work at a travel company focused on older adults, so ageing was dinner-table conversation as much as lived experience. That familiarity turned into a more specific curiosity: who in India is protected as they grow old, who is heard, and how differently people experience the same stage of life.

My first way in was research. I wanted to understand what happens as India gets older, and how differently that transition is playing out across the country. That led me to government RTIs, to fieldwork at a shelter for abandoned elders, and to storytelling and mentorship.

**Q** **Your research examines India's ageing population, pension gaps and differences across states. What are the most significant findings, and what do they reveal about the way India is preparing for its ageing population?**

A A national average can flatten enormous differences. Kerala already has a significant share of elderly people, while Bihar is considerably younger. Even within a single state, the work someone did through their life shapes the old age they walk into a government job with a pension and health cover, or a lifetime of informal labour with neither.

My policy article with Ideas for India, "India's uneven greying: Why policy can't be one-size-fits-all," pushed this further. If the number of elderly people grows, pension budgets can, at least in principle, grow with them. But geriatric clinics, trained caregivers and palliative care networks cannot be legislated into existence overnight. States already deep into the demographic shift need that infrastructure now.

My published demographic research (IJSSRR) spans 25-year projections across 15 states. It uncovered Rs. 3.7M in pension misallocation and 57,000 ineligible recipients, and identified a $7B silver economy opportunity. The wider context is stark: India's 60-plus population was roughly 149 million in 2022 and is projected to reach 347 million by 2050 (India Ageing Report 2023, UNFPA / IIPS). Support systems are not keeping pace.

**Q** **You filed an RTI on Elderline 14567, the national senior citizens' helpline. What prompted you to investigate the service, what did the response reveal, and what changes do you believe are needed to make it more effective?**

A Through my work at Earth Saviours Foundation, I saw how something as ordinary as a missing document or an unclear process could stand between a person and support that technically existed for them. That made me curious about the systems themselves.

Elderline 14567 was launched by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 2021 to rescue abandoned elders and resolve pension disputes. Over May-June 2026, I made over 50 calls to the helpline and the calls repeatedly disconnected. I then filed an RTI asking for details of days operational, calls received and actioned. My RTI found that of the 8.9 million calls received in FY 2025–26, only about 1.1 million were deemed actionable.

The change I argue for is to make the service performance accountable; to transparently share who manages these calls, how are they actioned and what benefits do they deliver.

**Q** **Your work at Earth Saviours Foundation involves helping abandoned elders with documentation and pension access, as well as improving their living spaces and conducting literacy activities. What have your interactions with residents taught you about the everyday challenges older people face and the support they actually need?**

A Earth Saviours works with 1,300+ abandoned elders, providing shelter and a community. I have helped residents recover lost identity documents and access pensions, and I learnt quickly that a missing document can be the only thing between a person and support that exists for them. It took questions I had met in my research, such as coverage, access and implementation, out of a dataset and put a person on the other side of them.

But the need goes beyond paperwork. During one visit, an elderly woman pulled my hand, sat me down on the bed beside her, and told me about her old place in Delhi and how fortunate she felt to have found this new family. Another resident insisted on cutting vegetables for the community kitchen every day, her way of saying she was still useful, still here. People need to feel seen, heard and worth listening to. I lead a team of 5 renovating the shelters, so residents feel at home, we are now working to bring colour and art to the walls, and I run literacy classes so residents do not feel alienated from today's world.

**Q** **What inspired you to start The Grand Stories Project? How do you document older people's experiences, and what have their stories revealed about the importance of preserving personal histories and encouraging conversations between generations?**

A The Grand Stories Project began as an exercise in preserving older people's stories, and it turned out to be teaching me how to listen. I learnt to let silences sit, to ask about a first salary or a childhood game rather than simply "tell me about your life," and eventually to see the individual person behind the category of "senior citizen."

I turned those lessons into a handbook for other students and volunteers, and later wrote a blog, "Learning to Ask," for HelpAge India. HelpAge India's Head of Communications noted how my approach had shifted: my questioning evolved into listening more, and into the stories that came out of that.

The first volume is published (100 copies) with a companion dialogue guide, and I am now running a campaign gathering 50+ stories for Volume 2.

The Ministry of Rural Development has endorsed the project's intergenerational work. It is not a substitute for policy or social protection. It is a bridge across the growing distance between generations, and a way to capture elder knowledge for Gen-Z before it is lost.

**Q** **The Grand Stories Project has expanded into a school-wide Legacy Day reaching more than 1,200 students. What has the response from students been, and how do you think such initiatives can change young people's perceptions of ageing?**

A Legacy Day is planned as a school-wide extension of The Grand Stories Project and reaches 1,200+ students.

On perceptions, HelpAge India's research on intergenerational perception found that 48% of young people still describe elders as "dependent," but 51% also call them "wise" and 43% "respected." The raw material for a different relationship already exists, if someone builds the structure for it. Initiatives like Legacy Day and the dialogue guide aim to be that structure.

**Q** **You founded Silver Circle to connect retired professionals with students. What gap were you hoping to address, how does the mentorship programme work, and what have you learnt from bringing these two generations together?**

A Retirement in India is treated like a finish line, the point at which decades of expertise are expected to quietly step aside. HelpAge India's 2022 research found that 40% of elders wanted to keep working for as long as possible. Elders are being failed on one side and undervalued on the other, and Silver Circle addresses the second half.

Silver Circle formalizes retired professionals as mentors to students, offering judgment, networks and lived experience through a structured pipeline. So far, 15+ retired professionals have been onboarded across 12 mentorship circles, matching 520 students across 8 institutions. Indus Guru is our mentorship partner.

**Q** **Your initiatives have reached students across several institutions and involved retired professionals in mentorship. How do you measure their impact, and what feedback have you received from the older people and students who participate?**

A For Silver Circle, an internal survey showed 68% of matched students reporting greater career clarity, 34% reporting placement gains and 30% reporting recruitment gains.

For my other work, I track reach and outcomes: 1,300+ abandoned elders reached through Earth Saviours Foundation, pension access secured for elders who had lost identity documents, 1,200+ students reached through Legacy Day, 500 copies of The Grand Stories published, and 20,000+ readers for the Ideas for India adaptation of my research.

The feedback on record is from HelpAge India, whose Head of Communications noted how my approach to interviewing had evolved towards listening.

**Q** **You have approached ageing through several lenses: policy research, advocacy, direct engagement, storytelling and mentorship. How do these efforts connect to your larger idea of what dignified ageing should look like in India?**

A The methods are different (research, paperwork, fieldwork, conversation), but they keep returning to the same question: what does it take for a society to grow older without allowing its older people to become invisible?

My thesis has two halves that work as one. Elders are failed by the safety net on one side, and undervalued on the other. The research, RTI and pension work aim to restore what the safety net owes them. Silver Circle and The Grand Stories make the case for what their knowledge is still worth. Dignified ageing, to me, means an older person is both protected and still recognised as someone with something to give.

This is close to what the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has spent recent years calling for: community-led engagement, seniors recognised as mentors rather than dependents, and stronger bonds between generations through sustained work. I am not waiting for that vision to trickle down. I am building it, one recovered pension, one painted wall, one published article and one recorded story at a time.

**Q** **As a Grade 12 student, you have taken on work that spans research, community engagement and advocacy. What challenges have you encountered in building these initiatives, what are your plans for expanding them, and how do you see yourself continuing this work in the future?**

A My near-term plans are concrete. I am producing Volume 2 of The Grand Stories with 50+ new stories, extending the project into a school-wide Legacy Day, bringing colour and art to the Earth Saviours shelter walls, and continuing to push for Elderline 14567 to be restarted. I also write a column for HelpAge India to encourage intergenerational dialogue and conversations around India's ageing population, and I authored a state-wise elder-care capacity report recommending state-level policy planning for high-need states such as Odisha.

My work has been recognised with an Honorable Mention at the Cambridge Re-Think Global Essay Competition (top 10% of 13,000+ entries) and a shortlist in the Philosophy category of the John Locke Institute Global Essay Competition.

