

Chapter 9

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I

The present study on the *Life of the Middleclass Aged in Kolkata Metropolis: A Sociological Enquiry* had set out to explore the life and problems of the elderly population of middleclass background in Kolkata, one of the four metropolitan cities in India, which carries the colonial and post-colonial economic, political and socio-cultural legacy. Being the capital of colonial India until 1911 Kolkata has been one of the few cities that had early exposure to European history, knowledge and education. The city has been the seed-bed of anti-colonial movement, one of the few cities that had experienced early industrialization, the city that had to bear the brunt of partition of Bengal (almost half of Kolkata constitutes the refugees from East Pakistan), has been the literary capital of India for many years and all this catapult into what is termed by many as “Bengal Renaissance”. Being the industrial and commercial capital of the whole of Eastern India and because of its access to the Bay of Bengal (sea routes that connect the city with the world outside), the city has drawn job-seeking migrants from all the neighbouring states, which has given the city its multicultural, cosmopolitan character (since the migrant groups had moved in with their distinctive cultures). The city has thus been witness to the interface between the elements of modernity and tradition, in the forms of conflicts and synthesis.

The study was set out against the universal trend of graying population and rationalization of family size and household arrangement, and widespread dispersal of the younger members, which leave the elderly lonely, having to resort to self-care, or depend on the professional service providers. The life of the aged, both men and women, has been looked into in the light of changing social relations, which include family relations, kinship relations and neighbourhood relations. The micro changes in family composition and family

relations, as the study shows, impact upon the life of the elderly in a big way. The prime objective of the study was to prepare a sociological account of the aged based on their life history (autobiography) and lived experiences and changing social relations and interpret their life in the light of relevant sociological theories.

One of the guiding conceptual questions that has been whether the family locale, the relations and the family cultural frame are changing towards narrow, calculative rationalism (in Weberian sense) to spring a dehumanized approach to and treatment of the aged or they still are able to sustain the traditional forms and a humane, caring, supportive, emotional approach towards the elderly members who give so much for the younger generation. The approaches towards the elderly members need not necessarily be in terms of binary opposites as there could be a mix of rationalism and humane-caring outlooks and the relative share of the elements of the opposites in the mix could vary from case to case and from context to context. I had, therefore, tried to observe both the family level variations and the common (collective) patterns that emerge in the social locale of the aged and the familial/social approaches towards them.

II

The study aimed to cover the different sheds of life of the urban middleclass aged in two distinct social locales – in the house and family and in old-age homes. The core areas of enquiry were: (1) the social and economic background of the aged and their changing family and household setup (in terms of size, type and relations); the position of the aged people in the family, their material status, authority that they exercise and the degree of freedom they enjoy; (2) the nature of geographical mobility (or dispersal) of the younger members and its impact on family relations and on the life of the elderly; (3) the nature of crises, in terms of ailments, loneliness, insecurities and worries that face the elderly and the strategies they resort to in order to overcome them; (4) the nature of support or care (moral as well as material) the aged receive from the family members, extended kin and neighbours; (5) the factors and social processes in the family that take the aged to the old-age homes and whether the middleclass

perceptions about family vis-à-vis old-age homes are changing; (6) the nature of the everyday life of the aged as they live in their houses and in old-age homes; (7) the gendered space of the elderly women in the light of changing family relations; and (8) the self perception of the elderly and the exercise of “agency” in deciding the course of life (particularly when they are faced with crises).

III

I selected my informants from the universe constituted of the aged persons, that is, men and women above 60 years with middleclass background. The reason behind choosing only middleclass population is that the people of this class are most likely to experience rationalization and individualism, the two most important pillars of modernism, in the form of control of family size by using various methods of contraception, rearrangement of households and in the form of changing family and kinship relations. The younger generation of this class, being educated, is expected to experience large-scale spatial mobility and re-laying of the family relations following the logic of “calculative rationalism”. The rationalization of family, in terms of size and relations, is the factor that could determine the quality of life of the aged. It is also possible, hypothetically, that the burden of so-called traditional institutions and values will be less on this class as they would be under the spell of atomization and individualism.

I have done the fieldwork in Salt Lake and in two old-age homes in different phases in 2014 and 2015. I did a survey with the help of a structured schedule on 54 elderly from Salt Lake and 56 from two old-age homes in southern Kolkata; this was about their general socio-economic background. In the second phase I have done detailed case study of a total of 64 elderly, taking 32 from each category.

The rationale behind selecting the respondents both from amongst those who live in their own houses with some family members and those who live in old-age home/homes was to understand to what extent the family system binds the aged people and what are the forces that motivate them (or force them) to leave their family to take shelter in old-age home. The comparative study also gives us a

view of different phases of their life. The idea was to do a comparative study of (a) different family situations within a particular category of respondents and (b) between two different categories. By doing this I could collect wide range of data on the way the aged spend their everyday life, the nature of relationship with the kin and neighbours (in case of those who live in their own house) and with the inmates (those who live in old-age homes). While collecting the first-hand data from two different social locales I have taken care in recording the versions of their life and relations the elderly have narrated to me. I could not collect the versions of the members of the younger generation to have a balanced view of the life of the elderly and this has been one of the methodological flaws of my study. Besides the field data, I have made use of (a) Census reports for a grasp of the demographic trends with regard to changing family/household size, (b) empirical studies on the problem of the aged that are already available, both from Indian and Western sources, for a comparative study of the aged in different social situations, and (c) theoretical writings on modernization debate for interpreting the empirical data and theorization.

IV

A comparison of the background of the two categories of elderly reveals some interesting points which help understand the life of aged in Kolkata. The most important observation is that the aged who live in the old-age homes had a very weak family support system as most of them are either unmarried, widow or widower. Little familial support (since they did not have their own families) saw them landed into the old-age homes. The aged living in their own houses/flats amidst their own family members in Salt Lake (barring two cases), on the other hand, mostly live with their wives and have stronger support from the family members; they are unlikely to move into the old-age home unless their family support system breaks down.

Second, the women have an overwhelming numerical dominance among the inmates of the old-age homes while the men outnumber the women in Salt Lake

residential area. Another study on the elderly in Kolkata came out with similar finding. Working on a larger sample the study by Sarkar has found that 76 per cent of the residents of old-age home were women while 59 per cent of those living with their family are men (Sarkar 2013: 209-10). This indicates that the elderly women (particularly those who are single) are at greater risk of losing family support and more likely to land into old-age homes in search of care and security than their male counterparts. The self-care system of the women, who live alone, could also be more fragile compared to that of their male counterparts.

Third, the level of education, nature of housing, access to modern gadgets, higher per-head share of living space, occupation, income, upper caste background confirm that the elderly we have studied represent urban middleclass, who have adequate access to economic, social and cultural capital. In comparative terms, the aged who live in Salt Lake are better placed in terms of their access to these basic resources.

Fourth, the rationalization of the family size indicates to dropping fertility rate. One can see a drastic drop in family size from the respondents' family of orientation to their own families. In both the groups, family size is restricted to less than five members. One child (a daughter or a son) or two children is the dominant standard for the urban middleclass.

Fifth, although 37 of the 56 respondents living in the old-age homes live on their own income 14 others receive financial support from their close ones, sons, and daughters and so on. This indicates that movement to old-age homes does not mean the end of familial relations. The movement to old-age homes, on many occasions, is done with the consent of and with the help of the family members and sometimes the elderly move to Homes on their own exercising their agency. The aged living in old-age homes continue to receive family and kinship support in one form or the other.

Sixth, the survey clearly indicates to the presence of inter-generational mobility in terms of education and occupation; the informants had greater access to higher level of education and well-paid jobs. The children of the informants have moved even further ahead; there is a growing preference for technical

education and employment in the private or corporate sector. The gender gap in education and employment was wider in the earlier generation than what we see in the present generation. All the mothers of the informants in both Salt Lake and old-age homes were housewives but many from amongst their daughters are educated and are employed in quality jobs. Among the women there is a clear preference for teaching job in school, college or university.

V

The downsizing of the households because of death, marriage of the daughters, dispersal of the daughters and sons because of career compulsions have together contributed to nuclearization of the households and families. The study shows that 78 per cent of the families have been reduced to nuclear, sub-nuclear, supplemented nuclear and single member households with their grown up members spread out. The house/flat size and the number of persons living are highly disproportionate, particularly in view of Kolkata being a city of very high density. The downsizing of the households is not the result of “breakdown of joint families” as is commonly perceived; it is rather the result of a logical and mutually worked out living (household) arrangement. The dispersal of family members, daughters and sons, is the most important factor that brings about a kind of dynamism in the family, which undergoes a process of expansion and shrinkage (a phenomenon called “household dimension”). A joint family today can turn into a nuclear or sub-nuclear family after some years and the reverse can also happen. Even when a relatively larger family that has experienced a phase of expansion, splits into a number of households, the members try to uphold the family values based on care and empathy and responsibility; the “spirit of family” or of “joint-family” thus survives in the urban middleclass family context. This observation is in consonance with the observation of the Indian scholars who have been studying urban family and kinship for years. The transformation of a family into a number of households is often not the result of conflict, but the result of a logical and mutually accepted arrangement, as a part of developmental cycle. The dispersed members make use of modern means of

transportation and communication to keep in regular touch and when the situation demands the dispersed members rush to their parental family to take care of the elderly. The predominant form is to preserve the family values; the neglect, cruelty, selfishness are the aberrations and not the rules.

Downsizing of the households keep the dispersed younger members away from taking daily care of the parents. There is no denying that the elderly members, particularly those who are ailing, are in a kind of crisis, which manifests in loneliness, insecurity, longing for children who are away, and dependence on hired care givers. The elderly try to accept this changed fact of life, justifying the situation in terms of career achievements of their children and in the name of "self-reliance and freedom". Growing life expectancy, the downsizing of the family, and the dispersal of family members together create a "crisis situation" for the aged; they rationalize the scenario but suffer in different forms, not so much in the form of torture, humiliation, neglect etc. as is commonly perceived, but in the form of being lonely, taking the pain of losing the dearest ones and keeping away from the dear ones.

VI

The elderly living in old-age homes, mostly having urban middleclass background, also have experienced downsizing of family through fertility control. We have seen that 24 out of the 32 cases (75 per cent) the households of the elderly persons were single-member at the time of movement to the old age home. These families, however, were not necessarily single-member; they became so through a long process; the contributing factors being (a) the decision to remain unmarried, (b) death of the spouse, (c) premature death of the only son or sister, (d) dispersal of sons along with career mobility, and (e) dispersal of daughters after marriage.

The common pattern is that the elderly decide to move to old-age homes when the family support system breaks down. The dispersal of children, the death of the spouse, ailments and a sense of insecurity together work behind the movement of the aged to old-age homes. Among the other reasons are space

crisis in the house/flat, a feeling of being neglected and the will to live a life of freedom and dignity. The informants were reluctant to speak about tensions and stressed relations in the family; yet we have seen in a few cases that strained relations among the family members (the informant having tension with her/his daughter-in-law or nephew over space sharing) has been the main reason for their shift to the old-age home.

The relations between the aged and their family members and larger kin evolve in course of time and go through different phases of stresses and strains. It has also been seen that the relations in the family may lose warmth in due course but the members largely value the relations highly. The close family relations work in finding the right kind of old-age home, extending financial support when necessary, keeping in touch and standing by the side of the elderly in moments of crisis. The siblings and close relations keep in touch with one another over telephone and by exchanging occasional visits.

It appears that the “stigma” that was not so long ago attached to old-age home living is gradually waning. Neither the Home inmates nor their family members feel ashamed of this fact of modern life. A large section of the elderly is not keeping good health. They do not want to be “burden” on any one; they move to old-age home to live a life of freedom and dignity while allowing their children to live the life of their choice. The elderly, particularly the women, in some cases take the decision to move to old-age homes on their own in search of a secure and better life and this could be interpreted as an expression of “agency” or assertion of “self”.

VII

The dispersal of the younger members within the city, to other cities within the country and even to global cities has become an unavoidable feature of urban middleclass life. This is a fact that is going to gain in magnitude in the era of globalization. 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.

When dispersal of the younger members is a fact of life the elderly in Salt Lake often fall back on kinship and neighbourhood relations and rediscover the virtues of conjugal relation as a strategy to combat the crises that result from it. The dispersal of younger members adds solidity to the relations among the members of already downsized urban families. Emotive, relational (and sometimes material) interdependence among the members has been found to be growing. The elderly who have moved to old-age homes also preserve relations with their dispersed children and the latter extend care and support to the extent possible.

VIII

Living in Salt Lake is a status symbol for the middle and upper-middle class people in Kolkata. Over the years there has been a concentration of educated upper-caste government and semi-government employees in Salt Lake; many have come after retirement. They represent the progressive, modernist cultural tradition that crystallized in the colonial and post-colonial urban India, a legacy of Bengal Renaissance and Left political movement in Bengal. The elderly live with economic self-reliance as they live on their pension and interest on savings. They have their children well settled in life, with good education and employment, mostly dispersed to different cities in India and abroad.

Life of the elderly largely centers on the family and family members, the care and support system in the family. Unlike the elderly living in old-age homes, who are either unmarried or have lost their spouses, the elderly in Salt Lake largely live with their spouses and other family members. In other words, they live in the midst of a strong family care system. This is the most important point of difference in the life of those who live in old-age homes and those who live in their own house amidst family members. In some cases the married daughters live with their parents or live close by in order to be able to take good care of their parents. The children who have dispersed cannot take close care but they

remain in close touch and rush back home in times of crisis. They make periodic trips back home and take their parents to the country of their work. The family support system is supplemented by the services of the hired care givers or the maids, who constitute an indispensable part of the family life in Salt Lake.

In a few cases there have been incidents of untimely death of children or husband. The living elderly members find it extremely difficult to overcome the shock years after the incident. In small families the emotional attachment among the members is strong and the chances of ill-treatment of the elderly are very less. A few have complained that they suffer from loneliness and long for the children who live away. They live with the memory of good old days.

With aging, health worries have become a part of the life of the elderly; all informants have minor or serious ailments; many have undergone surgery and spent days in hospital. The elderly manage such crisis with saved money and health insurance. They face such crisis by making adjustments in life, like restrictions of food and movement and taking the help of the family members and care givers. If needed, the children extend financial and other kinds of support to see through the crisis. The larger kin and neighbours come forward with their support in the form of service.

My observations do not support the stereotypical idea that kinship relations break down in urban social situation. Most of my informants maintain thick or thin relations with their siblings, their families and the members of the families of the in-laws. They meet occasionally, keep in touch over cell phone, attend the social occasions, and come forward to each other's help in times of crisis. There have been cases where the elderly grandfather or grandmother plays an important part in rearing the grandchildren and in transmitting a share of their experience and values.

Contrary to popular belief, the elderly members value their relations with the neighbours highly and take active part in the activities of the block community. Community centre is the centre of a host of social and cultural activities. Important community functions are organized by the block committee in which the residents take part with great enthusiasm. The elderly not only participate in

such programmes but they, with all social and cultural capital under their command, provide leadership in organizing the community programmes. The community centre, the park and the market place are the places where the elderly meet for *adda* almost on daily basis. The members exchange information and extend their help when somebody is in crisis.

The elderly, the men more than women, continue to work for trade unions, mass organization like Democratic Mahila Samity, and political parties. These elderly have been into Left politics for many years, some have been the local level leaders; they draw inspiration from their political ideology to continue to work for the organization. They try to do something of value in this old age in order to remain meaningful and avoid being insignificant.

The decision making by and large remains a male prerogative although some informants consult the other members, the spouses and grown up children. The women members do not complain about it. The women, with some exceptions, confine their activities within the four walls while the male members take a greater part in outdoor activities. The women manage the kitchen with the help of maids and also hire the maids for doing domestic chores. One can however see some elements of change in the role of the male members, some of whom are guided by a sense of partnership in dealing with their wives. I have seen that some elderly play their part in kitchen and in doing domestic chores. The women, even the Left political activists believe in religion and offer puja on daily basis. However, there are women who are politically conscious and active have a life outside home, which they value immensely.

IX

My understanding of the life of the elderly living in old-age homes helps deconstruct the widely perceived notion that the elderly are the victims of neglect and desertion by their children and that the larger kinship and social support system breaks down as the aged move into the Homes. 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. After the shift to the Home the family members and relatives do not shrug off their responsibilities towards the aged. 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 is a collective social life as well as an inner individual life. At the collective level the boarders make informal social groups to build a mini collective support system and do some activities in group. The members of such small groups formed on the basis of mutual liking spend a lot of time together. They crack jokes, pull each other’s legs, watch television programmes, particularly Bengali serials and go out for shopping. Every evening the boarders sing Tagore’s songs or Prarthana Sangeet together. The boarders also participate in various activities like music class, yoga class, and physiotherapy sessions. 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. Many of the boarders do not like some of their fellow boarders; they do not like talking about themselves or interfering into others’ life. 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 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 aged boarders rate the food good and appreciate the treatment they receive

from the Home staffs. As a part of business strategy the Home management adds value to the suggestions and complaints by the boarders and tries to improve the care system.

The boarders in both the Homes make efforts to be happy and enjoy their life. They are not in a mood to surrender to the worries that aging heaps on them. With time they develop a sense of belonging with the Home and the room they live in. Some of the boarders get so much attached to the Home that even when they visit their children or relative's place they cannot stay there for long; in a day or two they feel the craving to return to the Home. 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.

X

For the sake of generalization, the findings of the study could be looked into (a) in the light of the general sociological and social anthropological universal conceptual tradition and (b) the trend in urban family and kinship studies.

In Western theoretical tradition as set by Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Tonnies, Wirth, Park and so on we come across a generalized view that the urban-industrial society undergoes a process of breakdown of the traditional institutions of social solidarity and collective life as a result of growing individualism. Weber and Simmel, in particular, have observed the irreversible march of individual and social life towards calculative rationalism and the "breakdown" of the "traditional" norms, values and social institutions which facilitated collective or social life. Some of the Indian sociologists (as we have seen in Chapters 1 and 2) supported the "breakdown" thesis in the study of urban family and kinship and community relation. This line of argument finds reflection in the dominant discourse donning the field of social gerontology; a large majority of the literature supports the view that the elderly in India are largely the victims of calculative, selfish approach of the younger generation to life as the traditional social values and institutions which stood in defense of collective social life wane.

The counter thesis of resilience, supported by scholars like I.P. Desai, T.N. Madan, A.M. Shah, Patricia Oberoi, Sujata Patel and many others (discussed in Chapter 1), is however stronger. My findings are in line with the resilience thesis. The seminal observation of the present study is that despite the stresses and strains of the larger forces, internal as well as global, the institutions and values like family, kinship, community and neighbourhood, care, support, empathy, the traditional values have not become redundant in understanding the life of the elderly in a middleclass urban set-up, both in a neighbourhood context and in old-age homes. After all, peoples' love for life and craving for a good life never ends.

We thus observe a situation where the elements of Western modernity co-habit the Indian traditional values to define the life of the elderly. Sarah Lamb has used a term "alternative modernity" to explain such a situation. Despite signs of rationalism and Western modernity in the forms of fertility control, nuclearization of families and households and dispersal of young members and some form of individualism and careerism, the family values based on love, affection, sharing and mutual care largely survive in Indian urban middleclass context. Some of the recent studies in the West, which have been referred to in Chapter 1, like those by Lewis (1951, 1961), Gans (1965), Willmott and Young (1972), Willmott and Thomas (1984), Hannerz (1987), Jansen (2001), Pipyrou (2010), and many others, also bring to light the existence and functionality of the familial, community or collective life in urban situations. This may provoke the social scientists to examine more closely the continuation of community or group life as a universal phenomenon, even in post-modern context. I would tend to think, with a risk of generalization, that the universal elements of humanism, articulated by Rousseau in the idea of "pity" or empathy (Rousseau 2008) holds good in defining social relations even in the present day urban context. Interestingly, Lamb (2012, discussed in details in Chapter 2), who has also studied the middleclass elderly in Kolkata, has underlined the importance of social relations and attachment.