

India's elderly now viewed as a burden

BREAKDOWN | Economic boom in Asian country has triggered a loss of traditional values, with seniors suffering cruel neglect

BY AMRIT DHILLON

DELHI — The funeral pyre was moments from being lit when a movement on the bier triggered panic among staff at the crematorium in southern India. Then, as they rushed to examine the elderly woman under the shroud, her three sons abandoned their mourning and fled.

In a shocking example of India's growing disregard for its elderly citizens, Arti Padmati, a 75-year-old widow, narrowly escaped being cremated alive by her own children earlier this month. Fed up with caring for her in her battle against cancer, the family had taken her to King George Hospital in the city of Vishakhapatnam, expecting her to die there.

Instead, after a few days, she had been discharged while still in a stupor. Rather than taking her home, her offspring drove their mother to the crematorium.

"At first, they ran away when the crematorium staff got angry," said a district police officer, Jagdish Murali. "But later, they had second thoughts, thinking she might give their address and call us, so they came back and took her away."

Murali was not particularly surprised. In recent years, he has seen many elderly people being dumped by their children at bus and railway stations and hospital car parks. Once unheard of, the problem of families neglecting, fleeing, and abusing elderly parents is something that HelpAge India and other old peoples' groups now see every day.

"Cases of cruelty have doubled over the past decade," said HelpAge's chief executive, Mathew Cherian. "Children want the father's property, not the father."

In Delhi alone, the charity receives 45 complaints of mistreatment a month. In India's biggest city, Mumbai, the Dignity Foundation receives more than a dozen calls a day from distraught parents, most complaining about

children who have taken their property but are unwilling to look after them. Two weeks ago, the foundation's staff had to come to the aid of an 82-year-old widower, after he was persuaded to vacate his home and move in with his married son who promised to care for him. The son then bamboozled him into selling the empty house, saying it was no longer needed.

Once he and his wife had pocketed the proceeds, they pretended they were going to a wedding out of town and that the father would be safer in a hotel than if he stayed alone in the house. But it was just a trick to get him out, said Sheilu Sreenivasan, the president of the Dignity Foundation.

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Help-Age's chief executive

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Until very recently, the family and extended family systems were the bedrock of Indian society. The elderly were not viewed as a burden, but as an integral part of the family, to be respected and cared for, a tradition that allowed many Indians to sneer at the Western practice of dumping old people in homes.

But part of the price being paid by India for its economic boom and new affluence is the crumbling of traditional values, and the extended family as an institution. Married children want to live separately in nuclear families; they lead busy lives in small city apartments too cramped for both children and parents.

The number of old people is also rising, as life expectancy has doubled from 32 to 64 in the past 50 years. In 2001, India had 75

million people aged over 60. By 2016, this will rise to 112 million, more than one in ten of the population. In the absence of state pensions, only available for government employees, the vast majority will rely on offspring for care in their final years.

Alarmed at the age time-bomb, the government has drafted an Old Peoples' Care, Protection and Maintenance Bill, making it mandatory for children to look after their parents in later life.

Due to be tabled in parliament next month, it will allow parents to take their children to court for maintenance, or face a fine or a three-month jail term. But many doubt if legislation will suffice.

"It may help those who are destitute, but few Indian parents will have the heart to take their children to court. I certainly couldn't," said Jagdish Jain, 75, who was evicted from his home in New Delhi by his son and daughter-in-law two years ago, after they had transferred the property into their name.

The new trends can be seen in the number of old people's homes in the country: up from 300 in 2002, to more than 1,000.

At Gharaunda Home, just outside Delhi, past the sprawling farmhouses where the rich spend their weekends, Babulal and Premrata Awasthi, both in their late 70s, are resigned to dying in their windowless room.

Not one of their three sons or two daughters is in touch. They lost their home in Lajpat Nagar, New Delhi, last year when their son-in-law, who lived with them, suggested they sell it in order to build a bigger one. He and his wife then vanished with the money. None of their other children would take them in.

"I wonder what my children tell people about us. Maybe they say we're dead," said Premrata, a tall woman with fine features. "I never thought my children would throw me away like this."

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