

Her institute for the aged isn't just a support system, it's a home

By SOUTIK BISWAS

EVERY day, Bani Mukherjee, a wizened 65-year-old widow, treks four kilometres from her home, a patch of a small shabby verandah in Calcutta's slum-infested Beliaghata, to a cramped apartment in the neighbourhood. There she meets up with some 40-odd aged citizens, near-homeless and unwanted by their families. They swap stories, play Ludo, watch popular mythological soaps on a small black and white TV, make newspaper bags, sing songs and get some food and pills for their ageing bodies. Sometimes, they even hop into a bus and go out of the city to see temples and the river. "We feel peaceful here, we feel wanted and bonded," says Mukherjee, whose fruit-seller husband died eight years ago. Another member of this old folks apartment is 83-year-old former signboard painter Manindranath Bose. In spite of having two sons and two daughters, he has no one to look after him. So he comes six days a week to the apartment to share his time and thoughts. "There's no love for the old," says Bose. "We are the dregs of society."

Indrani Chakravarty didn't think so. So in '88, this sociology major, fresh from her study on the problems of pensioners at the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), rented a 700 sq ft apartment in a faceless Bellaghata highrise and began her modest Calcutta Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology, the only such research and welfare institute in eastern India. Today, the apartment is a haven for many of the city's poor and near-destitute old people. Urban Calcutta has some 3 lakh people above 60 years of age—and many of them are poor, uncared for and homeless. Chakravarty's institute, run out of three rooms with some two dozen dedicated volunteers, looks after some 750 of such old people. "The poor among the old are the worst off," she says, "even their social security is in jeopardy as their children can't look after them." So every day these wrinkled old men and women, in their frayed

clothes, cracked spectacles and plastic sandals troop into Chakravarty's centre for some food and fun. They even earn a bit—maybe Rs 10 a week—for making paper bags. Some, like Hrishikesh Mondal, 75, spend Rs 12 every day to make the 20-km journey to the centre's day-care programme from his suburban home where "nobody gives me the same care and attention".

"Support systems for old people are sorely lacking in India," says Chakravarty. That is why she's stretched her limits despite the inevitable problems of funding.

The institute also runs a successful granny adoption programme: 53 old women living on the sidewalks are cared for (an equal number of sponsors arranged by Helpage pool in Rs 450 every month for each destitute granny's upkeep). Seventy-something Saralabala Dasi, who lives in a water pipe after her husband abandoned her, is one of them. Chakravarty's volunteers regularly provide her with food, clothes and medicines for her crippled feet and battered body. There's also the mobile medical unit: two doctors travel to eight slums and treat 400 old people once a month. In addition, about 150 old women are also given ration cards and food.

That's not all. Chakravarty, a rare academic-activist, pursues her favourite calling—the study of the old—vigorously. The institute also has a respected nine-year-old quarterly journal on ageing, and has completed five projects on 'productive ageing' and problems of aged widows, among other things. After her brave start, Chakravarty has secured central and state government grants to run her day-care programme and journal. Now, this 40-plus woman is planning to set up eastern India's first geriatric hospital—eight beds and an ORG for starters—with help from donors. India will have 75 million old people by the turn of the century, and there are too few of her kind around. So if you want to join in to give old people a better deal and dignity, contact Dr Indrani Chakravarty at E-1, Sopan Kutir, 53, Dr S.C. Bannerjee road, Beliaghata, Calcutta. Phone: 3501437 (Off) or 3596464 (Res). ■



Indrani Chakravarty's work for destitute old people isn't over, she plans a geriatric hospital.

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