

When they're 64

Today's parents are not sure they will get their children's support in their old age

"I have two children, but they have not been brought into this world with the hope that they will look after me when I grow old." Name: Monica Thapar. Age: 36 years. Family status: Divorced. Job: Works for INTACH. Residence: Delhi.

"I am bringing up my children to be extremely independent. Care for me will happen spontaneously (in my old age), not because they think it is their duty." Prahlad Kaker. Forty-four years. Nuclear family. Ad filmmaker. Bombay.

"I have no expectations of my children. I'm very clear. I'll have to support myself in my old age." Bimal Desai. Thirty-five years. Joint family. Family business of *beedi* manufacturing. Bangalore.

Just think a minute about what these people are saying. Theirs is a very representative opinion across the urban, middle-class spectrum of people over 30 in the country. And what they are saying is that they definitely do not expect their children to look after them when they are old.

But wait. That doesn't sound very Indian, does it? Isn't this the home of family values? What about filial responsibility, and fulfilling parental expectations?

Sorry, but this is the new generation. It is truly a generation at the fag end of a transitional phase, from the traditional joint family to the western-style nuclear family. This generation has been moulded, carried away by the floods of very rapid social change. And for the first time ever, it is shaking its collective fist at the traditional norms of parenting.

This is all very new. After all, throughout human history, societies have been built on the foundation of the reciprocity of generations. I raise you, I give you my all. In turn, you take care of me when I can no longer take care of myself. It was clear, it was simple and it worked. Then, just a few generations ago, the very liberal notion arose in the West that



children can be released from this reciprocal responsibility. And it has only very recently caught hold of the Indian imagination.

It is the youngest generation of parents, men and women in their 30s, who have been the most fertile ground for such an attitudinal shift in child rearing. This is the generation that is witnessing the plight of an older generation who did not plan for, who could not have foreseen this break-up of reciprocity. Septuagenarian aunts, nonagenarian grandfathers, who are now at the mercy of either their children, or inflation, or an indiffer-

ent health care system.

These 30-somethings are not about to let that happen to themselves. Far better to have zero expectations from your children. And plan, accordingly, for yourself.

How many can afford the luxury of raising kids as non-profit ventures, however? It is of course the middle to upper-middle classes. It is only people who are reasonably stable, economically, who can look at themselves squarely in the mirror and assess their chances of creating wealth. And you don't even

need the '91 census figures to tell you that this class is growing fast.

Within the class, it is the people over 30 who are the most confident of generating surpluses. In fact, like their counterpart puppies in the West, they are driven to do so. Naturally, it is they who can allow themselves to believe they are raising their children more for pleasure than for profit. And to determine themselves



never to be a financial burden on their kids.

In the popular Beatles song *When I'm 64*, a generation now in their 40s expressed their own anxieties about the loneliness ahead. But there is something qualitatively different about this generation. It is one thing to worry about whether people will live up to your expectations — and quite another to steel yourself to have no expectations at all.

How did such a sea change occur in the family's structure, and its expectations, in so short a time?

Dr K. Sathyavathi, who recently retir-

ed as professor of clinical psychology at the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore, has been tracking the evolution of the Indian family for 33 years. "The changes in evolution of the family have been so swift, it has been like a flood," she says. "It is only of late that clear instances of a nuclear family are emerging, both residentially and functionally."

In this nuclear family, role-functions are still unclear. But one thing is obvious. "The anonymity of the individual in the family has given way to the assertion of individuality," says Sathyavathi. This has its own complications. It means that you cannot automatically expect any member of the family to play by the rules. In fact, the unwritten, unquestioned rules that governed families earlier have gone.

And they have not been replaced. "Children are no longer a continuity factor in carrying out the traditional dos and don'ts, the mores and values of the family," offers Sathyavathi. "And the give-and-take that there used to be is no longer there." Naturally, everyone has to re-evaluate reciprocity of any kind. "When the very foundation is shaking," asks Dr Sathyavathi rhetorically, "what about the superstructure? How can anybody bank on his children?"

If people can't bank on their children, who can they bank on? In the West, the fragments of the traditional family fell into the safety net of state-sponsored social security. Do 30-somethings, then, expect the same — demand the same — from the Indian state?

Unanimously, the answer is, no, not really. If ever there had been a dream of a *ma-baap sarkar*, it has withered. Says Rohit Khattar, 38, successful owner of several Delhi eateries/pubs (Chor Bizarre, Thugs The Pub). "I'd been to an old age home run by the Delhi administration and the place is so bad it would be better to give the aged an injection rather than subject them to this slow death." He firmly believes that the government can-

not do much in terms of support for senior citizens.

Prahlad Kaker agrees. "This government cannot even handle AIDS, what are they going to do for old people?" he asks. Chitra Kumar, 37, with a background in psychiatric social work, is equally doubtful. "The government should step in to provide old age services, as it has for children. But it has no

JITENDER GUPTA



Benu Kumar, New Delhi, is reluctant to accept the new trend of having to be on one's own in the last stages of life. "It is a scary thought," she says, contemplating old age without her children by her side

stake at all in old age."

Would these 30-somethings, all of whom wish to release their kids from the burden of supporting them, instead support a tax to create widespread social security as in the West? People are very wary. Says Vikram Sakhija, 31, an executive in a multinational firm, living in Bombay, "I am very cynical about such ventures. They always go wrong."

This cynicism is only the natural, universal inheritance from the experience of the government's role in post-Independent India. Who can dare hope that the government will do anything for anybody any more? But this only makes the problem worse. If the over-30s are very clear that the government can't and won't do anything for them in their old age, they are very vague about what role the private sector can play. In fact, they are very uncertain about any extra-familial solutions.

Across the board then, this generation of parents, whose children often are bare-

**PRAHLAD KAKER***Ad filmmaker*

"I am bringing up my children to be independent. Care for me will happen spontaneously: not because it is their duty"

**VIKRAM SAKHIYA***Business executive*

He is against a tax structure to create social security for the aged. "I am very cynical about such ventures. They always go wrong"

GAUTAM PATOLE

ly into primary school, are resigned to fending for themselves.

"Modern parents are preparing themselves to meet the future in economic, social as well as emotional aspects, without dependence on their children," says Dr Sathyavathi. That takes a lot of preparing. Do they really have the time, in these roller-coaster years, to get off for a while and equip themselves for the future?

Certainly, says Bimal Desai. "This generation has put in a lot of thought into this matter," he says. "My father always says, you guys think too much. At your age, I never bothered," he adds. But the Desais are in a joint family. And Bimal knows that his father could always depend on him. And he knows that values are changing. "We are going to suffer. I am gearing up to a situation where I will not have a shoulder to cry on," he says.

Bangalore's Chitra Kumar is preparing too. She became sensitised to the issue when she spent three years with her in-laws before moving into her own home. "In my old age, I would like to be in control," she says. "And that means health and financial planning. Keeping yourself active is important, keeping yourself interested is important, and relationships are terribly important." Her analysis is that this generation will have to develop new resources for itself, fast. Among them are lateral support systems, so that old people can group together.

Staying in touch and staying interested becomes even more crucial for couples with no kids, or for single parents. Gauri Trivedi is an IAS officer in Karnataka. At 32, she has a six-year-old daughter. And she is divorced. "We are the unluckiest generation," she says.

"We have been brought up so that we look after our parents but there is no guarantee that our children are going to do that for us." She is taking no chances. Financially, she is confident that she can be self-sufficient. And emotionally, she is preparing herself.

It is the need for companionship that occupies most 30-somethings when they project into the future. That is, of

course, universal. Says Dr Amit Desai, a psychiatrist in Bombay, "The real problems of old age have to do with loneliness. Old people usually have a lack of stimulation from the environment."

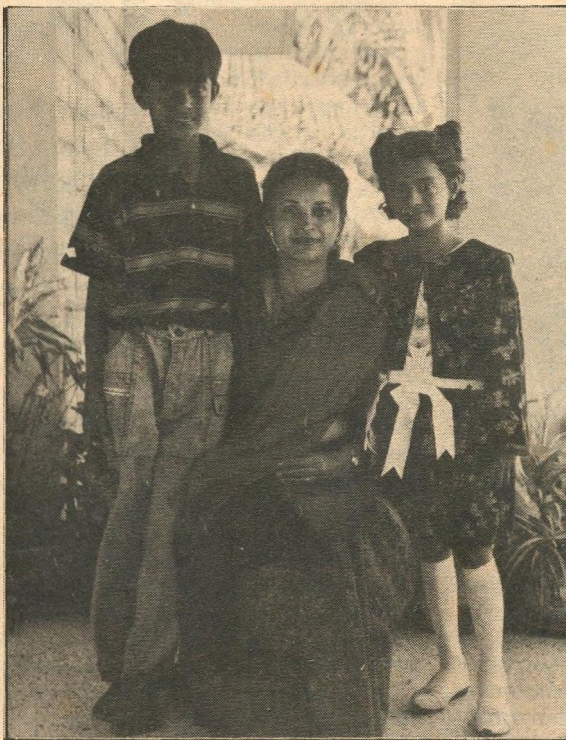
Where, then, is the 30-something group headed for in the future? Dr Indrani Chakrabarty, founder-director, Calcutta Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology, thinks the future is bleak. "With

the way the population is growing, combined with the erosion of traditional support systems, we are going to be faced with a very big crisis very soon," she says.

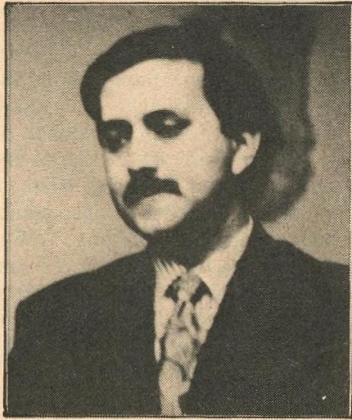
That is easy to believe. Even in the West, where extensive support systems have been put into place, care for the elderly has been an unmitigated disaster when it comes to emotional health. For a generation of parents that is bringing up their children without expectations, isn't that a cold, hard truth to face?

Not necessarily, believes N. Venu, 34, a teacher at the Centre for Learning, a school which is trying to develop alternatives to mainstream education in Bangalore.

He believes that parents need to put less pressures on career orientation, put more energy into building positive attitudes in their children. Because, in the final analysis, any solutions for the problems of senior



Bangalore's Chitra Kumar feels that her generation will have to develop new resources for itself. Among them are lateral support systems, so that old people can group together



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ROHIT KHATTAR*Businessman*

He believes that the government cannot do much in terms of support for senior citizens. One has to look after oneself in old age, he says

citizens have to emerge from the matrix of the family, or of the community. "This is the only right thing," says Venu. "This generation will be making a mistake if it is looking for state support."

Perhaps. The fear that raising kids to be so independent and free of responsibility may not be right is palpable in today's parents. It comes across as an *angst*, a *frisson* at the back of the mind. "All I will need is affection from my

son," admits Parvati Khan, the singer-actress from Bombay. "What I cannot rule out is the emotional support that I will expect from my children," says Rohit Khattar. "It is a scary thought," says Delhi housewife Benu Kumar, contemplating old age without her son by her side. "All I can do is hope," says teacher Gopal Sharma, wondering whether his children will be there for him in his sunset years.

When the whole twine is unravelled,

**PARVATI KHAN***Pop singer*

She does not rule out the emotional aspect in old age: "All I will need is affection from my son"

it turns out that these 30-something parents, who don't expect to be financially looked after by their children, do indeed hope for their emotional support in the future.

The problem is, the only problem is, they are not too sure they are going to get it. •

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