

## No country for old people

Amit Sharma & Saurabh Prashar, TNN, Jan 17, 2011, 12.47am IST

At a time when the concept of nuclear family is becoming increasingly popular in City Beautiful, the elderly are finding themselves increasingly relegated to spend their twilight years alone. The cruel, cold-blooded facet of the city cannot find a place to hide with a chilling fact: Of the total 70,000 senior citizens in city, 17,000-18,000 of them are living alone, tending to the chores of their dull, insipid years of their remaining life.

They consider themselves lucky if their life partner is still with them, but for those who are left with no one in this lonely world, it becomes a daily battle. The trend has been attributed to busier lifestyle of the offspring, where both husband and wife goes to work and leave their children in crèches or in the care of maids and have no time for their parents, who usually are far off from them. Whether they live in a spacious bungalow or some old-age home, it becomes inconsequential when their children start giving them cold shoulder.

The common belief that only blood relations come to aid at the last stage in life does not hold true. At least six recent reported deaths of well-known people in the city are an ample proof of it. The single common factor noticed in all these deaths, the deceased – mostly women – were well-educated, rich and having children to look after them. But their deaths were unreported for five days to one week and their bodies were discovered only by chance. The recent death of a Sector-21 elderly woman made her the latest victim of 'empty nest syndrome' in the city. The decomposed body of Mann was recovered by chance by her daughter on January 6.

For sociologists and psychologists, the instances of leaving parents alone are not new but its concepts have changed in the present scenario. PU's sociology department chairperson Sherry Sabbarwal said, "The empty-nest syndrome exists in society since long though mainly in the cities. Earlier, it used to happen when the children used to leave the house in pursuit of their career but now with society changing rapidly people have become more individualistic and self-centred." Even if the children are financially strong, they neglect their parents as they rate their work and money over their parents. Earlier, due to social inhibitions children used to take care of their parents but now they do not even care about the society.

However, in some cases parents are also modernized and they prefer to stay alone, she added. One of the remedies to save people from empty-nest syndrome is to adopt the models from western countries where people live in communities and there are special apartments made for seniors only but whether it is workable or not in [India](#) is yet to be seen.

Two years ago, the reported death of Lelly Bains Sandhu, a doctorate in orthopaedics from Pune University, in her rented accommodation in Sector-10 only highlights the plight of elderly more. Most of her family members including her children had settled abroad and she was living alone

since 2005. The death of elderly once again puts a question mark on the effective community policing in the city.

Though Chandigarh police has a long chapter of community policing divided into four parts, positive results of community policing are still awaited. Sociologist Prof Manjit Singh said, "In urban sphere the life has become more individualist, competitive and career-oriented, particularly among the middle and upper-middle class that has made the empty-nest syndrome even more acute."

It is parents who make their children career-oriented in the hope that when the children get successful they will look after them, but later realize that their expectations have come to naught. This has been happening recurrently for last some years due to very strong feeling of alienation in both parents and children.

Prof emeritus Jitendra Mohan of psychology department feels, "We have lost the sense of concern and commitment for parents due to a total anarchy of emotional and social bonding which has resulted in a new world devoid of emotional attachment that has disconnected everyone," he added. The least a society can do to its elderly is to start a call service that alerts the immediate neighbourhood, hospitals and cops when such people need help.

### **Revealing Statics**

The statics available with UT police reveal that in four gruesome homicides, including a double murder, which hit headlines in the last three years, criminals had targeted retired persons and couples living on their own. An elderly couple, Sucha Singh and his wife Balbir Kaur, in Kajheri, Sector 56 was brutally murdered in July 2007. They were a victim of empty nest syndrome as their children — two sons — settled in [Canada](#) along with their families. The murder of 76-year-old Sarla Devi by drug addicts in Sector 15 in 2007 is another example of this growing problem

### **Deteriorating law and order**

Contrary to UT administration's oft-repeated claims of looking after senior citizens on a priority basis, a study on 374 such cases points towards deteriorating law and order situation, with safety down and criminal assaults up

UT administration must adopt models from western countries and come up with apartments for seniors especially so that they form a community there —Prof Sherry Sabbarwal, chairperson, sociology department.