

Chapter 3

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE ELDERLY

Introduction

We have studied the middleclass elderly in two different residential locations – (1) those who live in their own house or flat along with their family members in Salt Lake and (2) those who live in two old-age homes (“Homes” henceforth), namely, Mukto Bihanga, located on the southern fringe of greater Kolkata, and Rabindra Niketan in South Kolkata. We have done the study in two phases; (1) a preliminary survey on the socio-economic background of the elderly, 54 from Salt Lake and 56 from the two Homes and (2) intensive case study of 32 individuals each from the two categories (a total of 64 case studies). In this chapter I have used the quantitative data drawn through the survey to draw an understanding of the social and economic background of the elderly who have been covered in the study. I have used the term “social and economic” in a broad sense to include the age and sex distribution, education, occupation, family size, health status, the quality and quantity of their residential places and also addressed the question of gender inequality. After presenting the elderly in two locales separately I have tried to do a comparative analysis of the socio-economic statuses of the two categories of informants.

Elderly in Salt Lake

Of the 54 elderly we have surveyed 37 are male and 17 female. Selection of a larger number of male in the population was not deliberate; it just so happened that a greater number of heads of the households were male; the women who came into my survey were largely the heads of their households. In some cases they are either widow or had their husband down with ailments. As we see in Table 3.1 39 out of 54 respondents (72 per cent), men and women taken together, were between 60 and 80 years of age.

Table 3.1: Distribution of the aged by sex and age

Age group	Male	Female	Total
60-70	19	10	29
71-80	15	05	20
80 +	03	02	05
Total	37	17	54

So far as the residential status of the elderly is concerned, 22 out of 54 (41 per cent) were living in their own houses and the remaining 32 (59 per cent) in their own flats, which were constructed by the government employees and their friends and relatives when the planned township was developing in the early 1980s and 1990s. The house owners got their plots of land through lottery.

In Table 3.2 we can see that 32 of the 54 (59 per cent) informants' households live in houses or flats with more than 1000 sq. feet area and the remaining 22 live in relatively smaller flats of the size of 600-1000 sq. feet.

Table 3.2: Size of the house/flat

Size of the house/flat (in sq.feet)	No.	Number of persons sharing a flat/house		
		-3	4-5	6-7
600- 800	12	11	02	-
800-1000	10	05	05	-
1000-1500	19	10	11	-
1500+	13	04	06	-
Total	54	30	24	-

We have also tried to find out the house type and per-capita space of the household members. In Table 3.3 we can see that only 18 of the 54 households (33 per cent) live in two-bed room flats; these are the residents who have retired as government employees or do small-scale business; the remaining 36 (67 per cent) households live in bigger houses with at least three bed rooms, a drawing room, a kitchen and two toilets. The households being smaller we can see that the members have a comfortable per-capita space allocation (see Table 3.4); in 43 out of 54 cases (80 per cent) one member has a share of at least 300 sq. feet house space. Although we do not have an yardstick for comparison, in Salt Lake we see a situation where the members of the smaller households use space

which is much more than what they require, particularly when population density in Kolkata is counted among the highest in the country.

Table 3.3: House Type

House type	No.
2 bed	18
3 bed	28
4 bed	05
4+ bed	03
Total	54

Table 3.4: Per-capita distribution of living space

Area (in sq. feet)	No.
-300	11
300-500	19
500-700	14
700-900	03
900+	07
Total	54

In my study the informants, both men and women, represent only three upper castes, namely, Brahmin, Kayestha and Baidya (Table 3.5). Among the three castes again the Kayesthas are numerically dominant (63 per cent). It is quite possible that in the whole of Salt Lake (and other new townships) the upper-caste middleclass people used their social and economical capital to access land or flat.

Table 3.5: Caste background of the informants

	Brahmin	Kayestha	Baidya	Baishya	Total
Male	9	22	4	-	35*
Female	4	11	2	-	17
Total	13	33	6	-	52

*Two male informants were Buddhist

Table 3.6 shows that only 6 out of 54 elderly (only 11 per cent) are in good health; among others 32 (59 per cent) live with various ailments (blood sugar, blood pressure, joint pain are very common), and 16 (29.6 per cent) of the respondents live with critical ailments (like problems in heart, kidney, lung, spine and bone); some of them have already undergone surgery. The latter category of

ailing elderly depends on professional service providers in one way or the other; many of them cannot move without help.

Table 3.6: Health status of the home inmates

	<i>Overall good</i>	<i>Not too serious</i>	<i>Critical</i>	<i>Total</i>
Male	5	20	12	37
Female	1	12	04	17
Total	6	32	16	54

Notes: (1) Overall good – those who move around freely despite having ailments like blood pressure and blood sugar or mild hearing problem; (2) Not too serious – those who have problems with one vital organ and move around with difficulty; (3) Critical – those who have serious problems in multiple organs and cannot move without support or are bed-ridden.

Table 3.7: Income of the informants

	Income (in Rs. in thousands) per month				Total
	-50	50-100	100-150	150-200	
Male	25	07	04	01	37
Female	15	02	-	-	17
Total	40	09	04	01	54

In calculating income we have considered the income of the elderly only and that of their spouses; we have not taken into account the income of their children. Yet we had problems since the informants could not give us data on the interest they draw from their savings. Table 3.7 therefore shows that 40 out of 54 (74 per cent) respondents have an income which is less than Rs. 50,000 a month; they could be the retired persons living on their pension.

Table 3.8: Informants' parents' education

	Illiterate	Elementary /primary	High School/IA	Graduate	Post graduate	Technical	Total
Father	-	-	31	15	-	8	54
Mother	5	10	38	1	-	-	54

About education two points come up clearly; one, the intergenerational mobility, second, gender gap. Table 3.8 gives an account of the education level of the parents of the informants. Among mothers only one was graduate, five illiterate and remaining 48 had primary or high school level education. Among fathers, none had below school level education; 15 (28 per cent) were graduate and 8 had technical education (mostly B.Tech. or MBBS). Among the men

informants 22 out of 37 (59 per cent) are graduate and 12 (32 per cent) are post-graduate and 3 have technical education. The wives of men informants lag behind their husbands in terms of education as 5 of them have only school level education and none has technical education. The children of the men informants have moved ahead of their fathers (Table 3.9) as 20 of them (34 per cent) are post-graduate and 20 (34 per cent) have technical education. This reflects the tendency among the younger generation to go for technical education, which is a consequence of globalization and expansion of market.

3.9: Level of education (Men)

	Levels of education				Total
	SF/HS/IA	Graduate	Post-grad.	Technical	
Informants	-	22	12	3	37
Informants' spouses	5	24	08	-	37
Informants' children	1	18	20	20	59

The women informants slightly lag behind the men informants as 3 out of 17 have school level education 9 are graduate and 5 are post-graduate. None of them has technical education. As can be seen in Table 3.10, the spouses of the women informants have higher level of education. Their children have done even better with higher level of education, particularly post-graduation and technical education.

3.10: Level of education (Women)

	Levels of education					Total
	III./elementary	SF/HS/IA	Grad.	Post-gradu	Technical	
Informants	-	03	09	05	-	17
Informants' spouses	-	-	13	03	01	17
Informants' children	-	-	08	08	07	23

As in education in the field of occupation also we notice a kind of mobility and change over generations. Table 3.11 shows that all the mothers of the 54 informants were home makers although their fathers were all economically active. They were either self-employed (meaning engaged in business), private sector employee and primarily engaged as employees in the government and semi-government sectors. To be government employee, school, college and university teachers and government officers has been a matter of pride and security among the middleclass Bengalis.

Table 3.11: Informants' parents' occupation

	Home-maker	Self-employed	Govt. employee	School/college teachers	Govt. officer	Private sector employee	Total
Father	-	14	11	14	04	11	54
Mother	54	-	-	-	-	-	54

Table 3.12: Occupation of the informants/spouses/children

Occupation	Informants		Informants' spouses		Informants' children	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Home-maker	-	07	-	18	-	08
Self-employed/business	02	-	02	01	02	05
Govt. Employee	16	-	08	03	01	03
School/college/univte achers	05	10	02	11	03	10
Govt. Officers	12	-	04	02	02	-
Pvt. Sector/Corporate sector employee	02	-	01	01	29	07
Total	37	17	17	36*	37	33

*One male informant is unmarried

Table 3.12 gives us some interesting trends about changes in the occupational patterns over two generations. First, among the informants and their spouses the share of home makers is higher. Second, among the females there is clear job preference and that is the job of teaching in school, college or university. Among the children of the informants there is a sharp growth of private or corporate sector jobs. This trend goes along with the overall trend in the job

market, which means, the stagnation or decline in public sector jobs and expansion of jobs in the private sector.

Table 3.13 tells us about the marital status of the informants. Among 54 informants one is unmarried, 41 of them live with their living spouses, 5 are widow and 7 widower. It is noteworthy that 76 per cent of the informants live with their spouses, which has huge significance in terms of binding the elderly to their own houses and families. To have some form of family and care is the most crucial factor that prevents the aged from moving into old-age homes.

Table 3.13: Marital status of the informants

1. Married (living with spouse):	41
2. Unmarried:	01
3. Widow:	05
4. Widower:	07
Total	54

The most distinctive finding of the study, which has huge bearing on the quality of life of the aged, is the progressive downsizing of both the household and family. The family is becoming smaller because of control over reproductive behaviour of the urban middleclass population. We can see the trend in Table 3.14 very clearly. All the families of the informants have less than five members and the largest number (30 out of 54 or 56 per cent) are restricted to 3 members. The informants' families of orientation and their spouses' families of orientation were significantly bigger.

Table 3.14: Changing family size

	Family size						Total
	Unmarried	-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10+	
Informants	01	30	23	-	-	-	54
Informants' family of orientation	-	-	10	17	17	10	54
Spouses' family of orientation	-	01	13	21	07	12	54

Table 3.15: Interesting findings about informants' family

1. Childless:	1 unmarried; 1 childless
2. Single child (daughter) families:	09
3. Single child (son) families:	17
4. Families with two children:	23
5. Families with more than two children:	03
Total	54

The information in Table 3.15 also confirms the trend called downsizing of the family in the generation of the informants. Among the 54 families 9 (16.6 per cent) are single daughter (single child), 17 (31.5 per cent) are single son (single-child) and 23 (52.6 per cent) are two-child families. These three categories together account for 91 per cent of the total families we have covered in the survey.

The social background of the Home-inmates

An elementary survey was conducted on 56 elderly persons, who live in two old-age homes, Mukto Bihanga and Rabindra Niketan, of whom only 10 are men and remaining 46 are women. In table 3.16 we can see that 48 out of 56 (85.71 per cent) aged are above 70. Elderly in the higher age group are relatively more vulnerable to move to old-age homes.

Table 3.16: Distribution of the aged in terms of sex and age

Age group	Male	Female	Total
60-70	01	07	8
71-80	08	21	29
80 +	01	18	19
	10	46	56

Table 3.17 tells us that 31 out of 56 (55.35 per cent) elderly are living in the home for more than three years while the remaining inmates have shifted to Home within last five years.

Table 3.17: Period of stay in old-age homes

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
-1 year	3	08
1-3 years	3	11
3-5 years	1	05
5+ years	3	22
Total	10	46

Table 3.18 gives the caste background of the home inmates and as we have seen in previous section (where we have discussed about the elderly living in Salt Lake) the elderly living in old-age homes largely represent the three higher castes, namely, Brahmin, Kayestha and Baidya; they also largely represent the middleclass.

Table 3.18: Caste background of the home inmates

	<i>Brahmin</i>	<i>Kayestha</i>	<i>Baidya</i>	<i>Baishya</i>	<i>Total</i>
Male	2	5	3	-	10
Female	18	25	11	2	46
Total	20	30	14	2	56

Table 3.19: Place of origin

From within greater Kolkata	- 47
From outside Kolkata	- 09
Total	56

As seen in table 3.19 the home inmates are largely of urban background; we have found that 47 (84 per cent) of the elderly living in homes are from within Kolkata while only 9 are from outside Kolkata, but primarily from small and medium-sized urban centres. One can probably say that living in old-age homes is, by and large, an urban phenomenon.

Table 3.20: Residence status before moving into the home

1. Rented house –	14
2. Own house/flat –	42
Total	56

Table 3.20 shows that a large majority (42 out of 56 or 75 per cent) of the home inmates had their own house or flat which is an indication of middleclass living. Table 3.21 gives us an idea of what they have done with their houses or flats while shifting to old-age homes. Out of 42 house/flat owners 19 (45 per cent) have disposed of their property and 13 have left their house/flat behind for the use of their family members. In one interesting case the house has been donated to Ramkrishna Mission (a charitable religious organization with global network).

Table 3.21: Status of the house/flat after they moved into the home

1. Family members stay –	13
2. Kept locked –	08
3. Put on rent –	01
4. Donated to R.K. Mission	01
5. Sold out -	19
Total	42

Table 3.22: Health status of the home inmates

	<i>Overall good</i>	<i>Not too serious</i>	<i>Critical</i>	<i>Total</i>
Male	2	4	4	10
Female	6	17	23	46
Total	8	21	27	56

Notes (1) Overall good – those who move around freely despite having ailments like blood pressure and blood sugar or mild hearing problem; (2) Not too serious – those who have problems with one vital organ and move around with difficulty; (3) Critical – those who have serious problems in multiple organs and cannot move without support or bed-ridden.

Health is an important factor that determines the quality of life of the elderly. People with poor health and critical ailments are more likely to take shelter in the homes in search of security and care, particularly when they live alone and the living family members are either too busy with their professions or have dispersed to distant cities. Table 3.22 shows that 48 out of 56 (86 per cent) elderly live with different ailments, 27 (48 per cent) of them have critical ailments as they live with the support of the professional care givers and have their movements highly restricted.

Table 3.23: Marital status of the informants

1. Married (living with spouse):	03
2. Unmarried:	21
3. Widow:	30
4. Widower:	02
Total	56

Elderly women, unmarried women, widow, unmarried men, widower with urban middleclass background are the ones with little family support are more likely to move into the old-age homes in Kolkata. We have found (Table 3.23) that 21 out of 56 (37.50 per cent) elderly are unmarried, 30 (53.50 per cent) are widow and 2 widower. Only three of the informants have their spouses alive.

Table 3.24: Changing family size

	Family size						Total
	Unmarried	-3	4-5	6-7	8-9	10+	
Informants	21	20	14	-	01	-	56
Informants' family orientation	-	01	11	12	11	21	56
Spouses' family of orientation	-	-	09	08	10	08	35*

*21 remaining respondents are unmarried

Table 3.24 gives us a picture of how the size of the family has significantly dropped from the informants' and their spouses' families of orientation to their families of procreation. Among the informants 21 are unmarried and out of remaining 35 informants 20 have less than 3 members (which indicate that they stick to one child) and 14 have 4-5 members. Both the informants' and their spouses' families of orientation were much bigger than their families of procreation. For the informants' family of orientation only 12 out of 56 (21 per cent) had less than 5 members and for the informants' spouses' family of orientation only 9 (16 per cent) had less than 5 members. Again, for the informant's generation only one had 8 or 9 members in their family but for the informants' family of orientation 44 out of 56 had more than 6 members and for the informants' spouses' family the number in this category was 26 out of 35 (74 per cent). The data clearly indicate to rationalization of family size in the generation of the informants; the trend could even be stronger in the generation of their children.

Table 3.25: Interesting findings about informants' family

1. Unmarried	21
2. Childless:	05
3. Single child (daughter) families:	11
4. Single child (son) families:	04
5. Families with two children:	12
6. Families with more than two children:	03
Total	56

Table 3.25 gives us some useful information which also indicates to a trend called downsizing of urban family. Out of 35 married elderly 5 were childless. Among the remaining 30 families 15 were single child (11 with single daughter, and 4 with single son), are 12 were 2-child families; only 3 had more than two children.

Table 3.26: Informants' parents' education

	Illiterate	Elementary /primary	High School/IA	Graduate	Post graduate	Technical	Total
Father	-	-	31	19	02	04	56
Mother	06	27	22	01	-	-	56

3.27: Level of education of the informants (Men), their spouses and children

	Levels of education				Total
	SF/HS/IA	Graduate	Post-graduate	Technical	
Informants	1	6	2	1	10
Informants's spouses	2	6	2	-	10
Informants' children	-	1	1	2	04*

* The number of children is less because some of the informants are unmarried and some are childless.

Table 3.28: Level of education of the informants (Women), their spouses and chindren

	Levels of education					Total
	III./elementary	SF/HS/IA	Graduate	Post-grad.	Technical	
Informants	09	10	19	05	03	46
Informants' spouses	-	05	16	05	09	35
Informants' children	-	03	28	05	04	40

One can notice an intergeneration social mobility in terms of education and employment. So far as the fathers of the informants (Table 3.26) are concerned we can see that more than 55 per cent had only school level education. We can also see that 19 of them were graduates, 2 were post-graduate and 4 had technical education (engineering or medical). Mothers were less educated; 6 being illiterate, 27 having only primary level or elementary education and only one graduate. The education levels of the male informants and that of their spouses (Tables 3.27 and 3.28) appear to be at par. Their children also show a similar pattern. So far as elderly women are concerned, 9 are illiterate and 10 have only school level education (Table 3.28). However, 19 of them are graduate, 5 post-graduate, and 3 have technical education. Among the children of the informants there is no illiteracy and their access to higher and technical education is noteworthy.

Table 3.29: Informants' parents' occupation

	Home-maker	Self-employed	Govt. employee	School/college teachers	Govt. officer	Private sector employee	Total
Father	-	20	09	05	05	17	56
Mother	56	-	-	-	-	-	56

The mothers of the 56 informants were all home-makers (Table 3.29). Among their fathers 20 were self-employed, 19 were employees and officers in government owned sectors, and 17 were employed in the private sector. Among the women informants (see Table 3.30) the share of home-makers is still high, 23 (41 per cent) out of 56, a drop of 59 per cent from their mothers. It is interesting to note that the remaining 56 per cent of the elderly women were either employed or were self-employed. Since most of the informants (46) are women their spouses were all engaged in economic activities; 17 of them were either government employee or officer and one was university professor. Coming to the children of the informants 21 out of 25 daughters (84 per cent) are home-makers and only 4 are engaged in economic activities (mostly school/college teachers).

Table 3.30: Occupation of the informants/ spouses/ children

Occupation	Informants		Informants' spouses		Informants' children	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Home-maker	-	23	-	02	-	21
Self-employed/business	04	01	06	-	06	01
Govt. employee	04	07	08	01	01	-
School/college/univ. teachers	-	12	01	-	03	03
Govt. officers	02	-	09	-	-	-
Pvt.Sector/Corporate sector employee	-	01	05	-	09	-
Unemployed/dependent	-	02	-	03	-	-
Total	10	06	29	6	19	25

Table 3.31: Source of income

	<i>Own source</i>	<i>Dependent</i>	<i>Own source plus support from family members</i>
Male	7	3	-
Female	30	11	5
Total	37	14	5

The elderly men were all engaged in economic activities and their living widows live on the pension and property they have left behind. The men elderly home-inmates have their pension and savings to live on while some women receive family pension (deceased husband's pension). For those men and women who did not have any regular income now receive financial support from their family members like son, daughter, and niece and so on. Only 14 out of 56 residents (11 of them being women) depend on their family members for their sustenance in the Home.

Summary of the findings

A comparison of the background of the two categories of elderly reveals some interesting facts which, in the chapters to follow, would 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, on the other hand, mostly live with their wives and have stronger support from the family members and they are unlikely to move into the old-age home unless their family support system breaks down.

Second, it has been observed that while the women have overwhelming numerical dominance among the inmates of the old-age homes, 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 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 could be because the elderly men being the head of the family found greater representation in the selected informants. Another reason is that the most elderly women living in Salt Lake live with their living spouses.

Third, the level of education, nature of housing, 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. The number of families with only one child (a daughter or a son) or two children is the dominant standard for the educated urban middleclass, particularly in the generations of the informants and their children.

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 the Homes does not mean the end of familial or kinship relations who live in the city or to a distant place. The aged living in old-age homes 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 compared to their parents. The children of the informants have moved even further ahead. Among them, 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 Homes were housewives but many from amongst their daughters are educated, employed in quality jobs and economically self-reliant. Among the women there is a clear preference for teaching job in school, college or university.