

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Introducing the problem

Alarmed by a possible population explosion there have been efforts all over the world to check fertility and keep the population growth rate under control. The countries in South Asia (India included), with fast growing populations, have also put a check on the rate of population growth. The life expectancy, on the other hand is on the rise. The result is the growth of the share of population in the higher age groups, a phenomenon called greying population. The elderly population has already become a special category of population with special problems and therefore it has become the subject of research in the field of social gerontology. The demographers, sociologists, social workers, social anthropologists, scholars in social medicine study varied dimensions of the life and problems of the elderly from the perspective of the respective academic discipline.

The present study was designed to explore the life of the aged, both men and women, from amongst the urban middleclass, in the light of changing social relations, which include family relations, kinship relations and neighbourhood relations. I have chosen to study only the aged (loosely defined as the people above 60 years of age)¹ among the urban middleclass in Kolkata metropolis in order to delimit the scope of my study since life of the aged in other contexts (say, rural) and classes (upper and lower classes) could be significantly different. My objective would be 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.

1. According to National Human Rights Commission report 'The persons in India, who have attained the age of sixty years and above, are defined as elderly for the purpose of availing old age benefits' (NHRC 2011: 1); The National Policy for Older Persons, 1999, also recognizes a person aged 60 years and above as a senior citizen (NHRC 2011: 4).

The “middleclass” can be loosely defined as the class located between the poor on the one hand and the rich on the other; a heterogeneous class inclusive of the managerial class and the intelligentsia, the white-collar *baboos* (the *bhadraloks* in *bhadralok-chotolok* divide), and the “petty-bourgeoisie” (the owners of the small-scale business and enterprises who double their roles as worker and owner). A broad-based definition of the term would include most inhabitants in an urban neighbourhood (barring those who live in slums and squatter settlements and those who are rich) in the middleclass. For Lamb, in the contemporary context, the term “middleclass” refers to an elite minority group of English speaking, email-using persons, participating in consumption and employment within global markets (Lamb 2007: 45).

If we accept the government’s claim of dropping ratio of the poor it is easy to presume that the size of the middleclass is growing steadily particularly when the Indian economy is on a growth path in recent decades. The economic growth that we have experienced in the last two decades or so after liberalization from early 1990s must have had its hand in growing affluence of the middleclass. Although a highly heterogeneous category, the urban middleclass are expected to share a common social and cultural space and show a largely similar response to the forces of modernization and other exogenous forces of social change. The middleclass ideally provides the cultural “place” where the elements of tradition and conservatism and the elements of “progress” and “modernity” or “post-modernity” interplay. The term “urban” can be defined both in spatial and cultural terms. In spatial term an “urban” place, city or metropolis, is recognized by the State administration as “urban” and presented as “urban” in literature while in cultural term “urban” is understood as opposed to “rural”. Ideally, it combines the elements of rationality and modernity (in Western sense) although often retaining the elements of traditions.

The Indian middleclass (and other classes) families are undergoing a course of rapid change in recent years, especially in terms of rationalization of family size, engineering of reproductive behaviour, dispersal of family members, approaches to family relations, support to the aged and children – material,

medical, emotional, and so on. What can be framed as a research question is 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 are still 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 approach toward 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 quantum of the elements of the opposites in the mix could vary from case to case and from context to context. It is, therefore, imperative to observe if family level variations or common pattern(s) emerge in the social locale of the aged and the familial/social approaches towards them.

The 60+ aged persons in a metropolis are often seen living in a good quality apartment or bungalow in 2-3 member households when their grown up daughter is married out or the well-established son living with his own family at a distant city or abroad. The siblings and close kin are well spread out, far and near. The aged pick up ailments of different forms and their dependence on hired service providers grows. An important turning point comes when one of the spouses dies, the aged is left with none to give company or take care of. Another turning point in the life of the aged comes when they step into perpetual illness and are unable to take care of themselves. Many, in such situation take refuge in the old-age-home; many such Homes have come up in and around the metropolis in the last couple of decades. The old-age homes are mushrooming in and around the city with competitive service packages and innovative ideas, keeping the needs of different classes and categories of the elderly population in perspective.

The present study aims to cover the different sheds of live of the urban middleclass people from the point of their entry into the “aged” category to the last lap of their life in two distinct social locales – in the household or family and in old-age homes. The focus of the study would be on how the micro and macro social forces bring about relational changes which in turn impact upon the lives of the aged. The study is set out to examine the predominant notion of aged being

the victims of inhumanity and ill-treatment at the hands of their “own relations” and would go deeper exploring the micro aspects of familial and kinship relations and the relevance of the conventional middleclass values.

The context of the problem

The annual population growth rate in India is showing a declining trend; from close to 2.5 per cent in 1981 to 1.58 per cent in 2001 and to 1.34 per cent in 2011. Demographers observe that it is the urban educated middleclass, which has gone for a course of rationalisation of family size through fertility control (Agnihotri 2003; Buch 2005; Vasaria and Vasaria 2003). As a consequence, in some Indian States the population growth rate has dropped below the replacement level. People in this class are professionally busy and are in the trap of self-conceived hedonism or a perception of “good life”, which generally dictates people to go for smaller families. A growing perception of social insecurity and the pressure of maintaining the desired quality of life (in the face of withdrawal of government support from the social sector and the resulting escalation of cost on housing, education, transport, food and clothing, health and medicine) might also be contributing to rationalization of family size. There seems to be a strong social support for one-child norm, particularly in urban India. The norm has become such a social reality that conception for the third or fourth time is now considered a social stigma (Chatterjee and Riley 2001; Buch 2005). The declining fertility in urban areas and particularly in the middle- and affluent classes is a reality that finds reflection in the last two Censuses. Although choice of family size is supposed to be the choice of the decision makers in the individual family it reflects a social trend, “social fact” in Durkheimian sense, which is *socially constructed* and *constrains* the individual members to fall in line.

Yet another manifestation of rationalization of modern life is the dropping female sex ratio in the below-6 age group, a trend that has been termed masculinisation of children. The sex ratio in the below 6 age group has dropped from 927 in 2001 to 914 in 2011. The drop is more in urban than in rural areas and in the middle and affluent classes than among the poor.

Along with rationalization of family size and sex composition the other related social trends are (1) growing affluence of the middleclass (which results from rise in family income because more families now have more than one earning members engaged in white collar jobs or business and a smaller family to support) and a rise in the quality of their living, and (2) growing life expectancy, with health insurance and advances in modern health care. Average life expectancy at birth is 65.48 years in 2011 as against 42.45 in 1960. Another interesting fact about life expectancy is that it is always higher among the females; in 2011 for example, the female life expectancy is 67.3 against the male life expectancy which stands at 63.8 (indexmundi.com/facts/india/life-expectancy-at-birth). Keeping in mind the rising life expectancy at birth it can be presumed that India would gradually catch up with the West and the result of which would be “greying population”, a trend that West has experienced in the Post World War II period (‘India’s Ageing Population’ in *Today’s Research on Ageing – Programmes and Policy Implications*. Issue 25, March 2012).

The Union ministry of Health and Family Welfare claims that life expectancy² in India has gone up by five years, from 62.3 years for males and 63.9 years for females in 2001-2005 to 67.3 years and 69.6 years respectively in 2011-2015. The average life expectancy which used to be around 42 in 1960 has steadily risen to around 48 in 1980, 58.5 in 1990, around 62 in 2000, 67 in 2011 and 68 in 2015. Experts attribute this development to better immunization and nutrition, coupled with prevention and treatment of infectious diseases (Sampath 2014).

The other important, and associated, phenomenon has been growing spatial mobility of the educated professional offspring of the middleclass families, both across the cities and countries. Shah, for example, has observed that because of the small family norm in the upper and the middle classes, the parents now have

2. The World Health Organization defines life expectancy as ‘the average number of years a person is expected to live on the basis of the current mortality rates and prevalence distribution of health states in a population’ (source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/World-Health-Organization>).

only one or two sons who move out of parental home because of the new occupational structure (Shah 1999: 1181).

Generally, the children of this class are educated and resourceful and ambitious; they are always willing to move to distant places to tap better career opportunities. The lack of adequate employment opportunity in the local job market motivates them to migrate to distant cities both within and outside the country. The spatial mobility and the accompanying brain drain out of the country is the highest in this class.

Another significant development is that the aged middleclass in cities live a life of affluence long after their retirement from job. They live in big apartments or houses having access to all modern gadgets of entertainment, communication, and consumption, while their sons or daughters live in distance cities or metropolises amidst similar affluence with their respective families and professional life. The death of one of the spouses further reduces the family into "single-member household". The death of one of the spouses is a turning point in the life of the aged which drives them to leave their houses and take refuge in old-age homes. Even when both the husband and wife are alive and their grown up son or daughter living in the same city or metropolis the parents and children prefer to live in separate houses or apartments. For the parents as well as the children it is a rational decision since it grants them greater freedom in life, although such an arrangement would bring certain degree of isolation and loneliness particularly for the elderly. When the family care and support is exhausted the surviving man or woman takes shelter in old-age homes, or arranges to live a life in his/her own house in the care of a hired care-taker. Thus, wherever the aged live, in their own house or in the old-age home, they cannot escape the ubiquitous company of isolation and loneliness. Reports in the media show that the hapless elderly members, who have been living alone for some time live with a great deal of insecurity, are robbed or even get killed by a group of miscreants involving the care-givers, the maids and the drivers.

I have made an effort to explore up to what point the family of orientation expands while keeping all the members together and then comes to a point when

the members disperse to different places thus splitting into a number of small households of procreation. The phase of expansion is followed by a phase of shrinkage of households. Besides dispersal of members the death of the elderly members contributes to the phase of shrinkage of the households. Families and households thus go through a process of expansion followed by a process of shrinkage. Each of these phases leaves its mark in the life of the members who stay back and from where they make noticeable adjustments – social, economic, psychological and cultural – in order to preserve their family composure.

I have done a comparative study of the life of the aged who live in their own houses and those who have taken shelter in the old-age-homes. The purpose has been to prepare a detailed biographical account of the turning points in the life of the individual aged, the way they reflect back, the way they plan and live their life, the social support they receive, their creativity and corporate life, the efforts they make, individually and collectively, to make their life better and meaningful, their social concerns and so on. One of my objectives has been to map the way the aged in two different locations look inward and out-word at this twilight of their life. The fundamental theoretical point to probe is whether the traditional institutions of social support or solidarity (like family and kinship) and values are weakening to make way to Western-type rationalism, or whether the aged are being captive to any kind of post-modern hopelessness and undefined insecurity, or if they stitch together the elements of traditional institutions and values, while sacrificing many, in order to face challenges of aging life and ever changing social locale.

Research objectives

The study aimed to cover the different sheds of live 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).

Conceptual framework

The present study has been located in the theoretical debate between the modernization school and social resilience school. The modernization school, drawing from the writings of Durkheim (1947), Weber (1968), Simmel (1903), Tonnies (1957) and many other Western sociologists hold that industrialization, urbanization, rationalization, atomization, bureaucratization, Westernization are an integrated process which would redefine the development path of the non-Western and traditional societies. Some of the scholars (Davis and Moore 1967; Parsons 1960, 1967) even argue in a prescriptive tone that the non-Western societies should shun their traditional culture (values, norms and institutions) and feudal and despotic political frames to speed up industrialisation and should gradually elevate themselves to a stage closer to Western, liberal, atomized, rationalised Western societies (for a details see Nisbet 1969).

Durkheim (1947) was concerned about the rupture between the collective consciousness (the society) and the individual consciousness in modern societies of the West which resulted in growing individualism. He described this breach as a pathological state in society which seriously damages social stability. In his interpretation of suicide, for example, Durkheim found that variation in

suicide rates was caused by variations in levels of social integration. He observed that the older adults are less socially integrated than younger adults because their children have grown up and left home, many of their friends and relatives have died and if they have retired from work they may well have lost touch with their work mates. Using examples such as this, Durkheim claimed that suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part. Although the present study does not deal with the phenomenon of suicide Durkheim's study bears relevance because it brings to light the social process of isolation of the individuals from the collectivities in modern industrial society (Durkheim 1970).

Weber made it a point that in modern capitalist societies "rationality" was divorced from "morality" by saying: 'I am morally split off from others; everybody is split off from everybody else.' By this Weber did, in no sense, mean that there is no moral bond at all; it is observed to exist, according to him, among members of groups and movements whose bond is solidity or fraternity. Yet, the feeling toward other human beings, and toward all human beings, is not one of moral commonality, but on the contrary, one of 'being alone vis-a-vis a multitude of others toward whom one's attitude is purely cognitive, non-committal and non-committed, observing, calculating, instrumental, utilitarian, manipulative' (see, Wolf 1978: 534). From this it follows that in Western industrial societies even reason has become instrumental, utilitarian and calculating: the moral considerations or judgments, which the individual in fact did have, were not "rational"; there was nothing called "objective reason".

Horkheimer (1947), Bendix (1951), Hawthorn (1976) and many other twentieth century sociologists also upheld, following Weber, the notion that "modern reason" is largely devoid of "morality" and "objectivity". Henri Lefebvre, one of the most influential French Marxist scholars, also has endorsed this view by saying: 'Modernity is the movement towards the new, the deployment of technology and rationality (which Lefebvre calls "modernism"), but it is also absence of any real transformation of social relations, and leads from the human towards the inhuman, towards the barbarity' (quoted in Trebitsch 1991: XXVII).

Early sociologists in the West have observed a destabilising impact of urbanisation on the social and cultural life of the urbanites. Simmel (1971), for example, has observed that cities give rise to some psychological traits; in cities there is an intensification of nervous stimulation, so that a lasting and predictable sequence of psychic impressions (as in rural communities) is replaced by a crowding in of rapidly changing, unpredictable, and discontinuous images. City-dwellers thus become more mentally sophisticated but also more blasé.

In the 1920s and 1930s the Chicago School of sociologists and anthropologists promoted the idea of a distinct “urban way of life”, which was to replace the traditional “rural way of life”. Robert Park, the leading member of the school, examined the impact of industrial-capitalist expansion on Chicago and observed that ‘city life amounted to a meeting and mingling of ‘all sorts of people ... who never fully comprehend one another’ (Park 1968: 26).

Wirth, in the article ‘Urbanism as a Way of Life’ (1938) identified the unique features of city life; a different domiciliary urban ecology gave rise to different types of people, identities and relationships. Defining the city as ‘a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals’ Wirth described the replacement of rural relations which were long-lived, knowledgeable and often derived from kinship, with urban relations which were impersonal, superficial, segmented, non-cumulative, unpredictable, and given to a faster turnover. Drawing from the writings of Henry Maine (‘from status to contractual relations’) and Ferdinand Tonnies (‘from natural communities to artificial associations’), Wirth constructed cities as distinct social systems, and an evolutionary stage set to change rural ways of life – folkways, folklore, all that was folksy – forever.

In studies of the Mexican village of Tepotzlan and then on the Yucatan peninsula (1930, 1941), Redfield sought to plot the urbanisation of the rural in terms of the following criteria: small-scale to large-scale, social homogeneity to social differentiation (regarding occupations, recreations, and so on), physical isolation to predominance of networks of communication, group solidarity to individualism, personal, face-to-face relations to relations at a distance (in both

physical and emotional terms), sacred experience and action to secular, illiteracy to literacy, practising Little Traditions of cultural learning to partaking of sophisticated Great Traditions.

Reacting to Redfield's observations in Mexico City Oscar Lewis (1951, 1961) observed that people always and everywhere tend to live as members of small groups – families, neighbourhoods, associations – and not as nameless parts of amorphous masses.

Studies based in London (Wilmott and Young 1972; Willmott and Thomas 1984); Washington (Hannerz 1987) and Boston (Gans 1965) noticed the existence of “urban villagers”: people partaking in face-to-face exchanges, living in relatively cohesive communities, based on language, kinship, familiarity and religiosity. These scholars argue that being within the urban space need not necessarily give rise to urban identities; there can be admixtures of the smaller and more traditional groupings that live on within them (Jansen 2001; Pipyrrou 2010). In *Exploring the City* (1980) Hannerz has observed that although urbanism generally represents the expression of a particular homogenizing centripetal tendency one can see a discrete set of relations between diverse socio-cultural domains. He defines “urban” as a ‘soft’ environment (1980: 249) meaning it assumes shapes around individual inhabitants according to the choices.

For Jonathan Raban (1973) an urban environment is soft in a sense that it becomes what its inhabitants make of it; once they have decided, then the city assumes certain flexibility, reflecting back the identity which has been imparted to it. Certainly the city can be found home to a wide array of lives, keeping open a potential for diversity of life and culture (Williksen-Bakker 2002). What is important to bear in mind is that, as Cohen (1993) puts it, people invest the city with culture – people enculturate the city – rather than passively responding to it as a deterministic power. As Amit-Talai concluded in his study of *Americans living in London* (1989), it is in terms of a “voluntary” involvement rather than an inherent imperative that individuals in the city can be seen acquiring the

resources necessary for the development and expression of their social identities.

Chambers (1994a: 14, 94) describes cities as “migrant landscapes” home to ‘shifting, mixing, contaminating, experimenting, revisiting and recomposing’: recomposing histories and traditions, shifting centres and peripheries, mixing global tendencies and local distinctions. They are sites of transformations of socio-cultural reality, transitory lives and cultural movements. A diffuse sense of mobility thus characterizes urban life as inhabitants, in transit across multiple and diverse social worlds (house and work, family and friends, religion and recreation), find connections, avoid relations, meet people, garner experiences, routinize space and escape routine.

Thus, as reflected in Western writings, urbanization is not necessarily the destroyer of community life, traditions and human values; it is the individuals, who enjoy a greater degree of freedom compared to the non-Western societies, decide what elements of traditions are to be preserved. Similarly, the rationalization of family as an institution and a set of relations may not be a typical Western phenomenon but a universal one. Among the aspects of change in family at least four deserve consideration. First, it is argued that family, mostly in the form of nuclear family in the modern world, finds itself more isolated and independent of the larger kinship network. In the process, family is freed from the community control, and democratized; ‘a kind of privilege, a prerogative, a gift bestowed by the community’ (Bernard 1976: 123). In other words, family now is believed to operate in an environment largely free of primordial obligations. Second, it is widely held that the modern family has lost its prime functions as a productive unit in the larger economy, and has turned out to be a unit of consumption only. Likewise, the sexual and educational functions are no longer the monopoly of the family (Schofield 1965; Reiss 1967). Third, it is suggested that the relationships within family are now based on equilibrium. While the husband is taking a larger share (than before) of the domestic tasks and responsibilities, the wife has become a more equal partner in the enjoyment of sex, and in control over domestic resources. The wife no longer is a mere

housewife; the outside world has been made open to her. Fourth, the calculative rationalism has re-laid the family relations on the basis of selfish individual or sub-group interest where the aged, the non-contributing and the ailing members, are considered “burdens” by the younger and active members.

Said has rejected the Western ethnocentric view of the non-Western societies levelling it as “orientalism”, something which does not reflect the cultural tenets, interests and aspirations of the non-western societies (Said 1978). Indian sociologists who have direct touch with the ground realities of Indian society and culture highlight the enduring capacity of the Indian tradition and culture. The sociologists like Desai (1955, 1956), Kapadia (1954a, 1954b, 1955), Madan (1962a, 1962b), Shah (1988, 1991), Singer (1968), Oberoi (1993) and many others argue that despite long course of colonial domination and Western influence Westernization of Indian tradition has largely been a myth. The reality is that the traditional institutions like family, caste, kinship and religion continue to define the essence of Indian culture, even urban culture, and the Western culture has only a surface level penetration and that these traditional institutions and values have held their forte with some command.

While studying the life of the aged I kept this discourse in mind. Western influence and rationalisation would mean the breakdown of the traditional values and traditional social support system that stem from family and kinship traditions. Following the “resilience thesis”, elements of which we have found in the writings of both the Western and Indian scholars, one can expect to see the presence of family, kinship and community support system in defining the life of the urban elderly. One should, at the same time, be alert in recording the micro changes that these institutions undergo in the urban context.

Indian sociologists like Desai (1955, 1956, 1964), Shah 1973, 1988, 1991, 1998, 2005) Oberoi (1993, 2003), Madan (1962a, 1962b), Singer (1968) have observed that even in the urban-industrial context the Indians manage to preserve the traditional values and reproduce family and kinship relations; the “spirit of joint family” is largely upheld by the urbanites. I have found in my study (Roy 2010) that instances of desertion and treatment of the aged with cruelty are

rare and family and kinship support in one form or the other continues for the aged till the last. The concept of social resilience can be counter-posed to the Weberian idea of rationalization (calculative means-end rationalism) and dehumanization of modern life.

There has been a long-standing argument in the field of Indian social sciences that India, despite being under colonial rule for more than 150 years, has evolved its own mix of diverse cultural traditions and therefore its own path of modernization, which would maintain its distinctiveness from Western path to modernity (Mukerji 1948; Madan 1994; Srinivas 1966; Singh 1973, and many others). The argument has been brought to life by Charles Taylor who observes that 'perhaps the most important task of social sciences in our day [is] understanding the full gamut of alternative modernities which are in the making in different parts of the world'. Not to do so 'locks us into an [Western] ethnocentric prison, condemned to project our own forms into everyone else, ... and blinds us to the diversity in our own world' (Taylor 2001: 185). Supporting Taylor, Sarah Lamb, who has studied the elderly in Kolkata and elsewhere in India extensively, observes: 'Examining the diverse and complex ways older Indian and other communities are critically reflecting upon aging in the present helps free us from such an ethnocentric [Western] prison' (Lamb 2012: 13).

Fieldwork

The metropolitan Kolkata and its aged persons (men and women above 60 years with middleclass background) constituted the universe of the study. The reason behind choosing only middleclass population is that in this particular class we can expect to see the presence of the elements of modernity or rationalization, which find manifestation in the control of family size by using various methods of contraception, in arrangement of households, in changing family relations and in growing individualism and careerism. 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, could be the deciding

factor in the quality of life the aged live. 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.

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 level the family system binds the aged people and what are the forces that motivate them (or force them) to leave their family to take refuge in old-age home. The comparative gives us a view of different phases of their life passes through. 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 they 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 home). The first-hand data that I collected from field constitute the major data-base of my study. Besides, 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.

1. Fieldwork in Salt Lake

For the first category of respondents, i.e., the elderly who live in their house with or without the other members of the family, I selected some blocks in Salt Lake, Kolkata. I did my fieldwork in Salt Lake between December 2013 and April 2014. Salt Lake is a planned township; the residential areas with wide open space, markets and parks, community centres, wide roads, lakes, well planned houses, offices and apartments, good network of transportation have made the area coveted for the middle and upper-class people of the city. The whole township is divided into a number of blocks. All the blocks have structural similarity. Each

block has a name and every house in a particular block also bears a number. This made my task of locating the houses of my respondents easy. Five to ten minutes of walk from my place of stay took me to most of my respondents.

I chose Salt Lake because the residents there had higher education, had served in high government offices or business houses, had sound economic background, had their own houses, had the size of their family rationalised. They have brought up their children with utmost care and the younger generation experience large-scale spatial mobility because of career compulsions. The residents are knowledgeable; they are aware about the happenings both in their social “field” and in the larger world.

I have used snowball sampling method to select my sample population. This means having approached a few aged men or women from the selected blocks (neighbourhoods), using my personal contacts, I reached out to other respondents using their social network. Approaching the respondents through their friends or close neighbours helped rapport building which in turn helped collecting an authentic account of their life.

I have primarily used qualitative method, relying largely on in-depth case study method, interacting with the respondents in person informally for long hours and sometimes on more than one occasion. The idea was to get into a lively “dialogue”, into sessions of intense interactions with the thinking selves, sitting on a huge reserve of experience, who do not merely exchange passive disinterested accounts of their lives and viewpoints but interact with strategies of “impression management”, compassion or impulses and interest, which is not possible except in direct interaction.

I did a quick elementary survey on 54 households, (which are families, without exception), which had at least one member above the age of 60, and selected 32 of them for the in-depth study. I did survey with the help of a structured interview schedule which helped me know about the changes in family form and size over a span of at least two generations, the economic, educational, housing, social and occupational background of the families that have been covered under the study. After the survey I had undertaken the course of

qualitative research allowing the respondents to narrate the details of their lives in an autobiographical style and following the phenomenological method where the individual respondents would express the course of their lived experiences as they appear in their consciousness.

While conducting the initial survey I informed the informant that I would come again to talk to him/her in details, where the focus would be on his/her life. It would be a kind of life history or their lived experiences from childhood to the present day that they would have to share with me. When I told them about my plan most of them took it very sportingly and assured me that they would help me in every possible way. However, when contacted later a few persons showed their reluctance to talk to me about their life. They didn't like the idea that I would visit their houses and would talk to them about their personal life. I think they felt uncomfortable in sharing their personal life with an outsider. I decided to keep those, who were very reluctant, out of my list of informants for the second stage my study.

In the second phase of my study, the female respondents expressed greater annoyance in sharing their life histories with me than the male respondents. I knew well that until and unless I build a strong rapport with my respondents they would not feel comfortable; breaking this barrier was a challenge for me. In order to make a breakthrough I first made an appointment with a willing respondent and went to his/her place at a time they had given. My first task was to explain the respondent everything about my study to remove all the possible apprehensions about me from their mind. I deliberately spoke a bit about me and my family, I shared with them my relationship with my grandparents, my love for them and how badly I miss them now when they are no more. This helped generate in the respondent a bit of empathy for me. I knew that moving into interview in a formal way (like question answer way) would not help much and therefore I fixed the questions in my memory without any fixed sequence and took care in keeping the conversation as natural as possible, without giving them a hint that she/he was already into the interview. The interview was thus

transformed into a normal interaction or “adda”, based on a high degree of mutual trust and a bit of mutual empathy.

I have learnt, in course of interaction with the respondents, that being aged they live with a general feeling of neglect and they long for warmth and are willing to share the experiences of their life with someone whom they can trust and who can generate a bit of empathy. They generally have enough of time and less amount of work. Moreover as their children are all well settled they remain busy with their own work the elderly people feel bored and they look for people with whom he/she can chat for a while. Thus in most of the cases my respondents felt very happy to see me; once they got over with the initial phase of hesitation they became interested to talk about their life; their achievements, struggle and regrets, their thoughts about the contemporary society and so on. In talking about their childhood days the respondents often used to get nostalgic, narrating interesting incidents of their life with me. They just went on with a flow and shared many things which were not even required for my study. But they were in such a good mood that I didn't feel like stopping them, and it would also have been rude and unethical. I did notice the glow in their face and a spirit of engagement when they were unfolding the layers of untold “truth” of their life.

2. Fieldwork in old-age homes

I have studied two old-age homes between November 2014 and March 2015 in two phases. In the first phase, I did a quick survey with the help of a structured questionnaire on 56 inhabitants in two Homes in Kolkata, namely Mukto Bihanga (located in Natagachi, South 24 Paraganas) and Rabindra Niketan (in Banskroni area of south Kolkata), and in the second phase I have done an in-depth case study of 32 informants selected from amongst the ones covered in the survey. While the survey-data helped understand the socio-economic background of the aged, the case studies helped draw an insight of the micro social processes which they go through in the family and Home locales. Through case studies, I tried to draw autobiographical sketches of the life of the aged, which they had drawn reflecting on their family life and their life in the Home.

Selection of the Homes was a serious problem. Through web search I made a list of some old-age homes in and around Salt Lake areas and I had shortlisted Bairag and Asha Niketan. I made several calls to the office of Asha Niketan but none picked up the call. Then I shifted my focus on the other Home which is one of the most reputed old age homes in Salt Lake area. I visited the Home after fixing an appointment with the manager over telephone. Being briefed about my research the manager told me that he would permit me to talk to the boarders only for a day. I got the message and I returned heartbroken.

Using my social network I approached the owner-cum-manager of an old-age home called Mukto Bihanga, located at Natagachi, on the outskirts of Sonarpur of South Kolkata. One young couple was managing the Home. I explained them about my research work and they readily appreciated my research interest and promised me all kinds of help.

Mukto Bihanga was built in 2010. It is a two-storey building on a 10 Cottah land, hosting 15 boarders. In each room there are two beds, two tables, two chairs two racks and an attached bathroom. In each room two boarders are accommodated. There are a few single-bed rooms for which monthly rent is much higher. Out of 15 boarders only one lives in a single-bed room. Boarders living in a double-bed room pay Rs. 8500 per month while the rent for a single-bed room is Rs 10000 per month. Besides they have to pay a security deposit of Rs.35000.

There is a garden area in front of the main building. Many seasonal flowers, cactus and medicinal plants can be seen in the garden. Just beside the garden area there is a small worship room where idols of Jesus, and goddesses like Laksmi, Ganesha, and Shiva can be found. This home is away from the city that is the reason there is peace and tranquillity at the home. The closest market is in Sonarpur and the staffs of this home bring all the vegetables, fish, meat and other necessary items from that market.

I took time explaining the boarders the purpose of my study, particularly how the study is important for my career and the social cause behind the study. I told them that they would be doing a favour on me by giving interview. By giving a

small introduction of myself and my research work I managed to generate a little bit of sympathy for me. Since I was working on the relational aspect, I had to ask a lot of personal questions, particularly their relation with their children, whether they care for them or not, their relation with their sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, their grudge against their family members etc. Since I was dealing with very personal, sensitive, emotive areas of their life I made it a point that I knew that I have to be very sensitive and they would speak out only if they like me and feel for me.

After rounds of briefing about me and my work when I approached them for in-depth interview a few respondents were still not very comfortable in telling me about their personal life. I then decided to share with them some of my personal stories, particularly my relation with my parents, their expectations from me, how they show their concern for me, how do I care for them etc. I purposively shared my personal life with them in order to break the ice and to make them more comfortable with me. This worked and they started opening up.

While taking the interviews I used a small but high quality voice recorder, which proved to be very handy. I used to record the interview and after returning home I would transfer the matter to my laptop. I did at least one interview a day; sometimes I managed to take two staying longer. Since the home was on the outskirts of Kolkata and it took time to reach the Home I visited the respondents either in the morning or in the afternoon. I received tremendous help and support from all of my respondents.

I wanted to study one more Home to get some variations. While I was taking interviews in Mukto Bihanga, I kept searching for one more. Some of the elderly persons who I had known personally took me to the manager of a Home called Rabindra Niketan. The manager advised me to approach with a formal letter with testimonials which he had passed by the board of directors, thus paving my way into the Home. I started my fieldwork in this Home in mid of February 2015 and continued till April, the same year.

Rabindra Niketan is situated in Naktala near Ananda Ashram in South Kolkata. According to the information given to me, one Mr. Rabindranath Sen,

the chairman of an old-age home called Mahadebi Birla Niketan, which was owned by the Birla industrial group, decided to build a new Home seeing the growing demand from the elderly in Kolkata. The Birla group financed the construction of Rabindra Niketan and Mr. Sen took care of the administrative part. He donated the land and constituted a trustee board to look after the administration of the new Home. Martin Burn Company constructed this building within three years, between 1997 and 2000. This Home became operational in 2000. Mr. Das, the manager since 2000, prepared a menu chart, appointed a doctor to visit the home on regular basis. He built a small library for use of the boarders. He plays devotional songs and popular Bengali songs every morning between 5 and 7:30. Keeping the inadequate supply of water in mind he installed a deep tube well. He also made an arrangement for doctor's chamber, prayer room, and a room for the security guards. One boarder committed suicide jumping from the second floor. To avoid such incidents Mr. Das arranged to cover all the balconies of the rooms with grills; he also raised the height of the walls in the terrace. Mr. Das took initiative in constructing a big kitchen, separate quarters for the manager and his family, and a guesthouse.

In Rabindra Niketan there are 45 boarders of whom I covered 41 for my preliminary survey; I could not cover all because three of them were not available during my study. There are three types of rooms in Rabindra Niketan, (a) single-bed room single occupancy, (b) double-bed room single occupancy and (c) double-bed room double occupancy. Monthly rent for these three types of rooms varies between Rs.5,500 and Rs.7000. In addition to room rent the borders pay electricity bills and for the maids who serve in their rooms. As security deposit Rs. 90000 is paid by the boarders at the time of admission.

My experience with the boarders of Rabindra Niketan is mixed one. Here most of the boarders come from well off families and are educated. Majority of them had white collar jobs or were high officials before retirement. Compared to the boarders in Mukto Bihanga most of the boarders in Rabindra Niketan are better off and represent higher middleclass. Some of them were so well placed that I was feeling a bit of uncomfortable talking with them. Here also music and

sharing of the personal information helped me building good rapport with the boarders. The inmates over here were also very supportive. Even months after the completion of my fieldwork some boarders keep calling me and enquire about my health, and research work.

My experience of working in old age homes has taught me many things and has made me a mature human being. The experience of dealing with the boarders, building up a rapport with them, listening to their life history, doing various activities with them, sharing my own stories with the boarders, singing for them – all have taught me some basics about how to interact with people and collect information, which, in turn, has generated interest in me for undertaking fieldwork for future research.

After collecting the information I started writing down the autobiographical versions of their life narrated by the boarders. Transcription part was very tiring as well as time consuming. It took almost nine months to complete the work of transcription. Now when I read the narratives of life of the elderly I feel so glad that I have completed the not always beautiful and challenging journey. The relations I have developed with the aged and the understanding of their life will be the precious treasures in my cultural capital.

I have recorded the life history of my respondents following the logic of phenomenology (combining elements of both descriptive and hermeneutic phenomenology), which precisely means I had to get to the subjects' accounts of their life and experiences and take care in presenting their versions undistorted in preparing the "text", and, at the same time, being aware that the informants' versions of the information could very well be "strategic", "interest driven" or "unconsciously mediated", constructed under the influence and in the language of tradition.

I prepared master tables on the quantitative part of the background information for both categories of informants out of which I made a number of small tables, which have been analyzed in Chapter 3. Besides, I prepared two separate reports, one on the 32 case studies done in Salt Lake and another on

32 case studies done on the elderly living in old-age homes. Chapters 4 to 8 are based on the qualitative information collected through case studies.

Problems encountered in the field

Although the first phase of my fieldwork went off rather smoothly, I had to encounter a few problems in the second phase (I was doing detailed case studies). First, there was the confidence building problem which I have already addressed. In a few cases, despite my all-out efforts I was refused a meeting. I had to select respondents from outside the list of persons on whom I had done the primary survey.

Another major problem I had to deal with was that during the interview many of my respondents got extremely emotional when they were narrating the sad incidents and unpleasant memories of their life. Some of them even broke down. In such situations I felt sad and a bit bewildered without knowing how to console them or how to react. I just kept quiet hoping that the informant will overcome that passing moment. I came across three cases where one of the children of the respondents committed suicide. When they were narrating about their own stories, in every two minutes they kept on telling about their deceased son/daughter. One of the respondents took me to a room where her elder son committed suicide. She showed me her son's creations - writings, poems, and pictures. For an outsider that I was it was emotionally stressful to see all those stuffs.

One of my respondents, whom I covered in my initial survey and developed some affinity had died before I could interview her for the second phase of my fieldwork. In this case, I had to take the interview of the deceased respondent's husband. Fortunately he was very cooperative and was eager to share his life history. Some of my other respondents were also not keeping well so I had to call them several times to fix an appointment. Thus the health issue of the respondents was a major obstacle to my fieldwork.

A major part of my study was devoted to exploring the relationship between the aged and their children. However, I interviewed only the aged men or women

and recorded their versions of their relationship with their spouse, children, larger kinship network and neighbours. An understanding based on the version of one party in the relationship (the “ego”) is likely to have some elements of “bias” since the “alter” remained unheard. The possibility of bias is high when the informants had conflicting relations with other members of the family or were into relations loaded with tensions since every party involved in conflict is driven by some kind of interest, material or value-based interests. In most of the cases as the children stay away from their parents either because of their profession or because of marriage it was not possible for me to crosscheck the versions of my respondents. Had I taken the versions of the children and the spouse of the ego it would have been a complex thing to handle. I recon, this is serious problem with urban ethnography since the members of the families and communities are widely spread out.

In a troubled family, where there is tension between parents and children or between the spouses there is a tendency on the part of the respondents to conceal the “truth” or give only that version of the relation which would not project them in negative way, especially to the researcher who is a stranger. The informants deploy all the strategies of impression management since they are acting in the “front stage” (Goffman 1956). The researcher can take their version as they are, doubt them, but cannot verify the authenticity of the information. One can however guess the authenticity of the information by reading the way they receive the researcher, their gestures, the degree of emotive involvement when they reflect on their past life, and so on. An informant breaking down while narrating how badly she misses her son who has committed suicide or how badly she was treated by her daughter-in-law can hardly be doubted. The researcher also cannot be dispassionate, heartless observer using all her shrewd strategies to collect the “thing”-like “objective” social facts. The researcher moves with all her “pity”, humane qualities, emotion and feelings in interacting with the individual informants in the field. The researcher has to realise that the respondent has allowed him/her inside her/his house, has offered her tea and snacks and shared precious moment of life with her/him while opening up the precious treasures of

experiences from their private sphere and that itself can be the foundation of trust in the interaction. However there is no scope to rule out that there were some in my study who were strategic, disinterested and have given a “constructed” versions of their life and views. One of the respondents didn’t tell me that he was married for the second time. His first wife died a few years ago; I got this information about the respondent from another respondent who happened to be the former’s friend. However as a researcher my task was to trust my respondents and that is what I did during the field work.