

Chapter 6

DISPERSAL OF FAMILY MEMBERS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE LIFE OF THE AGED

Introduction

A family of orientation usually goes through a phase of expansion up to a point and then follows the phase of dispersal of the siblings and their children to different directions. Thus a joint family/household transforms into a number of nuclear or sub-nuclear families/households. The family of procreation also goes through the same process. The family of orientation of the informants were usually bigger since they had too many siblings; their family of procreation is smaller with number of children restricted to one or two. The members of the urban middleclass families are more likely to disperse as they are equipped to tap the career opportunities in the other metropolitan cities within the country as well as in global cities. The process has been intense in the generation of the children of the informants. The “rationalisation” of family size, careerism and other forms of rationalisation are leading to dispersal of members of the younger generation. The dispersal of the women members could be marriage related besides being career-induced. The dispersal of family members, which has emerged as a strong social phenomenon in the new global world order, leaves the aged lonely. The problem compounds when one of the spouses dies. The elderly make social and mental adjustments in learning to live in the absence of their dispersed lone child or two children by strengthening the conjugal relationship and by rediscovering the values of extended kin, friends, and neighbours; they try to remain active and meaningful in order to combat the vacuum left behind by their children. The children are rational in responding to the demands of modern professions yet extend their care and support for their aged parent/ parents. When the family support system breaks down and loneliness becomes unbearable and unmanageable, especially when health of

the lone elderly deteriorates, she/he exercises the option of moving to old-age homes.

Thus, in the middleclass urban families while dispersal of the family members is quite common, its impact on the aged, ailing members could be deep and multifaceted. It is important to capture the micro changes that are impacting upon the family relations and are silently bringing about some fundamental changes. This chapter deals with the phenomenon of dispersal of the members of the younger generation in the middleclass families in Salt Lake, Kolkata, and in old-age homes, which have already been downsized (being limited to one or two child families) and its impact on the life of the aged who stay back and on family relations. The chapter explores the life of the middleclass aged people and their relationship with their dispersed children in terms of exchange of care.

SALT LAKE

Of the 54 families covered in the survey 34 (63 per cent) had instances of dispersal, while in the remaining 20 there was no case of dispersal (Table 6.1). The reasons for dispersal are primarily three; (1) career induced dispersal (12 cases), (2) marriage related dispersal (18 cases) and (3) both factors combined (4 cases). In the first category mostly sons are involved but in the latter two categories mostly daughters are involved. In terms of destination the cases of dispersal can be placed under three categories: (1) within the city; mostly the daughters move out after marriage, or sons move out because of space problem or tension in the family, (2) into other cities of India; the primarily the sons and in a few cases the daughters move out after finding job or because of marriage, and (3) to countries outside India, mostly the sons (daughters as well) move to USA in connection with career.

Table 6.1: Dispersal of family members (Salt Lake)

1. No dispersal –	20
2. Career related dispersal –	12
3. Marriage related dispersal –	18
4. Both career and marriage -	04
Total	54

Out of 32 case studies done on the elderly in Salt Lake we found dispersal of younger members (sons and daughters) in 21 cases (65.6 per cent). Six of the 21 respondents, who had their children dispersed, are women.

The nature of dispersal

The nature of dispersal of the family members can be understood in terms of how many children of an aged couple have dispersed or how far the children have dispersed. Out of 21 families, with instances of dispersal, 11 had only one child, nine other families had two children out of which in four cases both the children have dispersed; in the remaining five cases one child is staying with the parents while the other has dispersed. In the remaining family there are three children all of whom have dispersed.

Considering the places of dispersal I have found that in 10 out of 21 families the grown-up children live separately from their parents within Kolkata, and in 6 other cases the children live away from their parents in another city. In 4 cases the children live abroad. Only one family has three children, all dispersed; one lives in Allahabad while the other two live in USA. What is striking is that in a few cases the sons live in Kolkata in separate household arrangements although they had the choice of living with their aged parents. Most of the dispersed children, who live in the city, are girls who live in the family of their husbands. The sons living in separate houses despite being in the same city constitute a special case which requires an explanation. They generally think that living in a separate household gives them greater freedom; they can live the way they want without spoiling the solidity of relation with their parents. The separate household setup is particularly preferred by the younger couples because they want greater free space in life. This is one form of rationalism that impacts upon the living arrangements and family relations.

The causes of dispersal

The members of the younger generation move out of their parental families for various reasons.

Table 6.2: Reasons for dispersal

1. Marriage of the daughter –	13
2. Job-related dispersal -	10
3. Space crunch in the house -	01
4. Preference for separate living	02
Total	26*

*The number is more than 21 because in a few families two or more children have dispersed.

First, the grown up daughters disperse primarily because of marriage. In 13 out of 26 cases dispersal has happened because of marriage of daughters. Second is the job-related dispersal. In 10 cases the grown up sons have moved to places where they work. Third, is insufficient space at certain point of family-expansion; in one case the married son had to move out of the parental house because of inadequate space. When the boys grow up and marry and their children also grow up the parental houses cannot always accommodate the new members and the latter move out to set up a neo-local household. Shah (1998a) has termed this process “developmental cycle”. Fourth reason is search for freedom in life; two out of 26 cases the sons have set up new houses so that they as well as their parents can live in freedom, without interference. The aged middleclass parents often are not economically dependent on their sons/daughters and they can afford to live in a separate arrangement while granting freedom to their married sons, who also are economically self-reliant, to live a life of their choice in their own nuclear or sub-nuclear families. The grown-up children with independent “selves” and “agencies” normally do not like a situation when they have to answer to their parents for the decisions they take and the activities that they do in their everyday life.

Relations between parents and children after dispersal

Continued relationship and interdependence, material and otherwise, between the parents and the children is one important area that needs to be addressed when we deal with the phenomenon of dispersal. Most of my respondents had been in good jobs or business; they have savings and pension which give them

much needed economic security in their old age. But dependence on children is not always economic; the aged parents look for support, care and love from their near ones. The aged parents want to be amidst their sons, daughters and grandchildren and this longing for the near ones could be in line with universal human nature. The physical presence of the family members, children in particular, becomes a practical necessity when the parents suffer from serious ailments and are in need of care and support for a long period.

One can understand the nature of relation between the aged parents and the dispersed children by examining (a) whether the children extend support (material or otherwise) to their parents on regular basis and particularly in times of crisis, (b) whether the dispersed children call their parents and are in regular touch, (c) whether the children visit their parents frequently, (d) whether the children show concern about the health of their parents, (e) whether the children have time and patience to listen to the problem of their aged parents or those relating to the family, (f) whether the children take initiative in resolving the family-related problems, (g) whether the children celebrate the festivals and family occasions together with their parents, (h) whether the children bring gifts for their parents, and so on.

Only three of the 21 respondents have said that their children send them money although they do not need it. The children insist on extending financial support out of “moral obligation” and for self satisfaction. Twenty of the respondents have said that they get care and “emotional support” from their children although the latter live in a separate/ distant place. The children call their parents frequently and the respondents share and discuss their family problems with their children. The children share their own views and take steps in resolving the family problems. Seventeen out of 21 respondents have said that they get care and support from their children especially at times of crisis. The children living away call the parents; express their concern and offer counsel and even rush back when the situation demands. Fifteen of the respondents have said that their children visit their parents when the latter fall ill, take them to the doctor and take all necessary care. The children cannot stay with their parents for long as

they cannot manage the necessary leave from their employers. When they cut their stay short and go back before the ailing parents are fully cured they make some kind of care-arrangement hiring the services of professional service givers (*aiya* or trained nurse). All of them enquire about their health and enquire if they are taking medicine regularly and taking proper diet.

Twenty out of 21 respondents have said that their children are in regular touch using modern gadgets of communication. In some cases the children call them on a regular basis while in some other cases telephonic conversation is frequent but does not follow a fixed routine; the otherwise busy children call their parents whenever they find time. One respondent's children, who stay abroad, not only call him every day but also persuade him to sit for a video chat almost every night.

Nine of the respondents informed that their children come and visit them frequently. There are a number of factors which can influence the frequency of visits of the children to their parents. First is distance; in case the children stay close to their parental house in the same city they can visit often. Second is the nature of profession the children are engaged into. Generally the sons are more occupied with their profession while many of the daughters are housewives. The latter can manage time to visit their parents often compared to the sons. Let me refer to the case of Mr. N.R. Sen, whose two married daughters, both live with their respective families in Kolkata and both are housewife, often visit their aging parents and take all possible care. Eighteen of the respondents have said that their children rush to them in times of crisis. Some of the children who live in far off cities might take time but manage leave to see their parents. The children who live nearby come immediately when their parents fall sick and take them to the doctor and also take good care of their health. One of the respondents, Mrs. R. Dasgupta, lives close to her daughter's house. She had high blood sugar and has to take insulin every day. One day her blood sugar shot up and she fainted. Being informed the daughter and son-in-law came immediately and did everything; from taking her to the hospital to monitoring her health conditions and the whole process of her medication.

Those who live in a distant city also make sincere efforts to be by the side of their parents at times of crisis. There was one respondent whose only daughter is a freelance painter who lives in Noida, close to Delhi, with her husband. When she came to know that her mother (the respondent's wife) has been diagnosed having cancer she not only came home but also took all the responsibility to take her to the best of the hospitals, stood by her mother for a month and took all possible care. Another elderly woman, Mrs. L. Sengupta, lives with her husband in their house at Salt Lake. Their only daughter lives in Bombay with her family. Last year, Mrs. Sengupta met with a serious accident; being informed her daughter came home the very next day. Reaching Kolkata she took control of everything. It is because of her daughter that Mrs. Sengupta didn't have to face any difficulty. However, there is one case which tells a different story. Mr. Dutta lives with his wife in Salt Lake but their only son lives in another part of the city in his nuclear household. There were instances when Mr. Dutta fell ill and informed his son about it but the latter did not come to visit him on the pretext of being busy with his profession.

Twenty of the respondents have said that they discuss serious and important family-matters with their children over phone and seek the latter's counsel. The grown up children also take interest in family matters and take active interest in resolving the problems. Even the children who live in a distant place rush to their parents when situation demands. For example, when Mrs. K. Moitra's husband fell seriously ill and was hospitalized for days her son, who lives in Australia with his wife, rushed back home to see off the crisis. Mr. S. Dasgupta, another example, has a son and a daughter. After marriage his daughter lives with her own family and his son lives in the same city but in a separate house. When Mrs. Dasgupta passed away recently her son and daughter took good care of their father, who was in a state of shock. For the first month of the crisis Mr. Dasgupta's son used to come and stay with his father for three days every week and for the rest of the days he was taken by her daughter to her place. His son used to go to the market to bring home the everyday grocery and vegetables. His daughter used to call him often to enquire about his health. Since both of Mr.

Dasgupta's children are employed this arrangement could not be maintained for long. So they decided to hire a caregiver who does cooking and takes care of him. Now the caregiver stays in Mr. Dasgupta's house all day long. His daughter, who stays nearby, visits him every alternate day. Mr. Dasgupta also spends the weekends with his daughter and her family. His son enquires about his health on a regular basis over phone and visits his father frequently. Mr. Dasgupta's children together took care to keep their father mentally fit and stable. It was on Mr. Dasgupta's daughter's initiative that on every Wednesday some of their relatives and friends used to come to Mr. Dasgupta's place to give her company and sing Rabindra Sangeet which was also Mrs. Dasgupta's favourite music. It was because of his children that Mr. Dasgupta could cope up with the situation, he could accept the fact that he would have to live the rest of his life without his wife. Now he misses his wife very much but both his daughter and son love and care for him so much that he has started loving his life again.

Eighteen of the respondents have said that their children take initiative in resolving the family problems. The children who stay abroad also play an important part in resolving the problems that face their aged parents. The remaining three respondents have, however, said that their children do not take interest in family-related problems because (a) as they stay away it is not always possible for them to come and address the problems, (b) sometimes the children remain so busy and stressed handling their profession and their own family that the parents do not want to burden them with their problems, and (c) in some extreme cases the children remain unconcerned even after knowing that their parents are facing problems. Sometimes, all of these factors or at least a couple of them work together. Here is an illustration. Mr. N.C. Gupta has two sons, both of whom live in the US with their own nuclear families. Mr. Gupta had been living with his wife in Salt Lake. In 2004 his wife died leaving him alone. Since his sons and daughters-in-law live in the US, Mr. Gupta prefers not to disturb them talking about the problems of his everyday life. His sons and daughters-in-law, however, care for him; they visit him once a year and wanted to take him along with them to the US. But Mr. Gupta is reluctant to leave the house, his society and culture.

His sons have hired a caregiver who now stays in the house of Mr. Gupta all day long, cooking food, doing household chores besides taking care of him.

Thirteen of my respondents have said that they celebrate festivals and family occasions together with their children. In religious festivals or family occasions the children visit their parents and celebrate the occasions together. Even those children who live in other cities of India visit their parents on vacations and occasions. For example, Mrs. M Dey's middle elder daughter who stays in Allahabad comes along with her husband and son during the winter vacation to celebrate Christmas and the New Year with her parents. However, eight remaining respondents have said that their children do not come on religious or social occasions on regular basis because of their professional and familial preoccupations.

While going through the case studies I came across two cases of contrasting nature. One respondent's (Mr. Dutta's) only son lives, with his wife and son, in the same city (Kolkata) in a separate house does not support his father financially, emotionally or in terms of physical care. The father also has least expectation from his son. On the other hand, Mr. S. Dasgupta, whose son and daughter who live in separate households in the city with their respective families, care so much for their father.

Nature of the visits home by the dispersed members

The children stay away from their parents because of professional compulsions but they do not stop coming home to be with their parents. When they stay away they make good use of the modern communication gadgets; the parents as well as the children keep in regular contact through phone, internet, Skype and so on. As the aged, particularly those who are above 71, suffer from various ageing related problems (like osteoporosis, joint pain, heart-related ailments) cannot visit their children, the latter visit their parents frequently or periodically. The frequency of home visits varies from person to person and from situation to situation.

Nine of my respondents have said that they are visited by their children frequently. There can be various reasons for such frequent visits. Often a strong bond keeps the parents as well as the children concerned for each other. There are cases where the respondent's only child stays away for reasons of job, marriage or study. In such cases, being the only child the dispersed member uses modern gadgets to be in regular touch with his/her parents and the aged parents too make occasional visits to the place where the former works. The child visits home often and in case of emergency. Distance is another important factor in this respect. The children of the respondents who live nearby in the city can visit their parents whenever they want. The children who stay in a different city or outside the country do not enjoy this kind of advantage. Mr. S. Das's lone daughter got married and stays with her family in a nearby flat. She comes and visits her parents almost every day. She spends the Sundays in her parental house, cooks food for them. When the respondent or his wife falls sick she takes the responsibility of taking her/him to the doctor. Only two among the respondents have said that their children visit them only once a year as they stay abroad. The children who stay abroad and can't visit their parents often take the kind of care that is possible from there. They enquire about the health of their parents on a regular basis over phone or internet. When any crisis occurs such as accident or health problems the children call their relatives and close friends to look after their parents until they come and take charge of the crisis. Sometimes they visit their parents and hire the services of the professional caregivers before leaving for the place of their work. I have already mentioned about Mr. N.C. Gupta's family which falls in this category. Among the 21 respondents I found one exception where the respondent and his only son live in the same city but in different houses. I have already cited the case of Mr. Dutta's family in this context, where the parents and their lone child are like strangers to each other.

Relation of the aged with the neighbours and friends

At a time when dispersal of children becomes unavoidable the urban neighbourhood gains importance in filling-in the void, particularly for the

middleclass aged. It is important to know how the aged maintain relation with their neighbours and friends when their children live away.

Thirteen of my respondents have said that they have a very cordial and family-like relation with their neighbours and friends. They visit each other frequently, enquire about each other's health and celebrate the social and religious occasions in a spirit of togetherness. When somebody is in crisis the neighbours come forward to his/her help with great deal of empathy and spontaneity. The remaining eight informants have said that they maintain a very formal kind of relation with their friends and neighbours. They usually do not visit their neighbours' place, maintain a bit of distance and cordiality at the same time. They wish each other well when they meet in the neighbourhood, bank or market and work together on various neighbourhood committees for organising programmes. All the respondents have said that they value their relation with their friends or neighbours.

The elderly members maintain some kind of relation (strong or formal) with their neighbours out of necessity as well as empathy and care. They do it (a) because they love gossiping and spending time together in the community hall; it's a part of *adda*-culture for which Bengalis are famous; (b) they also do it as a rational strategy because they know it well that their friends in the neighbourhood would come to their rescue at times of crisis with their counsel, company and service. When someone in the neighbourhood falls sick the others come forward to take him to the hospital, and inform his children and close relatives and take all possible care before the close ones come and take charge of the situation. The aged members in Salt Lake have learnt to celebrate life together. The neighbourhood communities organise annual picnic, annual cultural programmes, celebrate Saraswatipuja, Durgapuja, Diwali, Holi and many other occasions with great enthusiasm and thus cementing their neighbourhood bond. They share the responsibility of organising such community programmes. One can thus see a new urban culture emerging as a necessity when the members of the family disperse to different places.

Relations of the aged with their extended kin

The question that bears relevance here is whether the kinship relationships are losing their relevance in an urban setting, particularly at a time when the middleclass appears more self-reliant and there is a growing scope for care system to be delegated to the professional agencies. When the children are away it appears logical that the aged parents will fall back upon their kin beyond those in their household for support in times of crisis.

Twelve of my respondents have said that they maintain a very strong relation with the extended kin of both husband's and wife's sides. They not only enquire about each other's health on a regular basis over phone but also visit each other frequently. They celebrate every occasion together, be it small *pujas* like Narayanpuja, birthday, marriage anniversary or big festivals like Durgapuja and Diwali. Seven other respondents have said that they maintain a healthy, but not very close, relation with their extended kin. They call their kin occasionally and also enquire about them. They do not visit each other frequently; they, however, go out for shopping or attend any cultural programme together and visit each other during family occasions and crises. The remaining two respondents have said that they maintain a very formal kind of relation with their kin – a kind of relation that has lost all warmth and substance. They do not visit each other's place. Even in times of crises they do not show much spontaneity in standing by each other. Here are some illustrations of how kinship relations work.

We have already illustrated how Mr. S. Dasgupta's family members came forward and extended support to see him emerge out of crisis when he lost his wife. Besides his daughter and son-in-law his sister, nephews and nieces stood by him to extend all kinds of support. Mr. Dasgupta strongly feels that it is because of them that he could come out of the trauma of losing his life partner.

Another respondent, Mr. N.C. Gupta, maintains cordial but not very close relation with his relatives. Mr. Gupta's sons stay abroad and his wife died a few years back. He lives in his own house all alone with a lady care giver. However his brothers and sisters maintain a strong relation with them. As all of them have grown old it is not always possible for them to come and visit Mr. Gupta but they

call him and enquire about his health frequently. If he has any work at Dumdum he makes it a point to visit his younger brother. During *puja* they all have lunch and dinner together at least once on any of the *puja* days. Few months back he had one of his legs hurt in a small accident on his way to the local market. He, with the help of some of his neighbours, had the necessary treatment and got cured. When he told his brother and sister about this they got annoyed for not being informed. Soon after this, Mr. Gupta's nephews and nieces visited him.

Mr. J. Dutta represents the third category where his relation with his close kin is very formal in kind. They hardly visit each other. They don't even enquire about each other's health over phone. Only on family occasions they meet each other. In Mr. Dutta's perception, if this kind of indifference and cold behaviour continues the society would surely be heading towards a crisis.

How do the aged look at the phenomenon of dispersal of their children?

Eighteen of the respondents seem to have taken the dispersal of their children in a positive light. The respondents, whose daughters have been married out and now stay in their in-law's place, are happy about the fact that they are successfully playing their roles as daughters, daughters-in-law, mother and sister-in-law. One of my respondents, Mrs. R. Dasgupta, who has a daughter, has said that she was prepared for the fact that her daughter would leave her one day. But she is very happy that even after marriage her daughter continues to fulfil all the responsibilities towards her parents. Mrs. Dasgupta has high blood sugar and is on insulin. Few days back when she fell ill her daughter took her to the doctor and came to stay with her until she had overcome the crisis. Another respondent Mr. S.N. Das's daughter lives with her husband, son and mother-in-law in a nearby flat. As she stays close by she comes and visits Mr. Das and his wife almost every day. She sometimes cooks for them. On every weekend she, along with her husband and son, comes for lunch at her parents' place. She performs all the responsibilities as a daughter-in-law as well as daughter. Yet another respondent Mr. A. Saha Roy's son used to stay with them. But a few months back his son shifted to Delhi after getting a better job than the one he

was doing in Kolkata. Now his son is away from them but he takes all possible care for his parents. A month after their son had shifted to Delhi Mrs. Saha Roy got seriously ill and was admitted to a hospital. Her son immediately came to Kolkata and rushed to the hospital. He stayed back for a week and left for Delhi once Mrs. Roy's health got stable. Another informant Mrs. M. Dey and her husband are proud of their three daughters' achievements. They look at the dispersal of their daughters in a positive light. Their daughters have received higher education and are now well established in life; one is a professor in a research institute in Allahabad and other two are engineers, working for the multinational companies in the US.

However, not all aged parents look at dispersal positively. For a section of parents dispersal of grown up children leaves a destabilising impact on the life and mind of the aged parents, some of whom face difficulties in their everyday life. Mr. S. Dasgupta, for example, has a son and a daughter; his daughter is married and lives with her husband and son. Some years back Mr. Dasgupta's son has set up a separate household with his wife and daughter. For Mr. Dasgupta, life was going fine but after his wife's death, the management of everyday life has become so difficult; he has to do many things which his wife used to do. He has hired a domestic help who takes care of the domestic chores partly. But he misses his wife and children badly. He wants his daughter to come and stay with him which is not possible for his daughter as she has a son and a pet and she has to manage her household alone since her husband works in Darjeeling. Mr. J. Dutta and his wife also miss their only son, who lives in another part of the city with his family. They wanted their son, daughter-in-law and grandson to live with them but the latter chose a separate living arrangement. Mr. Dutta is economically independent and physically fit so he doesn't depend much on his son. What he needs is emotional support and the warmth of the closest ones, which he misses badly and with a sense of regret.

Dispersal and its impact on the relation between the parents and children

The question to probe is whether the dispersed children maintain a strong bond with their aged parents or they remain busy with their own professional life so much so that they forget that they have parents back home who live their life amidst tensions and anxiety for their children. Conceptually, one can pre-empt three kinds of relations. First, “very strong”, where the children enquire about their parents on a regular basis, listen to their problems, suggest solutions to their problems, and stand by them in times of crisis (like major operations or accidents). Second, “formal relation”, which is marked by a kind of emotional distance where the children call their parents occasionally but remain so busy with their career and life that they hardly get time to enquire about their parent’s health on a regular basis and cannot visit their aged parents even in times of crisis. This kind of prolonged ignorance and negligence gives rise to a kind of indifference in the relationship where the aged parents stop informing their children about their ill health or family problems because they know it well that their children will not respond. Finally, a “relation of complete negligence” where the children after dispersal from home, completely forget about their parents; neither do they visit them nor call them and maintain a conscious distance from their parents.

Eighteen of my respondents have said that even after dispersal their children maintain a strong relationship. Not only do their children call them regularly they also come and visit them whenever they get time. In spite of being busy with their job and family they find time for their parents. They listen to the problems of their parents and in the time of crisis they immediately come and stand beside them. We have already referred to the case of Mrs. L. Sengupta illustrating how her daughter, who lives in Bombay with her family, stood by her side when she met with an accident. Another case is that of Mr. A. K. Biswas, whose lone daughter, a painter, lives in Delhi with her husband. In 2010 Mrs. Biswas was diagnosed having cancer. Being informed about her mother’s illness she, along with her husband, came to Kolkata and saw through the crisis. On the other hand, three of the respondents have said that their relation with the dispersed children has

become very formal and a kind of emotional break separates them. In one case (Mr. Dutta) the son is careerist and indifferent towards his parents, in another case (that of Mr. N.C. Gupta) the sons live in the US and they do not have any plan to come back; they are in touch with their father but cannot visit him on a regular basis. In another case the son, after marriage, felt that his parents were interfering into his privacy and therefore shifted to another house in the city against the will of his parents.

Interestingly, none of the respondents has complained of ill-treatment at the hands of their dispersed children. There is no denying that they are upset about their “busy” children’s indifference towards them and it is also true that they still long for their children but none complained of experiencing any ill-treatment. They, instead, try to justify the apparent “indifference” of their children on the ground that they have been into the kind of professions which are very demanding and do not grant enough scope to be able to come home and spend time with them. In the words of one of the parents, ‘it is because of physical distance and also job pressure that the children cannot visit us, but that does not mean they don’t feel for us’. They further justify the acts of their children saying ‘we cannot blame our children; we have sent them to good schools and colleges and when they get good job opportunities we cannot stop them from grabbing them’. Moreover the aged parents also believe that they have to accept the phenomenon of dispersal positively and keep low expectation from the dispersed children.

Dispersal of children and its impact on the conjugal life of the aged

One interesting question that results from the dispersal of the children is whether the conjugal relation between aged parents gets strengthened. Since the aged parents’ life rotates around their children their anxieties and expectations are common. The parents share common dreams and responsibilities as they have brought up their children the way they collectively wanted and draw immense satisfaction when they do well in life. But when the children grow up and disperse the aging parents get enough space and time to rediscover themselves and

redefine the conjugal relation. I have observed that in the absence of their children the interdependence among the husband and wife grows and they rediscover the value of each other in their life; the emotional interdependence helps the aged couple understand each other better and act in each other's support.

I asked my respondents about the changes they have experienced in their relationship after their children have dispersed. Sixteen of the respondents have said that their conjugal relation has assumed a new meaning as their interdependence has grown. Now that they are retired from job or business they spend most of the time together, their mutual dependence has grown while facing different forms of crises that come with aging, and their emotional bond is stronger than ever before. In a way they have rediscovered the value of conjugal relation in this late age. Most of the male respondents have said that they help their spouses in the household works, even in kitchen. Mr. A. K. Biswas, for example, has said that he spends a lot of time in the kitchen; although they have a cook he helps his wife in cutting the vegetables and washing them. His wife was diagnosed having cancer and had to go through a long course of chemotherapy. That is why Mr. Biswas does not want his wife to take too much load. He helps her in all household works. Mr. D. Chowdhury, another respondent, earlier used to go to market everyday but after he was diagnosed having cardiac problem his wife asked him not to go to the market; she now brings vegetables from the market or tells their maid to bring the things of daily use. Another respondent, Mrs. R. Sengupta is a housewife; her lone daughter, after marriage, lives with her husband and son. When she was diagnosed having high blood sugar and was asked to take insulin her husband made it a point that Mrs. Sengupta does go out for a walk at least for half an hour every evening. Her husband also accompanies her in evening walk. Five of the respondents, who have their children dispersed, have lost their spouses.

For understanding how the relationship between the aged spouses grows stronger one has to study their everyday life and see the display of the warmth of their love and care in exchange of small gifts, in the way they chat with humour

over cups of tea in the morning and evening, the way they enjoy watching television programmes together; the way they enjoy their occasional outings, participate in the religious and social festivals and programmes and exchange moral support in times of crisis. In their everyday relation they pull each other's legs, often participate in fake quarrels and exchange humours. They share the moments of joy and despair; participate in gardening, in re-designing the interior and so on. Dispersal of younger members gives them enough space to rediscover their love which perhaps was hidden in the stress of shouldering everyday life responsibilities. The rediscovered or redefined love that cements the conjugal relation in this late age is no longer based on Freudian libido but more on 'pity' or compassion (as explained by Rousseau 2008).

OLD-AGE HOMES

Out of 56 families in two old-age homes 23 (41 per cent) had their children dispersed. Among other respondents 21 were unmarried, 9 were childless and only three families had no incidence of dispersal (see Table 6.3). In old-age homes a large number of informants were unmarried and childless and that explains why lesser number of families experienced dispersal.

Table 6.3: Dispersal of family members (old-age homes)

1. Unmarried -	21
2. Childless -	09
3. No dispersal –	03
4. Career related dispersal –	02
5. Marriage related dispersal –	13
6. Both career and marriage -	08
Total	56

Dispersal of family members: the process and consequence for the elderly

The dispersal of children impacts directly on the family care system and with the death of a spouse the living member becomes the lone member of the family. Living amidst loneliness and insecurity of various kinds he/she becomes the most likely candidate to shift to old-age homes. A close look at some case studies would give a clearer picture about the process and impact of dispersal.

Mr. M. Kar Majumder (75), a boarder of Mukto Bihanga, lives on pension. Before coming to this Home he was living in his own house at Hooghly. He came here because he didn't want to depend on anyone and after his wife's death there was no one to take care of him. He distributed the money he got out of selling his flat among his two married daughters.

Mr. Kar Majumder used to work in Indian Railways. His spouse was a school teacher. His elder daughter works in a private office and his younger daughter has her own business. His daughters keep in touch with him over telephone. Whenever they get time they come to visit him. Both of them wanted him to stay with them but he didn't want to be a burden on them. According to him, both his daughters are caring and supportive.

The elder daughter did graduation from Presidency College and the younger one did her graduation from City College of Commerce. His elder daughter got married in 1996 and the younger one in 1999. The elder daughter now stays in Salt Lake and the younger daughter in Jadavpur with their respective families. His wife retired in 2001. The elderly couple continued living in their house at Dakshineswar. In 2005 his wife passed away. With his daughters married out and wife no more he lived alone for some years. He however was missing his daughters and wife badly. In 2011 he sold out his flat of Dakkhineswar and shifted to Guptipara in Hooghly to live in his ancestral house.

From Hooghly he had to travel a long distance to visit his daughters, who lived in Kolkata. He thought, by living in Kolkata he would be able to see his daughters often. One day he went to his elder daughter's place and broke his left leg. That time his elder daughter asked him to stay with them and Mr. Kar Majumder agreed. As he recovered he felt bad that he was living idle. He started considering himself a burden on his daughter, although neither his daughter nor her husband was thinking that way. Because of their insistence he stayed with them for nearly one year. However, Mr. Kar Majumder decided to move to this home in search of life of dignity.

Mr. Kar Majumder is very happy with the way his daughters show their concern and take care of him. They call him almost everyday and enquire about

his health and everyday activities. His elder daughter comes to visit him frequently as she stays nearby in Jadavpur. He also visits her frequently. His younger daughter stays in Salt Lake which is far from this home and as she remains busy with her business she visits Mr. Kar Majumder occasionally but keeps in regular touch over telephone. Whenever his daughters come to visit him they bring fruits, sweets and dry food for him as he refuses to take money from them. When he visits his elder daughter's place she cooks for him his favourite food. He visits her place at least once every month. Both his sons-in-law are nice and humble persons and they hold great amount of love and respect for him.

Mrs. D. Mitra (72) has been staying in Mukto Bihanga since 2013. She has high blood sugar and she also has problems with her eyes. She gets her husband's pension and financial support from her son-in-law. She has her own house in Harinabhi, which is lying empty. She came to this Home after the death of her husband since there was no one to look after her. Her health condition was not well so she felt scared to live alone in their house. After the death of her husband in 2012 she stayed with her daughter for about a year but she never wanted to be a burden on her daughter and son-in-law. After convincing her daughter and son-in-law she moved to this Home. Her son-in-law helped her find this Home.

Mrs. Mitra's family of orientation was a joint family and all her uncles, aunts, cousins used to stay together with them. Her in-laws' family was also a joint family. Her father-in-law, mother-in-law, brothers-in-law and their wives and sisters-in-law all used to stay in that house. Her in-laws, particularly her sisters-in-law used to make fun of her as she didn't belong to a very well off family like them. She had great difficulty in adjusting with them. Her life started getting happier when her daughter was born. Mrs. Mitra moved to their own flat with her husband and daughter. The death of Mr. Mitra had brought a major crisis in her life. Mitra found it very difficult to stay in the house alone. Her son-in-law persuaded her to move to his flat. Her son-in-law tried his best to make her feel at home. Mrs. Mitra's daughter is a housewife and suffers from depression. Mrs. Mitra felt her own daughter did not like the fact that she was living with them.

Moreover there was space problem as it was a very small two bed room flat. So Mrs. Mitra decided to come to the old age home. Now, she keeps in touch with her daughter and son-in-law.

Mrs. M. Duttagupta (78) has been living in Rabindra Niketan since 2013. She lives with a lot of health problems, particularly arthritis and severe back pain. She also has problem in her spinal cord. She is economically self-reliant as she has savings and family property which is sufficient for a decent life. Before coming to this home she used to live in her daughter's flat behind Ruby Hospital, which was lying vacant for some time. She decided to come here because she was growing old and suffering from so many health problems. Her daughter now stays in Delhi with her family and her son lives in Bombay. There was no one to look after her. There was also security problem. She came to Rabindra Niketan leaving her flat locked. Her husband died a few years ago.

Mrs. Duttagupta's son, daughter, grandson and granddaughter, who live in Kolkata, come to see her periodically. They call her on a regular basis. Her relatives and extended kin also come to visit her. She sometimes feels bad that she cannot live with her son or daughter but she did not want to be a burden on anyone. She doesn't have any grudge or ill feeling towards her children. They keep concerned about her and they do every possible thing to make her happy and comfortable in this Home.

Mrs. Duttagupta was married when she was studying in college. Since she had to shoulder family responsibilities she discontinued her studies. After marriage Mrs. Duttagupta went to her in law's place. Her husband had a transferable job but Mrs. Duttagupta had to stay in the family of her in-laws because of her responsibilities. In course of time her brothers-in-law got married and moved out of their family of orientation. After her sister-in-law's marriage, she put her house on rent, took her father in law and ten months old daughter with her, and went to live with her husband at Ranchi. That was the first time she started her own family with her husband, daughter and son.

When Mrs. Duttagupta's son got a job in Mumbai they disposed off their Dumdum house and bought a flat in Bombay. After her husband's retirement they

went to live with their son in Bombay. In 1982 their daughter was married. After marriage her daughter went to Delhi with her husband and she has been staying there since then. Her son married in 1992. Mr. and Mrs. Duttagupta continued to stay in Bombay with their son and daughter-in-law. But they wanted to come back to Kolkata. By this time her daughter and son-in-law bought a flat near Ruby hospital. Since the flat was lying vacant Mr. and Mrs. Duttagupta shifted to that flat in 1999; they lived there for fifteen years. Her daughter and son-in-law used to come to Kolkata and stay in that flat sometimes.

After the death of Mr. Duttagupta in 2009 both her son and daughter wanted to take her with them. For a few years she stayed with them in Bombay and Delhi on rotation but she wanted to grant freedom to them. Coming back to Kolkata she used to feel very lonely and insecure in the flat. She hired a maid but she was irregular. Her health also started deteriorating. She then decided to move to an old-age home. Mrs. Duttagupta's son-in-law's maternal uncle lives nearby, who keep close touch with her.

Mrs. Duttagupta's daughter maintains regular contact with her but she cannot come to see her often. Mrs. Duttagupta's son is also busy with his own work. Her granddaughter is a renowned singer and she keeps on doing various programmes in different parts of the country as well as abroad. Her son has to go with her during her shows. That is one major reason he hardly gets time to visit her in Kolkata. Whenever he comes to Kolkata he brings the things that Mrs. Duttagupta might need; he also gives some money to his mother. Her daughter-in-law is also very caring and she calls her on a regular basis and enquires about her health. When Mr. Duttagupta was sick her daughter came to Kolkata and stayed with them several months at a stretch. Her son came and took all possible care.

Mrs. I. Ghosh (75) has been living in Rabindra Niketan since 2009. She is suffering from blood pressure, blood sugar and eye-related problems. She lives on her pension. Before coming to this Home she used to live in her flat with her elder son and daughter-in-law. She was having problems adjusting with her daughter-in-law so she decided to move to this Home. Mrs. Ghosh's husband

died a few years back. Her younger son lives in Bombay with his family and the elder one, with whom she used to stay, has bought a new flat and lives there with his wife and son. When she came in Rabindra Niketan she didn't feel bad because coming to this home was her own decision and she wanted to come to a new environment to live her life on her own terms.

Mrs. Ghosh used to work in National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organization. Her husband used to work in Bharat Petroleum. She maintains cordial relation with her living siblings. They come to visit her often and call her to enquire about her health and everyday activities. Her elder son and daughter-in-law maintain working relation with her. Her younger son visits Kolkata rarely. Her elder son, who lives in Kolkata, visits her whenever he gets time. When he cannot come he calls her frequently to be in touch. She sometimes feels bad that she has been living in this home away from her own family. But for the sake of peace she had to move out of her son's family. She also feels bad about the fact that her younger son doesn't keep much contact with her.

After graduation from City College with Honours in Geography Mrs. Ghosh got job in the Geography department in Calcutta University. She married four years after getting the job. Her husband used to work in managerial post at Bharat Petroleum. After her marriage she came to Chetla to live with her in-laws. They had a joint family where her husband, mother-in-law, sister-in-law, who was unmarried at that time, and her brother-in-law used to stay together. Mrs. Ghosh continued with her job even after marriage with the support of her in-laws. Her husband had to travel a lot for his job. She however couldn't accompany him as she had her own responsibilities in her office as well as in the family.

Mrs. Ghosh's elder son was born in 1968 and the younger one in 1972. Both of her sons were raised mostly by her mother-in-law as she had to go to work. Her husband moved to the Middle East with a job, but in 1975 he came back and got a job in Bombay. Her sons were growing up and she had to take a good share of responsibilities. In mid-1980s her husband got transferred to Kolkata. They bought a flat in Patuli and in 1996 shifted there from their rented house in Chetla. Her elder son got job with Crown. He also went to Ghana and stayed

there for a few years. There he fell sick and came back to Kolkata leaving that job. Now he has joined another company and is posted in Kolkata. Her younger son works in managerial post in Shoppers Stop in Bombay.

After moving to their new flat they had their elder son married. Her younger son also got married and left for Bombay with his wife. Initially, her elder daughter-in-law was caring and good but after Mrs. Ghosh's husband's death she started misbehaving with her. She started quarrelling with Mrs. Ghosh on petty issues. She used to complain a lot about Mrs. Ghosh to her husband. Mrs. Ghosh's elder son also started questioning her. Misunderstanding between two sides widened over time. After tolerating rude behaviour for some years Mrs. Ghosh decided to move out of the house. Both her sons didn't want their mother to live in an old-age home, since they considered it to be a "stigma". But she moved out of her house in search of a life of freedom and dignity. After living in the Home for many years she does not regret her decision.

She doesn't have any grudge or ill feeling about her sons. She felt bad when her daughter-in-law used to misbehave with her and her son remained silent. But now she is happy with her life. After the move to Home her relation with her daughter-in-law has improved. On 14th January, her birthday, her daughter-in-law was the first to wish her. She visited her in the evening with a bowl of *payesh*.

Summary of the findings

The present chapter clearly brings out that alongside rationalisation of family size widespread dispersal of the younger members has been an integral part of the modern urban middleclass families. The dispersal of family members, because of marriage, expansion of family and the resulting space crisis, and job related movements, were there among the siblings in the families of orientation but these processes have become stronger in the families of procreation of the elderly. The elderly who have moved to the Homes were mostly reduced to single member households because of factors like decision to remain single, loss of spouse, and dispersal of family members. The absence of family care system because of dispersal of children and their refusal to take the responsibility of their aging and

ailing parents primarily bring the elderly to the Homes. The elderly in Salt Lake, on the other hand, continue to have some kind of family support even after dispersal of the younger members of the family.

The dispersal of the younger members has been within the city, to other cities within the country and even to global cities. This is a fact that is going to grow in magnitude in the years to come. The aged parents seem to be gearing up to make some adjustments in their effort to face the consequences, social and emotional, knowing full well that they cannot come in the way to their children's future life and career nor they can stop daughters going to their in-laws after marriage.

The findings of the study suggest that some of the popular perceptions or stereotypes like breakdown or weakening of familial, neighbourhood and kinship relations cannot be supported with facts at hand. The elderly in Salt Lake often fall back on these relations and rediscover the virtues of conjugal relation as a strategy to combat the crisis that might result from the dispersal of the younger members. The dispersal of younger members, particularly in Salt Lake, adds solidity to the already downsized urban families where emotional and supportive interdependence among the members has always been growing. The elderly who had to move to old-age homes, even in cases where they had to move because of misunderstanding with the family members or a kind of ill-treatment or neglect at their hand, maintain relations with their siblings, relatives and children. They exchange visits, use modern gadgets of communication, and support financially when the elderly are not economically self-reliant. Some have moved to old-age home defying the wish of their children since they consider it a rational choice; they want to live in freedom and leave their children to live their life the way they want. They justify their shift to Homes in the name of freedom and dignity as some of them have a bitter taste of living like a "burden" on their child. Hidden in the process, at least in some cases, is the gradual distancing of some children (sons in particular) from their aged lone parent, on selfish considerations.