

## Chapter 8

### LIFE OF THE AGED IN OLD-AGE HOMES

#### *Introduction*

In the old-age homes in Kolkata one can generally find three categories of aged: (1) the aged couples whose children live abroad or in a distant city, (2) the aged who have lost their spouses and have child or children who stay away, and (3) the unmarried women (or men) who did not have a family to support in their old age. Interestingly the aged in old-age homes in Kolkata do not attach any “stigma” to their Home-stay and consider the decision to move to old-age home as a rational solution to their problem of aging related insecurity and loneliness; a step forward in search of a better life. About the process of taking the decision of moving to old-age homes one can see two situations: (i) in one set of cases, particularly in case of women, the decision is taken by the members on whom the aged is dependent, and (ii) in another set of cases the elderly (both men and women), who are mostly economically self-reliant and enlightened exercise their “agency” and take their decision themselves and in most cases with the consent of the other members of the family.

In this chapter, I have focused on the life of the aged after they move to the old age homes. The general feeling about old age homes is that since they work on profit motive humane side of empathy for the elderly is by and large neglected. Such a view may not be true about all the Homes as one can find elements of “care” in the treatment of the elderly, ailing Home inmates. Apart from the caring arrangement in the Homes the elderly inmates find the warmth of company of the other inmates, make informal groups to combat boredom and loneliness. The care-package, even for the ailing, half-crippled aged, proves to be handy. The prime questions of sociological relevance are (1) whether the aged, living in Homes, are the victims of neglect and desertion by their children

and (2) whether wider kinship and social support get cut as the aged move into the homes.

### ***Facilities in the Homes***

The facilities, the care system and the support of the Home staff and the already existing borders can play a crucial part in helping the new entrants adjust in the new situation. To leave the homely comfort and luxury and accept the limited facilities of the Home is not an easy task. Most of the boarders come to the Home mentally prepared that they are not going to get the homely comfort, care and luxury. Some boarders come with very little expectations and they are happy with whatever services they get. On the other hand, there are people who are very demanding and are never satisfied with the Home services and keep complaining about the shortfalls. They judge the facilities in Home in the light of the standards of their family life.

Located at the southern fringe of greater Kolkata and owned by a Christian couple Mukto Bihanga, a two-storey building on a 10-*katha* plot, has 15 boarders. Construction of the first floor of the building is continuing. Each boarder pays Rs.8500 per month, which covers room rent and food and a security deposit of Rs. 50,000. Most of the rooms have two beds although there are a few single-bed rooms as well. Only one boarder stays in a single-bed room. In each room there are two beds, two tables, two chairs two racks and an attached washroom. There is a garden and a lawn in front of the main building. The whole complex is walled with a big entrance gate on the side of the high way. Many seasonal flowers, cactus and medicinal plants are grown in the garden. Just beside the garden area there is a small worship room where the idols of Jesus, Laksmi, Ganesha, Kali and Shiva are placed. Being on the outskirts of the city there is peace and calmness in the Home compound. It is away from the daily noise and traffic of the city. The closest market is in Sonarpur and the staffs of this Home bring the vegetables, fish, meat and other necessary items from that market.

The owners, Mr. Mondal and his wife, also act as the managers of the Home. The Home has six employees. Two of them serve in the kitchen, other two clean

up the home, particularly the rooms of the boarders, one comes to wash the cloth and one acts as the caretaker. The staffs fill up the water bottles, serve food in the room and wash clothes of the boarders. The boarders are served morning tea at 7 a.m. and breakfast at 9 a.m. Usually *roti*, *sabji* and fruits are served in breakfast. On Sundays *luchi* or *paratha* is served with *aloor dum* or *cholar daal*. Lunch is served at 1 p.m. For lunch the boarders get rice, *dal*, one *bhaji*, one *sabji*, either fish or egg, *chatni* and sometimes curd. On Sundays they are served chicken curry; mutton being costly is served only on special occasions. By 3 p.m. the boarders are served fruits. In winter they get orange, apple, banana, and in summer banana, mango and papaya. In the evening the boarders are served some snacks like *suji*, *chirer polao*, chowmin, *aloor chop* and *moori* with tea. Around 9:30 p.m. dinner is served. At dinner, they get *dal*, *roti*, rice, *sabji*, fish/egg and milk.

Some of the boarders take a stroll in the lawn in front in the morning and in the evening. There is a small veranda in the front where most of the boarders assemble after lunch and chat for hours. In the evening, the boarders sing *bhakti geeti* (devotional songs) or *prarthana sangeet* (prayer songs) together in the portico.

One can notice a friendly, supportive environment in Mukto Bihanga. The manager maintains an informal kind of relation with a personal touch with the boarders. He spends time with them, chatting. He also listens to their problems and grievances and tries to solve them. The manager's wife comes to the Home twice or thrice a week and spends time with the boarders. She takes lunch with them, chats with them, pulls their legs, cracks jokes, shares light and funny moments with them. On special occasions like *poila Baishakh*, or *poush sankranti* or on a boarder's birthday Mrs. Mondal prepares some food at home and shares it with the boarders. This year during Poush Sankranti she prepared three types of *pithe* for the boarders and the staffs. The manager and his wife treat the boarder like their own parents and the boarders also love them like their own children.

On Durga Puja days all the boarders are taken for *puja parikroma* (visit to the *puja pandals*) in a hired bus during the day time. They are taken to the famous *puja pandals* in different parts of the city and are taken to a restaurant for lunch. Once a year they are taken on a tour, mostly to religious places. Last year they had gone to Varanasi. The boarders were taken to the station by car and were given to travel by AC III. In Varanasi they stayed in a decent holiday home. The cook Kalyani went with the team to cook food. They all had great fun together. This year (2015) they were planning a trip to Puri (a religious place in Odisha State).

Mukto Bihanga has an informal arrangement with some hospitals about treatment of its boarders. When a boarder falls ill and needs hospitalization Mr. Mondal first speaks to the family members of the boarder, arranges ambulance and takes the patient to the hospital of his/her family member's choice. The family members of the boarder bear all the expenses of treatment. If a boarder does not have a close relative or family member living close by the Home authorities take all decisions regarding treatment and the expenses are met from the security deposit.

Rabindra Niketan, the other Home, is situated at Naktala, near Ananda Ashram in South Kolkata. Run by a trustee board the Home is a walled complex. It is a three-storey building having 50 rooms for the boarders. The total number of boarders in Rabindra Niketan is 45. Besides the main building there is a small guest house and quarters for the manager and his family. There are also separate rooms for the maids and the staffs.

In Rabindra Niketan there are three types of rooms (a) single-bed room single occupancy, (b) double-bed room single occupancy and (c) double-bed room double occupancy. For single room the charge is Rs.5,500 a month and for double room Rs.7000 per month. The boarders have to pay extra money for electricity and for the maids who serve in their room. As security deposit they have to pay Rs. 90,000 at the time of admission. The boarders need to fulfill certain criteria in order to get a room in this Home.

The managerial staffs of Rabindra Niketan do not take the responsibility of hospitalization of an ailing resident, unless in emergency. The boarder's family members and relatives/friends/guarantors step in to see through the crisis. The Home has an informal understanding with Hindustan Health Point for treatment of its boarders. In case of serious illness the Home authorities admit patient to the hospital and ask the family members to take up from there. After recovery the boarder comes back to the Home.

In 2014 Help Age India (an international NGO) signed an agreement with Rabindra Niketan to initiate some activities. Help Age India has appointed a music teacher who visits the Home every Sunday to take two hour long music class in the first floor hall. She teaches Rabindra Sangeet and Nazrulgeeti to the boarders. The boarders enjoy the classes. On other days of the week the boarders practice the songs that they learn on Sundays. They also assemble every evening in the hall and sing Bhaktigeeti and Ramnaam in chorus. Every Monday evening a lady comes from Help Age India for Yoga class. The boarders assemble in the first floor hall and do yoga like kopalbhati, anulom bilom, breathing exercise, and play some interesting group games. On Tuesdays and Thursdays the boarders attend a physiotherapy session in the morning. One Allopathic and one Homeopathic doctor come to the Home once a week for routine health checkup of the boarders.

The staffs of this Home are disciplined, efficient and dedicated. However, the maids who serve the boarders in rooms do not work for long. They are in the habit of being absent often, putting the dependent elderly in discomfort. Rabindra Niketan has six workers in the kitchen, six to look after the boarders' rooms, a few caretakers and a sweeper. The maids clean up the rooms, wash their clothes, sweep the floor, and also serve food in the rooms of the boarders. The boarders take lunch in the dining hall but prefer to take the dinner in their respective rooms since the dinner time is early.

The morning tea is served at 6 in the morning and breakfast at 8 a.m. In breakfast they get bread, butter, milk, fruits, and egg. Sometimes they are served roti, sabji, milk and fruits. Lunch is served by 12 noon. At lunch they get dal, rice,

sabji, fish and chatni. Usually they are served pona macher jhol (a traditional fish curry) or some other fish; chicken is served on Sundays. The cooks are very efficient; they prepare food with less spice and less oil keeping in mind the health and age of the boarders. At 4 p.m. tea is served in the rooms of the boarders. Around 8 p.m. the dinner is served. Dinner includes roti/rice, dal, sabji and milk. On special occasions like Saraswati puja the boarders get Mug daler Khichuri, Paneer and Kuler chatni.

The aged, who are not keeping good health and cannot manage themselves hire a maid for the whole day paying extra money. The maids/aiyas take care of the ailing boarders round the clock. They bring food from the kitchen, fill-in their water bottles, give medicines, help them in eating food, in changing dress, guide them to bath room and toilet, prepare their bed and fix the mosquito nets. There is a caretaker at the gate of the Home, who also helps the boarders by bringing necessary items for them from the nearby market.

The manager of this Home maintains a formal relation with the boarders. His approach is professional rather than personal. He listens to the problems of the boarders with care and tries to redress them. Although there are some restrictions the boarders can go out and meet their friends and relatives whenever they want. They can also go out for shopping and for other work. If they plan to spend the night outside home then they have to inform the manager beforehand.

### ***Reasons for moving to old-age Home***

Quantifying the factors that take the aged to the Homes we can see that 40 out of 56 (71 per cent) Home inmates were living alone in their own house; loneliness, insecurity, ill-health, unreliable service providers prompted their shift. Five of the respondents moved to Home leaving their sons, daughters-in-law and even grandchildren because they wanted to live a life with freedom while granting freedom to their children to live the life of their choice. It is quite possible that they had tension in the family and the elderly could not take the strain and pain of soared relation with their close ones. It is also possible that it was a mutually

agreed upon decision for the convenience of both sides. In a way they preferred separation in order to save the relation. Three others have directly blamed the sons and particularly daughter-in-law for ill-treatment or cold treatment as reasons for their move to old-age homes. Two of the respondents, both widow, said their sons work in a distant cities and they did not want to go with them. Two others have said that they have lost their spouses and their daughters are dispersed after marriage and therefore they have moved to old-age Home. Three respondents have mentioned space crunch in their house with the expansion of the family while one couple has chosen to live in the Home together. Besides, one childless couple moved to Home.

**Table 8.1: Reason for movement to old-age homes**

<i>Reason</i>	<i>No. of respondents</i>
1. Single member; loneliness and insecurity	40
2. Wanted to live an independent life	05
3. Tension in the family/ ill-treatment	03
4. Space crunch in the house	03
5. Sons dispersed; the elderly without spouse did not want to go with them	02
6. Spouse gone; did not want to depend on close kin	02
7. Childless couple moved to Home	01
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>56</b>

***How the aged felt while moving to the Homes***

The social perceptions, the pressure of tradition, the stigma attached to living in the Homes, the micro situation in the family together create individual perceptions, a world of feelings, which determine how the aged members would feel about their movement to the Homes. Being asked how they felt while leaving their own house for the Home 30 of the respondents out of 56 (53.5 per cent) unequivocally said they felt very bad and had problems in accepting Home life and the remaining 26 respondents (46.4 per cent) said they did not feel bad and they had no problem in accepting the Home life. The micro family circumstances are responsible for such contrasting responses. Those who felt bad might have had family members to leave behind and did not have a clear idea about the

ambience in Homes while most other elderly who might have been living alone for some time (since they were unmarried, widow or widower) and they wanted to escape the loneliness and insecurities of life. For the latter group moving to the Home meant an escape from loneliness and an opportunity to explore a new situation. The case studies below would illustrate the point.

**Mrs. K. Basu (68)** is staying in Rabindra Niketan with her husband for the last two years. Before moving to Rabindra Niketan she used to stay in her flat at Lake Gardens. Their son got married and after the birth of their younger grandson, they were having space crunch since the flat where they were living was too small to accommodate all of them. So she along with her husband decided to shift to this Home. She felt very bad as she had to leave her own house and most importantly her grandson who was very small at that time. Mr. Basu then just got out of sickness and he needed some rest and peace.

**Mrs. S. Ray (78)** been living in Mukto Bihanga since July 2015. Before coming here she used to stay in her flat in Salt Lake. The flat is still there; her in-laws look after that. When her husband died, it became difficult for her to live in that flat alone. Moreover she developed serious problem in her legs and could not walk without a stick. Childless Mrs. Ray had no one to look after her. When she decided to come to this Home she didn't feel bad at all since she was getting used to living alone.

**Mrs. K. Mitra (82)** came to Rabindra Niketan from her rented house in Ballygunj in 2013. After her husband's death in 2012 she was having problem in living alone in that house. She stayed in her daughter's house for some months but didn't want to be a liability on her. She wanted to live her life independently and also didn't want to interfere in her daughter's life. For her shift to old-age home came to be a happy solution.

**Mrs. M. Duttagupta (78)** moved to Rabindra Niketan early 2014. Before coming to this home she was living in her daughter's flat near Ruby hospital which was lying vacant at that time. The death of her husband in 2010 left her all alone. Her daughter lives in Delhi and her son in Mumbai with their respective families. Aging related ailments, loneliness and growing sense of insecurity had

brought her to Rabindra Niketan. Moving to this home leaving everything behind was not an easy decision, but situation was such that she was left with no other option. In the last one year she has adjusted well with the Home ambience and now feels that she has taken the right decision.

**Mr. B. K. Das** (83) came to Mukto Bihanga in 2011. Mr. Das is a pension holder and before coming to this Home he used to stay in his flat in Dhakuria. He came to this Home as he was having problem with his son and daughter-in-law. His only daughter is married out and he was living with his son and daughter-in-law after the death of his wife in 2010. He did not feel bad when he shifted to this Home because he wanted to get rid of everyday's quarrel and insult in the hands of his closest ones. Life is happier here since he can live a life of freedom and dignity.

All the Home inmates were having some form of difficulty in their house/family and they took their movement to the Homes as a solution. All agreed that they took the decision after a long introspection and discussion with close ones and as the last resort. Most of the Home-inmates have developed their friendship circles and adjusted well with the life there. Even if they have grudge over the facilities in the Home, they do not complain much since they know that they are left with no better option.

### ***The relation of the aged with their children and extended kin after their shift***

One crucial sociological question to probe is whether family and kinship support system breaks down completely as the aged move to the Homes. The information at hand suggests that the relations do continue to work even after the shift. Out of 56 respondents, 28 (i.e., 50 per cent) informed that their children and relatives come and visit them frequently (once or twice a month), 17 (30 per cent) have said that their children and relatives visit them once in every two-four months while nine (16 per cent) respondents have said that their relatives and children visit them once or twice a year; only two of the respondents have told me that they have no contact either with their children or relatives. In other words, 96 per cent of the Home boarders maintain contacts with their close kin

and family members. Thus, the shift to the Homes does not mean, in any way, the end of family and kinship care system. The children and relatives of the aged try to maintain some form of relation with them and extend some kind of support (material or in terms of care). Placing them in a scale it can be seen that in most of the cases the relation is very cordial although there are cases (very few in number) where there is no relation or a very faint relation. Although most of the respondents maintain some kind of relation with their family members and close kin the degree of emotive involvement varies from case to case depending on the micro family situations. Here are some illustrations.

**Mrs. J. Chatterjee** (69) has been staying in Mukto Bihanga since early 2013. Before coming to this Home she used to stay in her paternal house in Rajabazar. Her husband died in 2012 and after that she was living alone and was feeling lonely and insecure. She has two daughters both of whom are married; one lives in Kolkata while the other lives in Durgapur. One of her daughters supports her economically.

Mrs. Chatterjee sometimes calls her younger daughter, but her elder daughter calls her more frequently. Her elder daughter visits her often, every week, and her younger daughter comes from Durgapur whenever she finds time. She came to visit her during last Durga Puja, three months back. Durgapur is far from this place and her daughter has her family responsibilities. In spite of that she comes to visit her at least thrice a year. She calls her frequently and enquires about her health and keeps on asking whether she needs anything. Her elder daughter and son-in-law pay her bills. Although she has savings in the bank her elder daughter asked her not to spend that money. She takes care of every little need of Mrs. Chatterjee. Mrs. Chatterjee's younger daughter also tries her best to support her financially. Her family is not as rich as that of her elder daughter. In spite of that, her younger daughter pays for recharging her cell phone. Whenever she comes, she gives Mrs. Chatterjee decent amount of cash to spend for herself.

Mrs. Chatterjee however does not have much contact with her in-laws. They never came to visit her in these two years. Her sister stays in Kolkata. She has arthritis so she cannot come but she calls her frequently. Mrs. Chatterjee

maintains a very cordial relation with all her siblings. They also enquire about her health and activities over phone.

Mrs. Chatterjee maintains contacts with her childhood friends and school mates. She attends the reunion function of Bramha Girls where she meets many of her school friends. One of her friends, who lives close to their Rajabajar house, calls her frequently. She came to meet Mrs. Chatterjee several times. She also takes Mrs. Chatterjee out for lunch.

**Mrs. K. Basu** (68) moved to Rabindra Niketan with her husband in 2013 because of space problem in their Lake Gardens flat. They have left behind their son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren. Their son and daughter-in-law maintain a very strong relation with them. Her son visits them every weekend. Some months back she had to undergo an eye surgery and her son did everything, starting from taking her to the hospital to fixing appointments with the doctor. After the operation he took her in their flat where her son and daughter-in-law took good care of her. She moved to the Home to join her husband after complete recovery. Their grandchildren and daughter-in-law come to see them frequently. As they stay nearby, they can come anytime to meet Mr. and Mrs. Basu. Mr. and Mrs. Basu visit their son and daughter-in-law occasionally.

Mrs. Basu's son and daughter-in-law keep visiting them every week. Whenever her daughter-in-law prepares any special dish she does not forget to send it for Mr. and Mrs. Basu. Last year in Saraswati Puja Mrs. Basu's daughter-in-law came to visit them with her favourite dishes. This year her daughter-in-law was very sick so she couldn't prepare anything at home. But in Rabindra Niketan they had Mug daler Khichuri, Paneer, Kuler chatni which were delicious and all the boarders relished the *bhog*.

Mr. and Mrs. Basu are economically independent and they do not take any financial support from their son. Their son runs a business and their daughter-in-law looks after her two children. Besides fulfilling all the family responsibilities both their son and daughter in law try their best to do whatever they can for Mr. and Mrs. Basu. Mr. and Mrs. Basu would have been happier living with their son but under given circumstances they do not expect anything more from their son

and daughter-in-law. Mr. and Mrs. Basu understand that their son is going through a struggling phase with his business and he needs parents' support.

Mrs. Basu maintains a very close contact with all her relatives and friends. Earlier Mr. and Mrs. Basu used to visit their relative's place frequently but after Mrs. Basu's cataract operation, they have put a check on their movements. Their relatives have also grown old and many of them are sick; they interact with Mr. and Mrs. Basu over phone.

**Mr. B. K. Das** (83) came to Mukto Bihanga because he had problems with his son and daughter-in-law who used to be the other members of his household. He moved to this Home because he was feeling neglected and uncared after the death of his wife. His daughter-in-law used to use harsh words against him in the dining table in front of his son but his son never protested. Then his son also started abusing him. Unable to bear the insult he moved to the Home. Mr. Das, an engineer, used to work in C.P.W. and he now lives on pension. All his kin, excepting his son and daughter-in-law, keep contact with him. They call him frequently and enquire about his health. He feels bad about the fact that he is no more living with his son and daughter-in-law for who he has done so much. Initially he used to have ill feeling about his son because of the ill-treatment he received. But now he has forgiven them.

His daughter, who stays nearby along with her husband and children, comes to see him often. His son-in-law is very caring and supportive. His son-in-law sometimes comes with some cash for Mr. Das to buy something of his choice. If Mr. Das needs anything he calls his daughter and she immediately brings that. Sometimes she comes without informing him to give him a surprise.

**Mrs. I Ghosh** (75) came to Rabindra Niketan in 2010. 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 some problem in adjusting with her daughter-in-law and son. Her son sold out the flat leaving her to stay alone in a rented house for a few months. Mrs. Ghosh then moved to this Home. After the death of her husband in 2008 Mrs. Ghosh started feeling neglected and insulted by her son and daughter-in-law. Her younger son stays in Bombay with his

family. Her elder son, with whom she was staying, has now lives in his new flat in Kolkata with his wife and son.

Mrs. Ghosh maintains a very good and cordial relation with her siblings. They visit her quite frequently. Her elder son and daughter-in-law maintain a kind of working relation with her. Her younger son stays in Bombay and he doesn't get time to come to Kolkata. Her elder son stays in Kolkata and comes to visit her occasionally. He however calls her to keep in touch. She sometimes feels bad that she has been living in this Home away from her own family. But she didn't have a choice. She does not nurse any ill feeling about her children but she does feel bad about the fact that her younger son doesn't keep much contact with her.

Neither her sons nor her siblings wanted Mrs. Ghosh to spend her life in this old age home. But she was determined and thus she came over here in Rabindra Niketan. It has been five years that she is living here and enjoying her life over here. She can live in her own way; there is no one to interfere in her life.

Mrs. Ghosh long for his sons; when her elder son comes they share a very good time together. After she moved in here her relation with her daughter-in-law has improved. On 14<sup>th</sup> January which is her birthday her daughter-in-law was the first one to wish her. She also brought *payesh* for her on that day. She is happy with her life over here.

### ***Life of the boarders in the Homes***

Both in Mukto Bihanga and in Rabindra Niketan the boarders have to adjust their daily routine according to the time schedule of the Home. In both the Homes the breakfast lunch and dinner are served at a fixed time and the boarders have to adjust their daily routine with that time table. In Mukto Bihanga most of the boarders are very aged and ailing and are heavily dependent on the care providers; they get a lot of leisure time since they are not otherwise active. Most of them spend time chatting with each other or reading books, or listening to radio in their own rooms. Barring a very few who are physically active the boarders do not usually venture out. A few of them whose health condition is good stroll around in the garden area of the Home or the main road outside the

Home in morning and in the evening. All the aged female boarders assemble in the portico in the evening to pray and sing Bhakti Geeti and Rabindra Sangeet in chorus.

Most of the female boarders take bath after breakfast. There are a couple of boarders who get up early and take bath before breakfast. Most of the female boarders spend a lot of time praying and offering puja in front of the idol or picture of their favoured goddess. In their rooms they have small idols of Radha-Krishna, Kali, Shiva and Lakshmi and after taking bath they sit for puja for a while. The boarders who are very sick and cannot do *puja* sit or lie on their bed and do *naamgaan*. In their rooms the female boarders mostly listen to radio or read books, mostly religious books, and other times they sit in the portico of the Home and chat with the fellow boarders. After having lunch the boarders assemble in the entrance veranda and chat for hours. This is how the boarders spend their leisure time.

The male boarders usually do not join the post lunch *adda* session; they prefer to be in their rooms. In the morning they usually sit in the portico and read newspaper or listen to other boarders chatting. The male boarders, a minority, interact with them and at the same time maintain a distance. Most of the boarders thoroughly enjoy their life in this Home. The relatives visit the boarders occasionally and the boarders, though not all, visit their relatives' place and exchange gifts. On special occasions like Rabindra Jayanti, Independence Day, Poila Baishakh the boarders arrange cultural programmes. Together they sing, dance, and recite poems and enjoy delicious lunch and dinner together. Hidden in all this there is sadness, loneliness, longing for close ones, recollection of good old memories, which for a short time visitor like me were difficult to find out.

**Mr. D. P. Ghosh Dastidar** (78), a Kayastha, has been living in Mukto Bihanga for the last 18 months. Before coming here he used to live with his brother and his family in a flat near Lake Market. After his nephew's marriage a couple of years back there was space crisis in the house. He was feeling awkward to share the same house with the newly married couple. After some discussion with his brother he decided to move to this Home. Mr. Ghosh Dastidar is unmarried

and never had his own family. In Mukto Bihanga Mr. Ghosh Dastidar has made a few friends. There are care givers who wash his clothes. The kitchen staffs take good care of his food preference. There is a man who comes and cleans up his room, pours drinking water in his jug and also brings hot water for his bath. Here he can take rest whenever he wants; he chats with other boarders, reads newspaper, watches television, gets meal three times a day, doesn't have to worry about security. Besides, he maintains relations with all his relatives. Mr. Ghosh Dastidar, in the early days of his stay in Home, was very upset and he used to miss his family a lot but now he has adjusted well over here. He now wants to spend the rest of his life in this Home.

**Mrs. J. Mukherjee** (76) has been staying in Mukto Bihanga for nearly two years. Mrs. Mukherjee never had her own house as she and her husband always lived in rented house. After the death of her husband a few years back she left that house and started staying with her two married daughters by turn. She liked staying with her elder daughter the most. Couple of years back her elder daughter was diagnosed having severe neurological problem and she was no more in a position to take care of Mrs. Mukherjee, who then decided to come to this Home.

In Mukto Bihanga she initially felt bad thinking that she will have to adjust at an unknown place amidst the unknown people, away from family. But gradually she has started liking the Home and the boarders. She has made some friends with whom she chats and spends time. The staffs over here are very caring and do exactly what they are told. She fell down twice in this Home. The owners and the caretakers took all possible care of her and helped her recover fast. Here she lives in peace and feels secure and well cared. She spends a lot of time with other boarders chatting, singing and gossiping. She spends two hours reading religious books especially the Gita every day.

**Mrs. S. Ray** (78) came to Mukto Bihanga in mid 2014. Before the shift she was living alone in her flat in Salt Lake since the death of her husband about two years back. She was childless and had none to give her company. Her deteriorating health scared her and she took the decision to move to this Home.

In the Home she has made friends and loves spending time with them, chatting, sharing each other's feelings. She spends hours sitting in the veranda of the Home with her friends. She is happy with the Home ambience, the services and the cleanliness. The staffs are well behaved and caring. The meals are cooked with care keeping the health and taste of the elderly. Her husband was in the habit of having continental food cooked without much oil and spices. But Mrs. Roy did not like that kind of food; it was pathetic in taste. Although she liked authentic Bengali food she had to swallow all the tasteless food because of insistence of her husband. But here she finds the food tasty. She loves the fruits that are served with breakfast. After lunch also the boarders are served seasonal fruits.

One noteworthy observation about the inmates of Mukto Bihanga is that they have by and large withdrawn from the larger social life; they are not in creative activity, not associated with social service or in political activities. They also do not do yoga or physical exercise in self-care. Barring a few the boarders do not visit the market or relatives living in different parts of the city. They live with a sense of withdrawal and confine their movements and activities within the Home.

In Rabindra Niketan most of the boarders have come from well off families. After coming to this Home many of the boarders have bought television, water heater, electric kettle, and other electronic devices. In Rabindra Niketan there are only four male boarders and three couples and rest of the boarders are women. Women boarders mostly spend their day by cleaning up their rooms, doing puja, watching television, listening to radio and chatting with other boarders. The male boarders are less active; they usually do not interact with the other boarders. They, however, maintain good rapport with the manager Mr. Das; they spend some time chatting with him.

Apart from the activities in the Home the boarders in Rabindra Niketan visit Gariahat or New Market in small groups to buy things for their family members and relatives. The rest of the boarders spend most of their time in their rooms watching television particularly Bengali serials and reading religious books. The boarders walk in the terrace of the Home in the morning and evening. The

relatives of the boarders visit them in varying frequency and the latter also visit their relatives on occasions. There are a very few cases where neither the relatives come nor the boarders visit their relatives. In most of the cases the boarders have found friends with whom they chat and spend some quality time. Although relations among the boarders are guided by personal likings they never quarrel with each other. If someone does not like other boarder's activity he or she can directly go up to the manager and discuss the matter with him. The manager takes the necessary step for maintaining the peaceful environment of the Home.

**Mrs. K. Mitra** (82) came to Rabindra Niketan in 2012. Mrs. Mitra used to live in a rented house in Ballygunj. After her husband's death she was having problem in living alone. She stayed with her daughter for some months but was feeling uneasy living with the daughter's in-laws. In search of a free life she moved to this Home. Mrs. Mitra's daughter also supported this move.

Mrs. Mitra has made many friends here and loves their company, chatting, singing, going to the local market and even to New Market and Gariahat market. When in room she spends time watching television. She loves watching musical programmes on Tara Music and sometimes she watches the Bengali reality shows like *dadagiri* and happy parents' day. She keeps herself active in one way or the other, attending music classes, *yoga class*, *prayer class* and so on.

**Mrs. G. Sen** (79) has been living in Rabindra Niketan for the last 10 years. Before coming here she had already lost her husband. Childless Mrs. Sen was living alone in a rented house. She suffers from high blood pressure, high cholesterol and thyroid disorder. Death of her husband left her lonely and insecure. Her ailments also made her insecure. She lives on the family pension of her husband, who was a government employee.

When she decided to come to this home she felt bad because she never thought that she would have to live in old-age home. But now it has been 10 years and she has adjusted with the environment and the people of this Home. In the first year in this Home Mrs. Sen was active; every evening she used to visit Shree Guru Ashram to listen to the Naamgaan (devotional songs). She also used

to visit her brothers in Salt Lake. But after a few years she started feeling lonely and depressed; her health condition also deteriorated. She developed hearing problem. She has however made some friends who come to her room and chat with her. It is because of them that Mrs. Sen has kept alive the urge to live. With frail health she cannot go to meet her siblings and other relatives; for her life is so lonely, boring and aimless.

In her room Mrs. Sen watches television, does *puja* in the morning. Every evening some of the boarders gather in the second floor veranda to sing religious songs and *naamgaan*. Mrs. Sen joins the programme on the days she feels better. In the evening she goes to one of her friend's room who stays three rooms away and spends time with her chatting, recalling the interesting experiences of life.

All her life she has been dependent on her husband, who also was his best friend and support. After his death she felt a vacuum and had to make whole lot of adjustments to live alone. Her niece's husband who helped them find this Home stood by her during that crisis. Earlier she could go to bank to update her pass book or withdraw cash but now because of her illness her niece's husband does everything for her. He comes once a week and brings all the necessary things that she might need. Sometimes in emergency she takes the help of the caretaker, paying him for his service. Since she cannot take care of herself she has hired a maid paying Rs. 700 per month. The maid washes her cloths, cleans up her room and dishes, and brings food from the kitchen. There is also an *aiya* who stays with her at night just to give her company.

**Miss T. Bose** (69) a Kayastha, is staying in Rabindra Niketan for the last five years. Before coming to this Home, unmarried Miss Bose used to live in her paternal house at Shyambazar with her widow mother. All her siblings got married and had built their own houses. She was alone and lonely after her mother's death in 2009. So she decided to come to this Home. Once in every two months she visits her house to keep it clean.

In Rabindra Niketan she has made many friends. She likes the friendly ambience in the Home. The management is good, facilities and food are good

and the staffs are well behaved and caring. The cook prepares *kochur saag*, which she likes. Miss. Bose finds the food quite healthy. Miss. Bose said that she didn't face any ill-treatment or inconvenience in her five year stay in Rabindra Niketan. Her life here is full of fun and happiness. She has so many friends over here with whom she spends time, sing *bhaktigiti* and do *naamgaan*. On Sunday evening a young lady comes to take music class, which she attends along with other boarders. Miss. Bose has done M. Muse. and is a trained singer. She takes the lead role in organizing prayer song sessions every evening. She also participates in the yoga classes that are held on Mondays, and attends physiotherapy session every Thursday. She was very naughty in her childhood and even at this age she feels that the naughty little girl is there inside her. She plays pranks on her friends and loves to pull their legs. She is active and full of energy; she presses her friends to go out for shopping or for an evening stroll.

Miss Bose suffers from asthma for which she takes inhaler and medicine. Regular yoga sessions have proved helpful in fighting asthma; breathing has now become easy. She visits a doctor at Garia once a month. There is a man who supplies medicines to the boarders at 10 per cent discount. She also has sciatica arthritis for which she takes medicine. Doctor has advised her to bath with hot water throughout the year. She has bought an immersion heater for her use. Once her heater went out of order and she had to bath in cold water. After that she suffered from serious knee-joints pain. Coming to know about it the manager arranged to repair her heater. Until her heater was fixed the mess workers supplied her with hot water. She also takes the help of a doctor who visits the Home twice a week.

Miss Bose interacts with fellow boarders, many of whom are her good friends, as well as the mess workers and *mashis* (maids). Everyone treats her well. She sometimes goes to the manager's room and chats with him. She has good relation with the manager and his wife. She visits her siblings and spends time with them. She strongly feels, 'if you have faith in god and love the people around you can be the happiest person no matter whether you are in your own house or in old-age home'.

### *Problems the boarders encounter in the Home*

The old age homes provide a safety, security, care and a number of facilities to the elderly boarders. The aged people leave their own house/flat for the Home with the hope that they can live the last phase of their life peacefully; they also know that Home living would be difficult as they won't get the comfort of family life and recreate the relations and moments they had in family.

In Mukto Bihanga the boarders are more or less satisfied with the services; the owner-cum-managers and the care takers serve them with great care and a personal touch. The boarders are satisfied with the quality of food and health care services. Being located on the outskirts of the city Mukto Bihanga is largely free of pollution and noise of the metropolis. However it is far from market area or hospital. So if the boarders have to buy anything they have to go the nearest market (Sonarpur Bazar) by auto. Although hospitals are far from this Home the management takes full responsibility to take the sick to the hospital. Here majority of the boarders are economically dependent either on their children or close relations. The family member or the relative who supports the aged visits the Home periodically to pay the bills. There are a few who get pension go to the nearest bank or the ATM to withdraw money to pay the bills. In this Home the care takers do not help by buying things from the market. Either the boarders do shopping themselves or rely on their family members or close kin.

**Mr. M. Kar Majumder** (75) came to Mukto Bihanga from his house at Hooghly early 2014. In his assessment, the people over here are nice; both the staffs and the boarders are very humble and friendly in nature. Mr. Kar Majumder goes to bank to collect money himself to pay the Home bills and to meet his other expenses. He likes the food here which is less spicy, and less oily. He personally likes the curd with lunch and the fruits that are given after lunch. He also enjoys the snacks that are served every afternoon. The doctor who visits the Home once a week checks Mr. Kar Majumder's health and prescribes necessary medicine. Mr. Kar Majumder has not faced any serious health problem in his nine month stay in the Home.

Rabindra Niketan is much larger of the two Homes, both in terms of the number of rooms and the number of borders. The boarders are by and large satisfied with the care and services provided to them. However, some of the boarders have complaints about the quality of food and behavior of the staffs. The cool and formal approach of the manager is also not appreciated. Some feel that the boys often refuse to bring things from the market and the maids who serve in the boarders' rooms are rude. The boarders have taken up the issues with the manager but the latter has taken no initiative to resolve them. Even after repeated complaints the quality of food has not improved.

**Miss I. Majumder** (79) has been living in Rabindra Niketan for six months. In Miss. Majumder's view the manager and the other staffs are very cooperative. Her health has improved after coming here. She is having some problems with the food; sometimes it is tasteless and sometimes it too hot and spicy. There is no variation in the fish; the monotonous *pona macher jhol* almost every day. The milk is of very poor quality. She has complained to the manager about it but with no effect. Every month the maid, who comes to the room for cleaning and dusting, is changed. She has to brief the new maid how to go about her work. But she doesn't complain because the maids do a lot of work the whole day.

Some boarders have said that the manager favors some boarders over the other. Many of the boarders have grudge over this kind of discrimination.

**Mrs. S. Banerjee** (74) has been living in Rabindra Niketan for the last twelve years. She has adjusted well in Rabindra Niketan. However, she is unhappy with the way the maids behave. Their service is unsatisfactory and they have the habit of informing the manager about what the boarders talk about him. They are very rude and often answer back to the boarders when asked to do something. Some boarders keep buttering the manager for drawing some favours; they get the lunch even after the lunch hour. The food quality is very poor in this Home. The Help Age India, however, has taken some initiatives to improve the quality of food. Earlier *rajma* was served once a week, which Mrs. Banerjee liked. But on complaints of some boarders *rajma* has been withdrawn from the menu. Mrs. Banerjee considers this a discriminatory treatment.

**Mrs. I. Ghosh** (75) is in Rabindra Niketan for the last five years. In this Home she has made a number of friends with whom she chats and spends quality time. In her room she watches television for long hours and chats with her relatives over phone. Initially, she had difficulty in adjusting with the time schedule of the Home but now she is well settled. The only problem she faces is that there is none who can buy things for her from the market. She has to go to the market, which sometimes is problematic. She has many health problems; high blood pressure, high blood sugar, joint pain, arthritis and problem in walking. Doctors come to the Home twice a week but she visits a doctor outside the Home. The quality of food is not up to the mark; taste is not to her liking. Food is cooked with very little spice and oil. The staffs over here take good care of the boarders. However, she finds problems with the manager who is not sincere in improving things. She advised the manager to engage someone to do outdoor works for the borders, particularly for those who cannot walk freely but the manager did nothing. She also spoke to him about the poor quality of food but nothing has been done. Mrs. Ghosh does not like everything in the Home but she is happy that no one interferes in her life.

In Rabindra Niketan boarders usually are of high caste, middleclass, urban background and they have maintained some standard in their living. When they encounter a sudden drop in the quality of living in the Home they get annoyed. Soon they realize that the things here are not in their control and they gradually learn to adjust with life here. The differential assessment about the facilities and management reflect differential family background and expectations and differential needs of the Home inmates.

***How do the aged compare their past life with Home life?***

The aged in most cases came to the Home as a rational choice compelled by the circumstances; they, excepting a very few, were not the victims of the cruelty of their heartless child/children. They feel that the aged, after certain point in life, should come to the Home giving space to their children to live their life of their own. In the process, the aged also can live life peacefully and independently in

the Homes. Most of the aged boarders miss their life spent in their own house with their family and recollect their fond memories but they have learnt to enjoy their life at Home as well. They do a lot of group activities, which I have already mentioned, and make positive efforts to make life better. In Rabindra Niketan the group activities are more compared to Mukto Bihanga, where the boarders do not do yoga or music classes; they prefer spending their time inside their rooms or by chatting among themselves at the veranda for long hours. The care and services are much better in Mukto Bihanga than in Rabindra Niketan. In Rabindra Niketan there are a lot of complaints about food, discriminatory treatment and indifference to the problems of the boarders but in Mukto Bihanga the boarders do not have much complaint; food is good, and what they like the most is the personal care of the owners-cum-managers. The boarders in general miss the luxury, comfort and the food that they used to get in their own house but here they have got a number of friends and are involved into a number of activities to make their life meaningful. The boarders have to adhere to the rules of the Home and compromise with many things which are beyond their control but what they appreciate is that the life here is secure, full of freedom and they do not have to answer to their children or relative for their activities and do not have to think of their security or health. The boarders feel that the people outside have a negative perception about the Homes which does not match with their experience. They probably think that everything is rule bound, the manager and staffs are very strict, the boarders have to take permission to visit their relatives, the services are also of very poor quality, and so on. The boarders admit that they also had this kind of perception before coming to the Home. They were not free of the social stigma that is attached to Home living. But from their experience of living in Homes they have realized that all such perceptions stereotypical and do not hold much water. Most importantly, living here they can keep healthy relations with their kin and family members and friends who live somewhere in the city. Those who have their sons and daughters living in the city feel that separate living saves them from being seen as “burdens” and helps maintain the relations healthy. Universal access to cell phone has also helped keeping in close touch

with friends and relatives. On many occasions I have seen friends and relatives sitting in the rooms of the borders.

**Mrs. J. Chatterjee** (69) of Mukto Bihanga is of the opinion that the old age homes have come up as a welcome alternative for those aged people who stay alone in their house. She thinks that because of varying intergenerational perceptions and priorities the members of both generations are finding sharing the same house and hearth a problem. Separate living arrangement for them is a welcome solution; they can thus maintain relations without interfering into each other's life. Sometimes space problem in the house leads to movement of the aged to the Home. Mrs. Chatterjee thinks that the old parents should voluntarily come to the old-age home and should give some space and freedom to their children. Earlier old age home living used to be regarded as social stigma but now the situation has changed.

People also tend to think that the members of new generation leave their aged parents to the Home in order to be free of the "burdens" and then they forget about their parents. Mrs. Chatterjee thinks that this is a wrong perception. Because of modern day fast life the children sometimes cannot take proper care of their parents; they send the aged to the Homes thinking that here they would get proper care and be safe. This physical separation does not lead to mental or relational separation; both sides continue showing their concerns for each other. However she feels bad that sometimes the children leave their aged parents to the Home at their very old age, when they are ailing and no longer in a position to take care of themselves.

**Mrs. K. Mitra** (82) of Rabindra Niketan is satisfied with the services that she receives over here. She understands it well that the Home is run for the purpose of business but it also has a humane face. It tries its best to cater to the needs and demands of the boarders. She has made many friends with whom she spends time; she has found means to keep herself busy and active. Mrs. Mitra is very fond of music; she received regular training between 1958 and 1974 in Delhi. In this Home she attends music classes every Sunday. They also sing prayers on every evening.

Mrs. Mitra enjoys her freedom in Ranindra Niketan. She loves mixing with people, spends time chatting with fellow boarders and participate in various activities. She does not feel lonely. She has an induction oven in her room; sometimes she cooks light food, tea and coffee. A boy comes every alternate day to take orders for medicine and does supply the medicines to her room at a discounted price. Mrs. Mitra strongly feels that old age home is solution for the problems of the aged since it offers security and a care-package.

**Mrs. M. Duttagupta** (78) of Rabindra Niketan had problems when she came to this Home one year back. In her flat, she had a leisurely life but here everything is very time bound. Since the boarders come from different family backgrounds their likings and attitudes are not the same. Initially it was difficult to find like-minded people but with more exploration she has found some friends. Now she is happy with her life here. Leaving her flat where she had spent almost fifteen years and her “gochano shongshar” was a very difficult decision. But now she does not regret her move. In her flat she was alone and here also she lives in her room alone. The difference is that here she doesn't have to bother about the everyday household chores. She also gets to interact with people to avoid loneliness. She has problem in her eyes and suffers from chronic back pain. She goes out for eye check-up and wears belt all day long. She has a maid who takes her to the local market and helps her buying things.

Mrs. Dasgupta misses the older days she had spent with her husband in their flat. They had close interaction with their neighbours, who were very caring. She was a member of the local ladies club and used to participate in the annual cultural programme, annual fete, food fest and the picnic the members of the *mahila samity* used to organize annually. The *achar*, *nimki*, *goja* and *patishapta* (all traditional delicacies) that Mrs. Dasgupta used to make had great demand. She also used to participate in various activities in the time of Durga puja and Saraswati puja. She preserves those memories with great fondness. Many of her neighbours were upset when she moved to Rabindra Niketan. Her old neighbours come to visit her frequently and also call her whenever they get time.

Mrs. Duttagupta is enjoying her life in Rabindra Niketan. She finds the caretakers and the managers helpful. Few months back the doctor asked her to do urine test. But that time she had tremendous back pain and could not go to the test centre. The manager arranged someone to collect her urine sample from Home. Arthritis and back pain trouble her. She takes Homeopathy treatment. In summer months she keeps better but in winter months she passes through a troubled time as her health deteriorates. And throughout the year she takes bath in hot water. Every night before going to bed she massages her legs and knees with hot *ayurvedic* oil. She has realized that people here have different mind-sets and different social backgrounds. So she now doesn't want to develop very intimate relation with anyone. She speaks to everyone and tries to maintain cordial relation but at the same time maintains a distance.

### ***Summary of the findings***

One prominent observation that comes out of the study is that the women and men, who have lost their spouses, the women who never married, the ailing people who have none to take care of, the parents whose child/children stay away – all belonging to urban educated middleclass - are the ones who are numerically dominant among the residents in the two old-age homes. The women outnumber the men among the boarders; this points to their greater vulnerability in society. Living in the Homes is increasingly becoming a rational solution to the multiple problems that face the middleclass aging urbanites. The stigma that was long associated with Home-living (and still is) is gradually weaning both from the shared perception of the urban middleclass and from the perceptions of those who live in old-age homes.

In this chapter we had set out to examine (1) whether the aged, living in Homes, are the victims of neglect and desertion by their children and (2) whether wider kinship and social support break down as the aged move into the Homes. The findings indicate that the answers to both the queries are in the negative. Only in a very few cases, the boarders have mentioned of troubled relation with their family members as the reason for their shift to the Home. There are a few

cases where the elderly have cited “neglected” and ill-treatment at the hands of their daughters-in-law and sons as reason for their movement to the Home. But even in those cases the relations and mutual care continue in one form or the other. In most cases the social circumstances, mainly lack of care and a sense of insecurity, took the elderly to the Home. After the shift of the elderly to the Home the family members and relatives do not shrug off their responsibilities towards them. The middle-class values of care and responsibility are strongly upheld by both sides. The family members and relatives extend financial support whenever necessary, pay regular or periodic visits, buy gifts, and stand by the aged at the time of crisis. There has been a strong realization among the aged that they must allow their children to live their life the way they want and they also should have freedom in their old-age. Financial independence proves to be conducive to this kind of approach to life.

In the Home there are generally two types of boarders. Some boarders, who are in majority, like to socialize and spend time with friends and engage in group activities and there are others who keep withdrawn and confined to their narrow world within the room. The latter spend time watching television, doing prayers and reading religious books. Old age homes provide a whole lot of freedom to the aged boarders, which they thoroughly enjoy at this age.

The Homes offer care-package as they are run on business motif. Although the elderly boarders leave the homely comforts and luxury of family life behind they are more or less satisfied with the services that they receive in the Homes. Most of the boarders rate the food good and appreciate the treatment they receive from the Home staffs. The managers of both the Homes are helpful and approachable although some boarders in Rabindra Niketan did not appreciate the “formal” approach of the manager. Often the boarders talk to the managers about their problems and the latter tries to resolve them. There are some boarders who are not satisfied with the facilities, particularly in Rabindra Niketan, but they understand that this is not their own house where they would get everything to their liking.

The boarders in the Homes, particularly those in Rabindra Niketan, make efforts to live a meaningful life. They make efforts to be happy and enjoy their life in the Home. They are not in a mood to surrender to the burdens that aging heaps on them. With time they develop a sense of belonging with the Home and the room they live in. On the whole, one can see that most of the boarders in both the Homes make constant efforts not only to live fighting the problems of aging but to live a good life by engaging in creative, collective activities.