

Indian Elders Fear Fraying Family Net

India is addicted to television soaps. And many of them, instead of being about the lives of the bold and beautiful, are about sprawling extended multi-generational middle-class families, where mothers-in-law connive, siblings bicker and wives feud. As families grow more nuclear in India, nostalgia for the extended family has become a middle class obsession. "Our children are too busy to have time for us" is the perennial complaint of older Indians. At least the television family shows up at 7:30 every evening without fail.

No discussion about aging in India is complete without a lament for the collapse of the extended family. Indians are graying, with 81 million over the age of 60. The population above 80, however, is growing fastest. By 2050, according to UN estimates, 48 million Indians will be over 80.

As India grows older, it fears it's aging alone. That fear is part of the cultural zeitgeist now.

"Ballygunge Court," a recent national award winning film is all about empty nesters. "Baghban," a recent five-handkerchief Bollywood hit, starred yesteryear superhero Amitabh Bachchan. Once famous for the rebellious "angry young man" roles, Bachchan now plays an aging patriarch. He and his wife are shuttled back and forth between their busy children, unable to live together any more, stealing tender moments secretly by telephone late at night.

The breakdown of the extended family has become the arch villain in the story of growing old in India.

"Until the 90s, there was strong family support," says Premkumar Raja, secretary of Nightingales Medical Trust in Bangalore, which provides medical services for elders. "Elders were taken care of in the family. But with globalization the joint family system is breaking."

But the past was never quite the golden age of happy families. "There was tremendous distance between generations. Different generations even ate at different times," says Mala Kapur Shankerdass, a gerontologist in New Delhi. "Now at least you see the whole family sitting together at the dining table."

"There were always old people being kicked out by their children," says Sarah Lamb, author of "White Saris and Sweet Mangoes – Aging, Gender and Body in North India." "It's just that now you blame it on modernity and globalization."

But the extended family was regarded as the amulet to ward off the ultimate horror – a lonely old age. In its decline, the family's potency has become even more mythical. Lawrence Cohen, author of "No Aging in India," remembers attending a session on old age at a conference in Zagreb in 1988. An anthropologist from India was presenting a paper about the long lives of elders in a remote Indian hill tribe. When he was questioned

about dementia, the anthropologist was confused. In his hill tribe, there was no senility, he explained. The joint family was still intact and therefore old people did not become senile.

When Aloka Mitra was starting a shelter for aged women in the 1970s government officials were indignant. She recalls that they told her, “You ladies have nothing better to do and so you are thinking up all these problems in our society which don’t exist.” Mitra started Naba Nir, a home for older women in Kolkata. At 69 she is now older than many of its residents. But she still calls them “mashimas,” or aunties.

“In a way they recreate the joint family here,” says Mitra. She knows several old ladies who went back to their sons but returned to Naba Nir within a year. “I said, ‘what happened to you. Did they ill-treat you?’ They said, ‘no, no, I just felt so lonely and neglected. I was just alone all day without a word to say to anyone.’”

The modern Indian family is now struggling to take care of its elders. The strains are manifesting themselves in rising levels of elder abuse, say advocates. Mostly it’s neglect. Elders are ignored, confined to a room, with no one to speak to. Hiren Mehta is the program manager of the Interactive Centre for senior citizens run by the Harmony for Silvers Foundation in Mumbai. He says he visited an affluent old age home near Mumbai. An old lady with cataracts mistook him for her son. “Her son had dropped her off six years ago, paid the money and promised to visit every day,” says Mehta. “He never came back.”

Sometimes there is physical abuse. Gauri Nandy, a worried looking widow in her 70s says she sought out a home for the aged after endless wrangles with her sons about their property. “They wanted me to sign the house over to them,” she says in a hushed voice. “I would not. They pushed me down and I hurt my leg badly. I had to go to the hospital.” She now lives in Naba Nir, the home for aged women in Kolkata, sharing a dormitory room with a dozen other women. She keeps a little potted plant by her bed to remind her of the garden she left behind. “Elders need to be respected,” Nandy says. “Do we now have to teach that?”

What India’s seniors are having to learn instead is that the balance of power has changed in the household. India’s economic progress has meant children often make more in their first jobs than their fathers did in a lifetime. “Earlier in the Bengali family the [prized] fish head went to the grandfather,” says Himanshu Rath who runs Agewell Foundation in New Delhi. “Now it goes to the grandson.”

The grandparents are feeling increasingly squeezed out of their own homes. “We even have cases of abandonment,” says Mathew Cherian, who runs the Indian branch of HelpAge in New Delhi. “Children just leave their parents in other parts of the city where they get disoriented.”

The government is getting so worried about the fraying family networks (and the possibility that it will need to take care of abandoned elders) that there is now a law

requiring children to take care of their parents. China passed a similar law in 1996, says Wang Xiao Yan, director of Community Alliance in Beijing. “This has created a strain on the working population, particularly children of the one-child policy,” says Yan. In India few actually want to take advantage of the law. “We believe that when you die your son must perform the last rites. So you don’t want to complain about your son,” says Agewell Foundation’s Rath.

But there is also a huge sense of guilt on the part of the sons in not being able to look after aging parents. When Mathew Cherian of HelpAge reunites parents with the children who dump them, they take them back. “There is social pressure,” he says. “The neighbors say ‘oh, look at these children, they left their parents on the road!’”

Some elder advocates, however, say it’s pointless to just demonize the children. Shankerdas, the gerontologist in New Delhi, says Indian families thrive on “a culture of dependency.” “The elderly are quite happy to be dependent,” says Shankerdas. “That means you don’t learn to do day-to-day things, like banking and bill payments.” Usha Vatsare runs Yogakshema, a rehab and wellness center in Bangalore. “The younger generation is too busy to take care of the elders,” she says. “But the elders are rigid and inflexible and can’t get along with their children.” While Indians love to talk about family values, Vatsare says relationships are mediated less by love and more by duty and obligation.

Children, especially sons, are considered an investment. “I look after my son and my son will look after me in my old age,” says Indira Jai Prakash, a gerontologist in Bangalore. Now, the return on that investment feels up in the air for many Indians.

But despite the problems, elder advocates say the solution is not an old age home in every district or more western-style retirement communities. Premkumar Raja at Nightingales Trust says what India needs are more day care centers. “We don’t want to separate elders from their families. We feel daycare is the answer.” Nightingales has two centers – one for poorer elders and one for the middle class. They tried to have just one, but in India class taboos are too strong for both classes to mix.

Jai Prakash agrees that day care centers can give families some breathing space. The family, she says, is adapting as well to the pressures and demands of the 21st Century. Children may not live with their parents. But they live near them, perhaps upstairs in a separate flat. Sometimes parents even live with their married daughters, once a major social taboo. “New forms of family are emerging,” says Jai Prakash. “You can’t really write the obituary of the Indian extended family just yet.”