SECOND INNINGS

‘Old age home’ is out, ‘retirement community’ is in, as India’s senior citizens opt for autonomy and camaraderie with their peers in their golden years

For all intents and purposes, Serene Adinath, a building complex near Vanda-lur, Chennai, could pass off as a college hostel. Walking across the first-floor library and ‘multi-purpose room’, to enter the canteen, I expect a grubby teenager to walk out in shorts, complaining about the food. Instead we are met with two friends in their 50s, sharing a peaceful conversation over a cup of steaming hot kaapi.

Serene Adinath, built in 2015, acquired and managed by Seattle-based Columbia Pacific Communities, is one of many senior living residencies — gated apartments that can be bought exclusively and managed by senior citizens. It’s a concept that India is increasingly warming up to, judging by the growing number of such homes — of varying levels of granularity.

This is not an old age home,” states resident Lakshmi Swaminathan. At 57, she is relatively younger than the rest, and the in-house ‘gadget guru’. Her husband, TS Swaminathan, talks over her as a couple who has been married for years is wont to, “She’s right, we chose to live here. Every day, we are busy making out to other countries or cities, for their career, and their parents stay alone,” says Mohit Nirula, CEO at Columbia Pacific Communities, explaining the rise in retirement homes.

Columbia Pacific Communities is managing nine such communities — many of them in Coimbatore, the new hub for such homes — of varying levels of grandeur. On the other hand, some are exclusively high-end, such as Antara Senior living in Dehradun, and Bless Retirement Living on the outskirts of Aluva, near Kochi.

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“This kind of community living ensures that there is neither loneliness nor alienation, and therefore better mental health. Seniors are secure and their self-esteem is intact as they don’t have to depend on their children. There is a professional system in place to take care of them,” says Babu Joseph, of Bless Retirement Living.

The premium retirement community, which began functioning in 2016, has 64 apartments, on three acres, all of which are booked and is now moving into the next phase of construction with additional 100-odd apartments. “Initial-ly we were sceptical about the response. But the stigma around senior living communities is gone, perhaps,” he adds.

Columbia Pacific Communities, too, saw a similar curve of growth, with its houses in five cities being sold out completely. “Some book the apartment for future use, and until then rent it out to other seniors,” says Mohit.

A rising phenomenon

“Fifteen years ago, India was not culturally ready for children to have their senior parents live separately. But now the circumstances are such that the children move to other countries or cities, for their career, and their parents stay alone,” says Mohit Nirula, CEO at Columbia Pacific Communities, explaining the rise in retirement homes.

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