

# A thought for the twilight year

BY VISHNUPRIYA SENGUPTA

Life is not all that smooth for the aged, so it is with their thoughts in mind that October 1 is designated as the International Day for Older People by the UNO, while the year 1999 has already been declared as the International Year of Older Persons.

Such enlightenment falls flat on its face, as the rough and tough generation merely shrugs at the knowledge, as though it were no big deal. This callan attitude, perhaps, speaks volumes of the plight of the aged in our country. Relegated to the societal periphery as junk, they are ready to be disposed of at the first given opportunity.

No wonder that scholars hardly explore the field of gerontology. They reason, it is not challenging enough. After all, when you are at the fag end of your life, what could be worth pursuing?

Indrani Chakravarty, founder president of Calcutta Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology established in 1983, is an exception, would have you believe otherwise. Having completed

her thesis on the problems of pensioners and senior citizens at the ISI in the late 80s, she took it upon herself to do something constructive for the aged. Her decision found expression in the form of a 700-square feet apartment on 55B, Dr S.C. Banerjee Road, the only research and welfare institute for the aged in eastern India.

Today, this institute with two dozen volunteers operates out of three rooms to tend to 750 old people who are poor, uncared for and homeless. At times, they even earn money as much as Rs 10 a week for making paper bags with their scrawny fingers. That mitigates the transition from their working life to retired life.

Says Indrani, "There are three lakh people in urban Kolkata in the age group of 60. Most of them are neglected by their families because they can no longer extend a helping hand. For the aged poor people, it is worse; considered as an extra mouth to feed, they are brutally abused. That is why we work at the grass roots level with the government aid and we are granted for projects for the poorest of the poor."

Indrani was brought up by her grandparents as both her parents were work-



Elderly persons at the CMIG. (Below) Dr Indrani Chakrabarty

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ing. "Having been so close to them, we bridged the gap between the third and first generation. Later, when I grew up, I decided to do research in this little explored field of gerontology," she says.

For this purpose, Indrani was required to do extensive field work. "I remember I used to go regularly to the pensioners office near Akash Vani Bhavan. There, an old frail man who would walk in this office all the way from Shyambazar to collect his pension caught my eye. He had no money to take a bus, so he would start walking early in the morning and reach this office after three to four hours. From then on, I nurtured a desire to do something for the older people," she adds.

Subsequently, Indrani went to Japan and did a comparative study between the Japanese aged and the Indian aged. "The problem here is very different from that in Japan. There, the old age home concept is very different; they do not believe in dislodging the aged, but provide the money to tend to their needs. I tried to take the cue from institutes in Japan while setting up CMIG to provide a support system for the aged," she says.

Most of the elderly find their way to this institute day without fail. This is in spite of abuse they are at home. They narrate stories of singing songs and get medical treatment. Sometimes, they are taken out on a joy ride into the city.

That isn't all. The institute has a medical unit, a free physiotherapy training unit, a nutrition programme and a day care programme under which women living on the street are cared for by sponsors who pay Rs 450 a month. Indrani, however, has plans to set up India's first geriatric hospital with eight beds and an OPD unit in Metropolitan Bypass. It is a place where the difference is large. Needless to say, if you forward to help out, that will alleviate the suffering of the ailing relief to these families. Those who wish to help, get in touch with Dr Indrani Chakrabarty, Calcutta Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology, E/1 Sopan Ka S.C. Banerjee Road, Kolkata.