

House arrests

What are the compulsions that make people lock their family in their homes? Is there a psychological dimension attached to the issue? Are the people aware of the dangers of leaving people locked in homes? Here's a find

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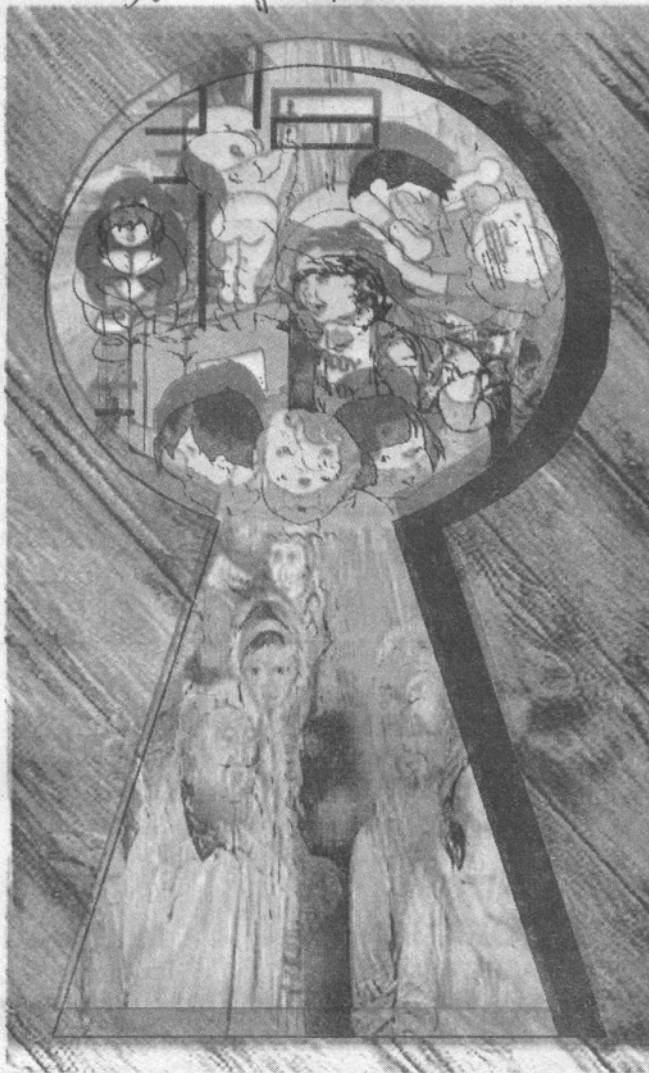
By Ather Naqui

One had always wondered why the bearded man would always lock the front door to his house before going out to offer prayers or attending to some work which required him to stay out for a couple of hours. Why would someone so imprison his wife and daughter?

The question continued to perturb our young minds at that time, eager as we were to weave mysterious stories around this daily ritual. A greater understanding of the present-day security issues have given us an answer, as we see other people around us locking the doors to their homes — to ensure safety of their near and dear ones inside.

The curiosity of those early years is now replaced by an acceptance of the practice, for a variety of reasons. There remains an element of concern though about the safety of those locked inside, in case there is an emergency or accident.

What are the compulsions? Is there a psychological dimension to the issue? Are the people aware of the dangers of leaving people locked in homes? We approached a few people who are in the habit of locking some member or members of their family before going out. The



responses were mixed. Some of them simply refused to have a discussion on the issue. To them it was 'intruding in one's privacy'. For others it was a non issue.

Wahab Ali, a resident of Township Lahore, is a government servant. He lives with his wife, two little children and an aging father. Wahab often locks the front gate to his house before leaving for his office in the morning. "I want to ensure the security of my family," he says. "My wife stays home and my father cannot walk more than a few steps without help. They do not usually go out in the day. My elder son is two and a half years old. So, in my view, the best thing for them is to remain at home and this way, I ensure that no one would disturb them in my absence. Besides this is the best way to get rid of the nuisance that beggars are."

Apa Tehmina, as she is called by her daughter and other family members, lives in her daughter's house at Lahore's Nespak Colony. "We have no alternative. My daughter teaches in a school so she has to leave in the morning with the husband and children. They have to lock me inside. Being an arthritis patient, I am hardly able to move," she says.

Referring to the possibility of accidents, she says, "Once, while I was making tea in the kitchen, the gas pipe nearly caught fire. I put my shawl to put the spark off. Thank God I was saved."

None is satisfied with this state of life, but many have to take it as the last option. "Of course nobody would like such an arrangement but my husband thinks that this is in our interest," says a housewife who does not want her name to appear in the newspaper. "I am mostly confined to the four walls of home till mid day. I cannot meet any neighbours until after my children are back home from school. I slip them the keys from

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under the door, so that they can unlock the door."

Doctors say that at least in some cases, the practice may be the result of some phobia. Those in the habit of locking their relatives at home may be "suffering from some mental ailment," says Dr. Ahsan-ul-Haq, a psychiatrist. But this needs to be qualified. "For example if someone had a robbery at his home, such a step may sound rational in the light of the trauma that he underwent. But when the practice persists, it means the person's mental state is disturbed. Such people need counselling," he says.

On the other side are those who have to cope with the experience of being confined. "If somebody locked me alone at a place, I will fail to survive the loneliness," Dr Ahsan says.

Muhammad Amjad who lives in a congested area in Karim Park, Bhati Gate, highlights another side of the issue. "Our lifestyle is fast changing. People are moving houses every other day. Understandably, they are suspicious of their neighbours. And hence prefer to lock their homes when somebody especially an old person or a child is alone at home," he says.

Muhammad Fahim, another resident of Bhati, brushes aside the view that all such people have a psychological problem: "I personally know quite a few people who do it because they have no alternative. In my view it is a normal thing when you are not living with a combined family."

Is there any legal recourse against forcing people to stay locked? "There is a difference between this kind of detention, if we may call it so, and the illegal detention which is forced upon a person. Unfortunately we cannot prosecute a person for locking up his family members unless they object to it," says Arif Bhinder, a lawyer. "In many cases this is no objection at all. And if there is one we can resolve it at the social level — through counselling."