

Homes not 'home' for India's elderly

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In this picture taken on August 9, 2011, Indian octogenarian Sheela poses at a privately run charity elderly home in New Delhi. Photo courtesy: AFP/Sajjad HUSSAIN

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by Abhaya Srivastava

NEW DELHI, September 18, 2011 (AFP) - Ejected from the house of his son and daughter-in-law, Brij Mohan Garg looks around the spartan surroundings of his state-subsidised old age home in Delhi with a mixture of despair and disbelief.

"After doing so well in life I find myself here," said the 72-year-old retired government official, shaking his head and gesturing at the dirty upholstery covering a well-worn sofa in the home's "visitors' room".

Garg's predicament is in many ways a direct result of India's rapid economic growth, which has brought enormous social change -- including the gradual break-up of the traditional extended family.

For elderly people like Garg, the "joint" family, where parents, children and grandchildren all live under one roof, was once a dependable safety net of comfort and companionship in their old age.

But rising costs, shrinking living spaces and increased job mobility mean the aged are increasingly left alone and forced to turn to some form of assisted living, the quality of which varies hugely depending on their means.

Latest census figures show that the average family size in India has dropped from seven members to five in the last 10 years.

"This reflects large-scale migration," said Mathew Cherian, the head of the non-profit group, HelpAge India.

"Rural youngsters are migrating to urban areas for employment, and those in the cities are either moving to a bigger one or going abroad for better economic prospects, leaving their parents behind," Cherian told AFP.

-- A growing burden? --

The socio-economic shift in family structure comes at a time of equally rapid demographic change as India's overall population ages.

In 2000, the number of Indians over 60 years of age stood at nearly 80 million, or roughly eight percent of the population.

According to UN forecasts, that number will reach nearly 170 million by 2025 and 325 million -- or 20 percent of the population -- by 2050.

For those with modest incomes and no family support, their limited retirement options will include homes run by state-funded charities -- similar to the one where Garg has spent the past five years.

The facilities are frugal: rows of small, dingy rooms with rickety beds, cramped cupboards and creaking ceiling fans. Some have sewing machines, donated by welfare groups.

Food and lodging is provided free of charge by the charity which estimates its costs at around 5,000 rupees (\$100) a month per person and which relies on donations from wealthy businessmen and non-profit organisations.

"My son has visited me once in five years," said Garg, who manages to find some comfort in living with other pensioners who have been similarly abandoned.

"At least I am not dependent on anybody and spend my time with other people who are like me and understand my pain," he said.

At another charity old-age home nearby, Mariam Lyall, 85, bitterly recalls the events that saw her fulfilling life as a nurse in Mumbai reduced to an old-age of state dependency.

"I loved my job and lived with my nephew. But as age caught up with me, he started ill-treating me. He told me that I was a burden and that he couldn't take care of me any longer," she said.

"There is no respect for us here," said Lyall's friend Angelina Lal. "I don't have any family. I have no choice but to rot in misery."

-- Comfort at a cost --

The plight of the elderly left to fend for themselves has provided a potentially lucrative market opening for privately-run homes which provide high-end care at a cost.

One such facility is the Golden Estate, a 19,000 square-foot retirement community which offers "privileged living for senior citizens" in the Delhi satellite town of Faridabad.

The home, which is due to open in January, provides everything from laundry to round-the-clock medical care, yoga classes and high-speed Internet connections.

Amit Vaidya, director of UCC Care Pvt Ltd, the company behind the project, insists the home is a genuine option for retirement living, rather than a last resort for abandoned pensioners.

"We realised that India desperately needed a quality old age home option, what with more disposable incomes, rising life spans and poor social security," Vaidya said.

"There are many well-to-do people of the silver generation who are suffering from loneliness. This facility is for children who love their parents and want to give them a happy and secure old age," he said.

Rooms are air-conditioned and come with flat-screen TV sets, while common areas include a dining room, a library and a gymnasium, all equipped with anti-skid flooring, grab bars and emergency alarms.

Monthly charges come to around 30,000 rupees, but there is also a security deposit of up to 2.7 million rupees.

Of the 70 units available, 35 percent have already been booked.

"There is lot of interest from those who are settled abroad but whose parents are still in India," Vaidya said.

The business opportunities are bringing in big players with big plans.

India's fourth-largest mortgage lender, LIC Housing Finance, recently completed a 98-unit retirement facility in the southern city of Bangalore and a 200-unit home in the eastern city of Bhubaneswar.

"We expect to make the care homes business a fully contained, listed entity in the next three to five years," said chief executive officer V.K. Sharma.

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