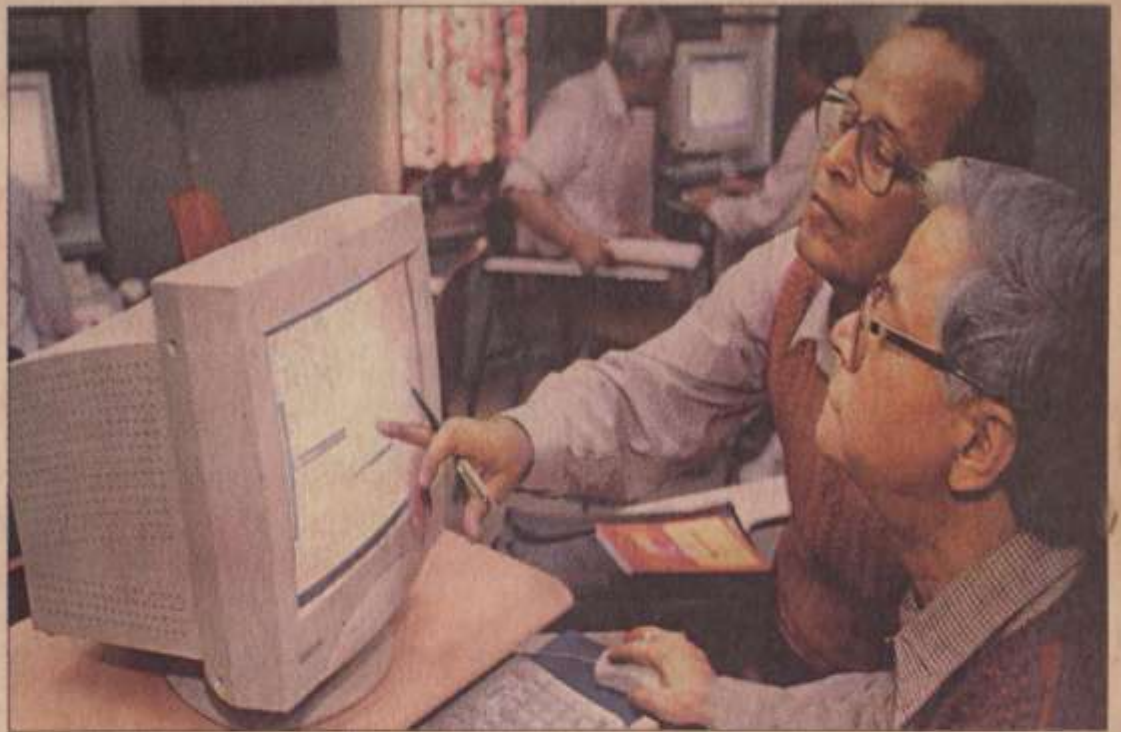


Used to joint family structures, the elderly these days do not have even their children to talk to, leading lonely lives fraught with anguish

Shamik Bag

CLOSE ASSOCIATES say he was the embodiment of etiquette and cordiality. Yet, everybody failed to realise that former Calcutta Port Trust chief engineer, 80-year-old BR Chatterjee, suffered deep anguish as a result of his loneliness, known only to him. His suicide recently by jumping from a Gariahat highrise has put the spotlight on a question that is often left ignored: in our hurry to scale individual heights, is young India using the elderly as a stepladder before leaving them behind to fend for themselves?

Chatterjee's death, as his suicide note stated, was a result of the acute loneliness that he felt after the deaths of his younger son and wife and the absence of his US-settled elder son. "We never understood his pain from being unable to communicate his feelings to anybody. Now is just the right time for us to think about the elderly and their associated problems like loneliness and abuse," says Krishna Basu, close associate of Chatterjee and secretary of



Loneliness, The Other Name For Old Age

Indian Association of Retired Persons (tel: 2463-9000), an organisation of retired people that provides medical and psychological support to the aged.

The problem of loneliness among the aged is on the rise in India, mentions Debanjali Maitra of Dignity Foundation (tel: 2474-1314), which also works towards providing support to the elderly. "While people are trying to better their lives while focussing on their careers, they are forgetting that they are leaving behind parents at home," says Maitra.

The shrinking of the traditional Indian joint family

structure is also one of the primary reasons, feel experts. While the present elderly population grew up in an environment that supported a joint family where there was no lack of people to communicate with, they now suddenly find themselves in a situation where even their own children are unavailable for giving them a patient ear. Often, the elderly have to keep themselves connected with their offspring through e-mails.

"Society must understand that they may be old, but the elderly are not redundant. We have to create the awareness in society about keeping its channels

Often e-mail seems to be the only means of communication that the elderly have with their children

of communication open with the elderly," says Sharmila Mazumdar of Helpe India (tel: 2216-5913).

To help in finding some of the answers, most of the organisations providing support to the elderly have worked out a schedule where the maximum stress is laid on interpersonal interaction. Says Subrata Sanyal of St John's Ambulance, which is opening an old age home called The Retreat in Salt Lake soon, "We

will encourage the occupants to meet, talk and share their happiness and sadness. That might be through cultural programmes and meetings."

That the elderly across all socio-economic groups are living under stress is clear from the words of S Mukherjee of the Calcutta Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology (CMIG, tel: 2350-1437), which primarily works with the elderly living in the below poverty line group. In the case of CMIG, it is poverty that is the bane. The reasons may differ, but the problems remain constant for those who toiled yesterday for our today. ■