Have there been any benefits? Our close friends are closer. I was overcome by the groundswell of genuine goodwill from colleagues whom I hardly knew. I have no fear of my own death whatsoever. If my son has experienced this what possible fear and horror can I have for this inevitable event?

The role of God? I do not know. Certainly I experienced periods of great tranquillity and certainty that we would eventually recover our sanity, even during the first few weeks. Were these God given?

I strongly recommend the therapeutic benefits of activity to the bereaved. Do not allow yourself to sit or lie and think. About one month after the accident I

bought my wife a new car although she was still languishing in hospital and this positive decision—against the background of exhausted, devastating inertia—made me feel high for 48 hours. We acquired a new dog as our last one had perished in the accident and she has been a strengthening focus of new life. We were also desperately keen to have another child inspired by the good fortune of my favourite actress, Patricia Hodge, at the age of 45. Then we could argue that some good would have come from bad but all to no avail so far. And never, never try to save money by buying a thin, elegant sort of car: bankrupt yourself and buy solid steel.

To children with love

Karen Trollope Kumar

Why is the birth rate so much higher in India than in Great Britain? Much has been written about variables such as female literacy, socio-economic status, and stages of demographic transition. Yet a deeply significant fact is overlooked in the debate on why Indians have so many children: it is because they actually like children. Bawling babies, terrible twos, fussy four year olds—they're all welcome in the warm lap of Mother India. Since Indians truly enjoy the patter of little feet, the more pattering the better.

As a Canadian who lives in rural India I have had an unusual opportunity to observe this phenomenon. India, through the eyes of my two small children, is a brilliant kaleidoscope of colour, a magic world where they occupy a very special place. One day last spring my 3 year old son and I were walking along the road near our home in the Himalayan foothills of northern India. A brightly painted bus came careering around the corner, its horn blaring. The bus was packed to capacity; passengers even perched on the roof. My son smiled and waved at the approaching vehicle. The response was immediate; people leaned out of windows and hung dangerously from the luggage racks, calling cheerful greetings to the little boy by the side of the road. The bus tilted alarmingly to one side. Then, with a terrific blast of its horn, it roared past us. My son looked up at me, beaming with joy. An image of a Canadian bus flashed before my mind: sleek, uniformly grey, with windows dark and shuttered against the world. No doubt highly efficient and safe—but from the point of view of a little boy by the side of the road, dreadfully dull.

Children interest every Indian. New mothers in India receive advice on baby care from all quarters. I have been lectured on medical care of my children by our washerwoman, advised on toilet training by our postman, and have had suggestions on infant feeding from the man who runs the corner shop. Young parents eager to test their theories of childraising face problems in this country, where the child is king. When our daughter was a few weeks old she used to stay awake till 3 am every morning, wanting to play, and then sleep during the day. Worn out by this routine, we decided to let her cry herself to sleep one night. This might break the pattern and get her to sleep at a reasonable hour, we thought. Alas for our plans—she had been wailing for only a few minutes when we heard an agitated knocking on our door. Our neighbour, an elderly grandmother, burst in and dashed to the bedroom. She whisked the baby out of her cradle and cuddled her, whispering, "There, there, little darling, little love! Your Ammaji has come... hush, now." Our daughter's yells stopped abruptly

For the grandmothers of India, the child can never be seen as a tiny contributor to an alarming growth curve

and soon happy gurgles were issuing from the bundle in our neighbour's arms. Our lame attempts to explain our childraising theories were pooh-poohed by the indignant grandmother-next-door. "When a child cries, she should be comforted," she pronounced firmly. And that was that. In India you never contradict an elder, particularly concerning childraising.

One might assume that this indulgent approach to child behaviour would result in very naughty children. Yet it doesn't; Indian children are generally well behaved. My theory is that Indian children get so much attention from a host of loving relatives that they do not need to act out for attention.

I once told the grandmother-next-door that in the West children sleep separately from their parents right from birth. Ammaji threw up her hands in horror. "The poor little darlings! They must be so frightened, all by themselves. A child should sleep with his parents until he is at least five years old."

The practice of young children sharing the parents' bed is widespread in Eastern countries. Dr Spock would have been horrified. Dire consequences were predicted for children who sleep in the same bed with their parents. I've never observed any such consequences; in fact, Indian children are generally well adjusted and happy. Thumb sucking is rare, as are night terrors or sleepwalking. Indian toddlers never seem to need a favourite blanket or teddy bear to take to bed—why should they when they can cuddle up to their mothers at night? Perhaps the grandmother-next-door is right: children in Western countries are frightened of sleeping alone, and they try to tell us by thumb-sucking, teddy bears, and sleepwalking.

Indians have a loving and tolerant attitude towards children even under the most trying circumstances.

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This became abundantly clear to me after a 17 hour transcontinental flight from Delhi to Toronto with my two small children. Sitting next to us on the first leg of the flight was an elderly, distinguished looking businessman. My little son, then a year and a half old, was sobbing miserably. "I'm sorry, this is going to be a nuisance for you," I said apologetically to our travelling companion. "Poor chap, he's worn out," said the businessman sympathetically. He opened his briefcase and took out pens, books, and a calculator to amuse my little boy. Moments later my son had transferred himself to the lap of our fellow traveller and was happily playing with the calculator. Around us other Indian passengers were watching us with amusement. "When you feel sleepy, just hand me your little girl," said a motherly south Indian woman across the aisle. During the flight to London other passengers offered us homemade Indian food, toys and treats for the children, and (inevitably) advice on the care of small children during transcontinental flights.

Most of the Indian passengers got off in London, and our fellow travellers on the flight to Toronto were mostly British or Canadian. The atmosphere became more formal and less comfortable. Later during the flight both children began to sob miserably, worn out by more than 24 hours of travel. This time there were no offers to babysit or treats for the children. Instead, I had the uncomfortable feeling that people were casting

pointed glances in my direction, expecting me to silence my children. It was a great relief to land in Toronto.

During that visit to Canada I mused about the role of the child in Western countries and India. In India having a child is the focus and meaning of married life. Without a child life loses its colour and joy. Insecurity looms before the childless couple, too, for the child represents the parents' insurance for care in their old age. Children in India grow up with responsibility: in the early years responsibility to contribute to the work of the family, and later to care for older family members. These responsibilities are no longer a part of the role of children in the West. Perhaps, as a result, children in Western countries have lost a little status. They are no longer perceived as a vital part of every family. The child has become an option. Couples in Western countries consider carefully whether they can afford and can cope with a child.

How alien these concepts would seem to Ammaji, our beloved grandmother-next-door in rural India. Perhaps, as we seek to understand the complexities of the population problem, we should try to listen to the views of the Ammajis of this world. For them the child can never be seen as a tiny contributor to an alarming growth curve. The birth of a child is an occasion to be celebrated, and there always seems to be room for one more in Ammaji's lap.

Medicinal plants: another man's poison

Fiona Godlee

Before man intervened in nature, species were formed and became extinct at about the same rate. But rates of extinction are now thought to be as much as a million times faster. With the destruction of the tropical rain forests one fifth of all plant species may be lost within the next 50 years. Among these may be thousands of species of medicinal plants.¹

The loss of the chemical information contained within these plants has been likened to the loss of the great libraries at Alexandria. According to Michael Flint, author of an Overseas Development Agency

report on biodiversity, costs will result from untreated disease and the need to synthesise more expensive alternatives.²

Only last year scientists at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (London), working on the Australian bean tree, *Castanospermum australe*, isolated a poly-hydroxyalkaloid compound that has an inhibitory effect on HIV. Since then another chemical, deoxy-nojirimycin (from the black mulberry, *Morus nigra*) has been found to inactivate the virus and is now undergoing clinical trials.

Drug companies are waking up to the potential of the rain forests and wetlands. A small red flower from the forests of Madagascar has proved a financial winner for Eli Lilly. The Madagascar periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*) is the basis for the vinca alkaloids, which include the cytotoxic drug vincristine—in 1985 they had a market value of \$100m. The periwinkle is now farmed in fields. After 20 years when, despite a total drug budget of \$2bn, investment in plant research in America dwindled to nothing, pharmaceutical companies are now racing into the fray. Over 100 companies in America and 223 worldwide are investigating plants for their pharmacological potential.

Chemicals in plants

Modern analytical techniques have shown enormous variety and complexity in plant chemicals. In 1985, 2618 new structures were isolated, says Dr Linda Fellows, Kew's senior plant biochemist. "Everywhere we have looked we have found something new."

Finding active chemicals in plants is not simply a matter of chance. The important thing, says Linda Fellows, is to look at the whole plant, and to test it against as wide a range of biological screens as possible. The National Cancer Institute in America spent 30 years and millions of dollars testing 35 000 plant

Kew's seed bank holds 1% of the world's flowering plants, including 3000 endangered species