

## Changing Social Relations in a Metropolis: The Perception of the Middleclass Aged

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***Abstract:** In recent years urban middleclass families are experiencing rationalization of family size, rationalization of living arrangement and large-scale dispersal of younger members in search of livelihood opportunities. The question of sociological significance is that whether all these leave a disintegrating impact on relations in the family, on the kin-group or on the neighbourhood relations. The present paper, based on empirical findings, observes that the middleclass in an urban setting face a number of stresses but they understand the value of familial and social relations, and even neighbourhood relations, in order to thwart the potentially disintegrating social forces. In the face of dispersal of the lone child in a distant city, the aged couple fall back on each other, support each other with a great deal of empathy to combat the challenges of old-age.*

**Keywords:** social relations, familial relations, kinship relations, neighbourhood relations, conjugal relation, dispersal of family members, rationalization of family size.

### **Introduction**

Changing social relations continue to be one of the central interests in sociology and social anthropology in India. The focus, however, has shifted from “break-down” of joint families, which had been the preoccupation of the urban family studies in the first three decades or so after independence, to the study of micro social spaces in terms of household rearrangements (Shah 1998), dispersal of family members, rationalization of family size, and most importantly, the impact of all these processes on changing family relations (Roy 2014). The present paper examines the changing family relations, kinship relations and neighbourhood relations in an urban middleclass setting, applying descriptive-phenomenological method. The relationships in the middleclass families in an urban setting like Salt Lake City of Kolkata are changing fast. Sometimes it results from multiple tensions. One such tension emanates from the conventional urge to uphold the familial values and hold all the members together, and the pragmatic tendency among the members to disperse to different palaces and relay

the relations on rational terms. The Weberian calculative rationalism seems to be silently creeping into the family and kinship relations in an urban setting. Although the extended family ties are retained in some cases, emotive elements have considerably been eroding from such relations. The neighbourhood and friendship circles have assumed much of the functions that were earlier performed by the kin groups. While rationalization of family size and dispersal of family members are ubiquitous, the bond and emotional interdependence among the members of nuclear families has been strong (Roy 2015). Away from each other, the family members make use of the modern communication system in order to keep in close touch and use new mechanisms of sustaining the care system. Untimely death of any member leaves a serious destabilizing impact on the others. However, the study shows that in the whole scheme of maintaining familial relationships, the female members exert strong “agency” (Roy 2015). There is also a growing sense of partnership in the husband-wife relationships, although many elements of patriarchy still work silently.

In this paper I have tried to look into the relationship between (a) the aged parents and their children, (b) the aged and their extended kin, (c) the aged and the neighbours and friends. The purpose of this study is to understand whether the children, extended kin and neighbours extend a strong support system to the aged or alternatively they do not feel the urge to help or support the aged in times of crisis. How strong is the relationship between the aged parents and their dispersed children? Do the children maintain strong bond with their parents even after dispersal or do the elements of Weberian calculative rationalism creep into the life of the children so much so that they no longer feel for their aged parents? What roles do the extended kin take when any crisis situation emerges in the life of the aged people? What is the role of neighbours and friends in such situations? Whether the neighbours and friends play a pivotal role in the life of the aged parents since their children and extended kin are busy with their own lives? These are some of the questions I have tried to address in this paper.

### ***Field work***

Data for the present paper have been collected through the anthropological method of intensive fieldwork done between early December 2013 and mid-April 2014 in the middleclass neighbourhoods (blocks) in Salt Lake City of Kolkata. I did a quick survey, with the help of a census schedule, of 54 households which had member/members above 60 years of age and interviewed 32 aged members from as many families to have an understanding of their changing social life. I did long interviews with the

help of an interview schedule, took field notes while meeting my informants in family/social gatherings and mini music sessions and had telephonic conversation with some of them. Urban middleclass has been chosen as the locale of the study because this class is widely taken as enlightened, educated and the “vanguard” of social change; it is in this class that Weberian rationalism is perceived to be evident (see Bendix 1951). The informants were all economically self-reliant and had served in high positions as teachers, bankers, government officials; many being politically active and sensitive, capable of reflecting on life and family relations and social issues. In documenting information (mostly qualitative) and writing the “text” I have followed the biographical/phenomenological method, where the respondents have been allowed to tell the story of their life and their versions have been presented in descriptive style without any analytical input or factual distortion, although I found it difficult to overcome the methodological problems associated with understanding and representation. For selecting the informants the technique of snowball sampling was used.

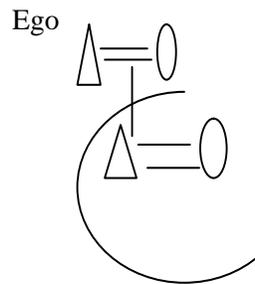
#### ***The relation between aged parents and their children***

The relation between the aged parents and their children varies depending upon whether the children stay with their parents or away from them. Out of 54 in 27 (50%) cases the children live with their parents and in 24 (44.44%) cases the children live away from their parents; the remaining 3 (5.5%) of my respondents were childless.

Out of 54 respondents only two have said that they have very formal kind of relation with their children. In these two cases the children stay away from the aged parents. In these two cases, the children hardly call them or enquire about their health or daily activities. The children are busy with their own life so much so that they don't have time to visit their parents. Even in case of crisis, particularly the serious illness of any of the parents, the children cannot even manage to take leave from their office to visit their parents. Even if they come to visit their parents they remain so busy with their cell phone and laptop that the whole purpose of their visit becomes futile. Drawing from their experiences, the aged parents have given up all expectations from their children; they do not call their children in times of crisis. In cases where the aged people get negligible attention from their children, their friends and neighbours extend their hands of care and support to them. Here is an illustration.

Mr. J. Dutta, aged 76, a Hindu Kayestha, lives in his flat at DL-12/1 since 1999. Mr. Dutta has a son who now stays in his own apartment with his

wife. His son is restless and careerist and in the habit of changing his job frequently. In connection with his job he often goes abroad. Sometimes he joins a new job with posting in Hyderabad or Delhi. Mr. Dutta is unhappy at his son's frequent change of jobs. His son and daughter-in-law come to visit them only occasionally. Even when they come they are busy working on cell phone or laptop. Mr. Dutta sums up the point like this: 'Last month our daughter-in-law visited us once. During her two hour stay here she attended at least 15 calls from her office and friends. Same thing happens when our son comes. Whenever he comes he comes with his office work and laptop and he doesn't get time to chat with us in peace.'



*Mr. Dutta's Family/Household*

Both Mr. Dutta and his wife are keeping well and they do not have any serious ailment. They do not depend on their son or daughter-in-law for anything. Earlier whenever Mr. Dutta or his wife fell ill they used to inform their son, hoping that he would come to their help. But his son's response was cool as he had the habit of extending excuses for not coming. He came on a few occasions but his reluctance was all over his face. Now Mr. Dutta does not inform his son on occasions of small sickness, knowing well that his son would not come. He said: 'I do not know what I will do if I or my wife encounters any serious health problem. I am not sure if my son will come during that time. In the event of such a crisis I will have to depend on my neighbours, whom I trust more. Fortunately, we have not encountered any such crisis so far. As long as we are healthy and active it doesn't really matter whether our son takes care of us or not.' It is not that Mr. and Mrs. Dutta had a fight with their son or daughter-in-law. But too much focus on careerism has driven their son and daughter-in-law away. His son is lost in his own world, a world of "misplaced priorities", fully endorsed by his wife. Mr. Dutta understands the problem but prefers not to

open a dialogue to heal the emotional rupture. Despite all this Mr. Dutta longs for his son and daughter-in-law and loves spending time with them.

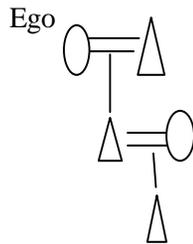
Mr. Dutta had a struggling middleclass upbringing. He taught in college and university and held high administrative positions. His wife also taught in a college. Mr. and Mrs. Dutta constitute their household while their son lives with his wife in a separate house in another part of Kolkata. Mr. and Mrs. Dutta wanted their only son to stay with them since the latter works in Kolkata and they have a big enough house to accommodate all but their son decided otherwise and lives a life of his choice disregarding his parents' wish. His selfish careerism has hurt his parents and the latter are pained to see that their son avoids them and does not take much care of them. Mr. Dutta is worried about the growing careerism in the younger generation which, he apprehends, would alienate them from all niceties of life and from parents and close relations. Mr. Dutta's is a typical case which demonstrates how Weberian calculative rationalism is creeping into the middleclass families, colonizing their psyche, taking over their value system while throwing the conventional family values, emotions, sentiments and care into wilderness (for details see Roy 2010: 153-178).

In Salt Lake, the aged parents who stay with their children generally maintain a very cordial relation and develop a very strong bond with them. The aged parents get enormous amount of love, care and support from their children. In most cases the children (and their spouses) work but they all do their part in the family. The sons do all kinds of shopping whereas the daughters help their aged mother in the kitchen. The children try to keep track of their parents' likings and concerns and buy things of their choice. When any of the aged parents falls sick the children sometimes take leave from the office and spend the whole day taking care of their parents. They take them to the doctors and bring medicines. All the members in the family play an important role, although not equal role, in matters of decision-making. The children discuss with their parents before taking an important decision in life. There is thus a great deal of collective participation and democratic spirit in the family. The aged parents do not depend on their children economically although the latter contribute a decent amount of money to the family.

Cases where the children are married, the daughter-in-law helps her mother-in-law in doing household activities and particularly in kitchen. The daughters-in-law who are working outside also help their mothers-in-law in performing household chores. Most of the aged who live with their children feel that their life is a complete, full of happiness. The aged people argue that they

get enormous amount of love, care and support from their children and all of them just pray that this happiness continues forever. It is not that their family is devoid of any kind of tension and quarrel. But this kind of quarrel or misunderstanding does not grow beyond control and family members sit together and talk to each other in order to sort out their problems and tensions.

Here is an account of a happy family. Mrs. A. Aich, 61, has been living in her own flat with her family at DL 221, Nonamati Cooperative, Salt Lake, Kolkata, for the last 13 years. She is Hindu by faith and Kayastha by caste. She lives with her husband, son, daughter-in-law and her four-month-old grandson – a standard joint family-cum-joint-household.



*Mrs. Aich's family-cum-household*

Mrs. Aich's son, an engineer, worked for Globesin for some years but now he works with IBM. In 2011 he got married. Mrs. Aich has no complaint about her son or daughter-in-law. Her son has always been well behaved and obedient. 'The only day he has given me pain was the day of delivery', said Mrs. Aich. Mrs. Aich's son has a four-month-old son and he can't even think of staying away from him for a day. Leaving for office in the morning he returns home by 7:30 p.m. Even if he has to stay for long hours in office he never forgets his responsibilities towards his family and particularly his parents. Sunday being holiday he loves staying home the whole day, spending time with family. When Mrs. Aich or her husband falls ill he takes leave from office and takes them to the doctor, and buys medicines. Last month Mr. Aich had a blackout while in the market close by. His son immediately took him to doctor, who had done an eco-cardiogram. The reports were normal. Mrs. Aich treats her daughter-in-law as her own daughter. She is very jolly, well behaved, loving and caring. She loves her and scolds her as well.

In decision making all the members in the family play an important part; everyone feels free to express his/her opinions. Her son and daughter-in-law discuss with their parents before taking an important decision. Thus

the family exhibits a great deal of collective participation and democratic spirit.

Mrs. Aich retired last year and her husband had retired two years ago. As both of them get pension they do not depend on their children economically. Mrs. Aich is very happy with her life and her family. She has got a caring and supportive husband, loving, obedient son and daughter-in-law. Her four-month-old grandson is the greatest attraction of her life. She lives her life happily and without any major tension. She only prays to god that she and her family live in happiness like this forever.

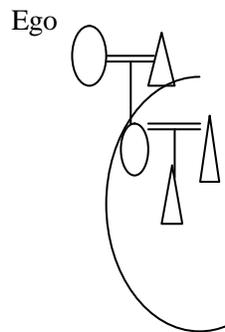
So in this kind of joint family the members preserve most of the family values (a sense of collective ownership of property, sharing of responsibilities, mutual care and love, everyone living for everyone else, complete liking and emotional interdependence, and so on) as we have found in the family of Mrs. Aich. A simple joint family is an “ideal” even in an urban setting, which is in consonance with the Indian family values and expectations – the retired aging couple, living with their son and son’s wife and a grandson/granddaughter.

The members of the patri-local joint family maintain a strong and trouble-free relation where life is largely family-oriented and child-centric. The aging ego fondly preserves happy memory of life she had in both family of orientation and family of procreation and the same is true of her daughter-in-law. The children are brought up with utmost care and are taught to uphold family values. The relations with the extended members of family of orientation and family of procreation appeared to have loosened primarily because of death and dispersal of the members. The relationship among the members of the family is very strong and the emotional interdependence among the family members is total.

Out of 54 respondents there are 24 cases where the children stay away from their aged parents. Barring two cases most of the aged in families where they live with their children maintain normal, cordial relation. Taking advantage of the modern communication system the children call their parents often and interact with them through e mail, skype and WhatsApp. When the aged parents fall sick the children immediately rush to them. They take them to the doctor, help them in going through all the tests, bring the necessary medicines while performing, at the same time, all the household responsibilities. The children who stay in other states usually visit their parents twice a year, particularly in summer and Diwali. Those who stay abroad try to visit their parents once a year, mostly in winters. The children

who stay away hardly play any role in decision making on petty matters. However, at times of taking decision on a serious matter the parents consult their children. The aged parents do not need financial support from their children. They live on pension and interests on their savings. They are covered by health insurance policy, which largely takes care of hospital charges. However in the time of crisis the children come up with every kind of moral and economic support.

Mrs. P. Sengupta, aged 80, a Hindu, Baidya by caste, lives with her 87 year old husband in their own house at DL - 86, Salt Lake. They have been living in this house for the last 27 years. It is a 1115 sq. ft. house with two bed rooms and a drawing room. Mrs. Sengupta has a daughter who lives in Mumbai with her family. She got married in 1990 and she has a son who is now studying M. Tech. in the USA.



*Mrs. Sengupta's Family/Household*

Mr. Sengupta got a plot in Salt Lake on government quota where the present house was constructed. In 1986 they moved into the present house. Their daughter did Masters in Economics from Rabindra Bharati University. Just after completing her Masters in 1990 she was married. After her marriage she went to her in-law's place in Garia. That time her son-in-law used to work in Ranchi. In 1991 her grandson was born. When her grandson was six-month-old her daughter did B. Ed. Her son-in-law keeps on changing his job. Now he works in a consultancy firm in Mumbai. And her daughter with MA and B. Ed. got a teaching job in an international school in Mumbai, where she lives with her husband and daughter.

Mrs. Sengupta's daughter comes to Kolkata twice a year on an average, normally during summer vacation and Diwali. Her daughter, son-in-law,

and grand-daughter love coming to Kolkata as they sustain strong emotional bond with their kin, who live in the city. When in Mumbai her daughter calls her every night. As both Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta are above 80 years of age their daughter keeps worrying about their health. Her daughter keeps on reminding her about the daily medicine. Earlier Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta used to visit their daughter once a year but now as Mr. Sengupta is not keeping well, and Mrs. Sengupta had a bypass surgery, they have restricted their movements. When Mrs. Sengupta had bypass surgery her daughter had come and stayed with them for about a month. She also came when Mrs. Sengupta had an accident in December 2012. Again when she had hernia operation her daughter came and stayed with her for about a month.

Everyone in this locality loves Mrs. Sengupta's daughter for her soft and caring nature. From her childhood she enjoyed her studies and Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta never had to prod her for it. Their daughter always wanted to be a teacher like her mother. The irony is that throughout her life she has been scared of mathematics but now she teaches mathematics in school. Both Mr. and Mrs. Sengupta are very happy at the way she cares for them. Despite living in Mumbai she takes all possible care for her parents. She, in fact, does more than what they expect of her.

Mr. Sengupta gets pension which is enough for two of them. Besides, they draw monthly interest on their savings. They also have health insurance and a health card (for being ex-employee of the Reserve Bank of India) with which they can avail free medical treatment.

Mrs. Sengupta enjoys near total authority in decision-making in the family; she decides the menu, pays her maids. Earlier she used to pay the bills herself, but after her accident she hires the services of a boy to pay her bills. Their maid does the shopping for daily necessities. As her husband is ailing and can't move without a stick, she has to do all the work by herself. On crucial family matters, however, she consults her husband and daughter.

Mrs. Sengupta is by and large happy with her life so far. She has got a wonderful daughter who loves her parents and takes good care of them. She has got a supportive husband who, because of her, had left his own family. She keeps worrying about her daughter and her family since they stay far. Now she just wants to remain healthy as far as possible and to live a peaceful life. She is 80 and her husband is 84 and both of them have age related problems. Nonetheless, "life", for her has been "a beautiful journey".

Another family that maintains good relations among its members is that of Mrs. J. Banerjee. Mrs. Banerjee, aged 78, a Hindu Brahmin has been

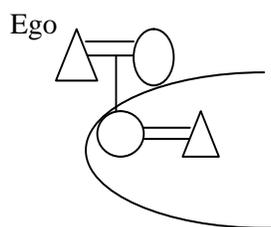
living alone in her own residence at EE- 121/5, Salt Lake since 2001. Her husband died a few years ago. Mrs. Banerjee has a daughter who was married in 1989 and now lives in other part of Salt Lake with her husband and son. Mrs. Banerjee's relation with her daughter is very strong and affable. She is her friend, philosopher and guide. She has always been a very obedient child. She has such a friendly nature that everyone in Howrah and Sharat Abasan love her. Now Mrs. Banerjee stays alone in this flat. Her daughter and son-in-law, who live not far, take all possible care. Her daughter comes to visit her twice or thrice in a week. She sends her driver who shops daily vegetables and grocery for Mrs. Banerjee. Besides she calls Mrs. Banerjee several times a day. Whenever she feels sick her daughter immediately comes and stays with her. After Mr. Banerjee's death her daughter asked Mrs. Banerjee to stay with them. But Mrs. Banerjee didn't want to leave this flat. Her daughter shares everything with her and takes suggestion on her family matters. Mrs. Banerjee is active and likes to do all her work alone. She doesn't need anyone's help unless in crisis but she enjoys the care her daughter and son-in-law take of her. Her daughter has always been a very supportive, caring and loving. She doesn't expect anything more from her daughter because she understands that she has to manage her own family, has to look after her mother-in-law who is also very old. Her mother-in-law doesn't have a daughter and treats her like her own daughter. Her husband is physically challenged so she has to do a number of works which her husband cannot do. Mrs. Banerjee is very happy at the way she handles her responsibilities at her in-laws' place. Once her mother-in-law had carbuncle and a nurse was employed for dressing. One day that nurse didn't turn up and her daughter did the dressing with the efficiency of a trained nurse. She is also a trained dancer. She has learnt Kathhak, Bharatnatyam and performed on many occasions. But after her marriage she has developed some gynecological problems and because of that she had to give up dancing. She has a dance school where she is one of the instructors.

The two cases we have presented in this section demonstrate that while dispersal is an inevitable part of urban middleclass families it does not necessarily impact upon the family care system adversely; the parents and the child miss each other badly and keep close contact using modern communication technology; the daughter rushes in to be by the side of the parents when the latter are in crisis and the parents long for their dispersed children.

***The conjugal relation between the aged parents after the dispersal of their children***

One interesting question that results from the dispersal of the children is whether the conjugal relation between aged parents gets strengthened. All the 24 respondents whose children stay away have informed that their relation with their spouse has been strengthened and have taken an interesting turn. Since the aged parents' life rotates around their children their tensions, anxieties, expectations are common. The parents have shared the dreams and responsibilities all these years in up-bringing their children. Now that the children are grown up, settled in life and away from them, the latter get enough space and time to rediscover themselves and redefine the conjugal relation. In the absence of their children their interdependence grows and they rediscover the value of each other in their life; the emotional interdependence helps the aged couple understand each other better and act in each other's support. The respondents have said that their conjugal relation has become more important as their interdependence has grown. Now that they are retired from job or business they spend most of their time together; their mutual dependence has grown as they are now prone to frequent illness, and their emotional bond is stronger than ever before. Most of the male respondents have said that they help their spouses in the household works, even in kitchen.

Mr. A. K. Biswas lives with his wife in his own house since 1982. It is 1500 sq. ft. house which has three bed rooms, one study room and a drawing room. Mr. Biswas has a daughter who is freelance artist and now lives in Delhi with her husband, also an artist.



Mr. Biswas's household

Mr. A. K. Biswas, has said that he spends a lot of time in the kitchen; although they have a cook he helps his wife in cutting the vegetables and washing them. His wife was diagnosed with cancer and had to go through a long course of chemo therapy. That is why Mr. Biswas does not want his wife to take the pressure of the household chores. He helps her in all household works.

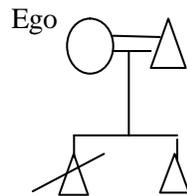
For understanding how the relationship between the aged spouses grows stronger one has to study their everyday life and discover the warmth of their love and care in small gifts they exchange, in the way they chat with humour over a cup of tea in the morning and evening, the way they enjoy television programmes; the way they enjoy their occasional outings, participate in the religious and social festivals and programmes and extend moral support in times of crisis. In their everyday relation they pull each other's legs, often participate in fake quarrels and exchange humours. They share the moments of joy and despair; participate in gardening, in re-designing the interior and so on. From my interaction with the aged I have gathered that dispersal of younger members gives them enough space to rediscover their love which perhaps was hidden in the wears and tears and the stress of shouldering everyday life responsibilities. The rediscovered or redefined love that cements the conjugal relation in this late age is no longer based on Freudian libido but more on "pity" or compassion (as explained by Rousseau, 2008). We sociologists and social anthropologists often tend to ignore these micro aspects of social-psychology of everyday life behaviour, which, I think, bears immense importance in understanding human relations, of which conjugal relationship is one.

#### ***The relationship of the aged respondents with their neighbours***

The relationship of the aged respondents with their neighbours is generally cordial. Out of 54 respondents, 48 (88.89%) maintain a very warm relation with their neighbours. It is not that the aged respondents visit their neighbors too often, but whenever they meet, in the market or in the street, they exchange regards and wish each other well. On the occasion on Lakshmi puja, Saraswati puja, birthday or wedding anniversary they visit each other's place. Besides whenever the aged respondents face any trouble related to their flat/building they seek help from their neighbors. The neighbors occasionally visit each other's place for chatting. The respondents along with their neighbors participate in various cultural programs in their locality (Block) during Durga puja, Poila Baishakh, Saraswati Puja, and Rabindra Jayanti. They also celebrate the festival of colors (holi) together. Most of the aged respondents said that although they do not visit their neighbor's place frequently at the time of crisis they get enormous help and support from them. Many of the respondents have said that the role that should have been played by their children is now played by the neighbors. For many of them their neighbors have become members of their own family. This relation of togetherness fills up the vacuum in the life of the aged

which has been shaped after the dispersal of their children or demise of the spouse.

Mrs. K. Chatterjee (aged 62), a Hindu Brahmin, has been living in her own flat (DL 224) with her husband and son since 1998. Mrs. Chatterjee had two sons. Her elder son committed suicide in 2012. Her unmarried younger son works with a Bank. Now Mrs. Chatterjee lives in her flat with her husband and her younger son.



*Mrs. Chatterjee's household*

Her elder son was a good student but after graduation he discontinued his study. He was passionate about music and formed a band called *Prithibi* of which he was the lead guitarist. The band earned a good name within a couple of months. Her son was showered with love and respect by the young generation of music lovers. He started giving guitar tuition to the young learners at home. His band started doing shows in Kolkata and its suburbs. Every Sunday students used to come from far and near to attend his classes. He used to earn more than what his brother is earning now as a bank manager. He was very well behaved and full of life but was very introvert. He did not like to share his own problems with anyone, even not with his family members. In December 2012, five days before his marriage day, he committed suicide. No one, even in family, knows the reason.

After this incident Mrs. Chatterjee's life seems to have come to a halt. Even today she is struggling to overcome the trauma. Another shock came last year, when her husband was diagnosed having throat cancer. After a surgery he got free of cancer but with his damaged vocal cord he cannot speak any more. After her elder son's death she was so traumatized; stopped talking to anyone for months. All day long she used to sit in her son's room and cry. Worried about her Mr. Chatterjee and their younger son persuaded her to resume music tuition. They knew that music and interaction with her students would have some healing effect. After long persuasion she resumed her practice sessions and music tuition classes.

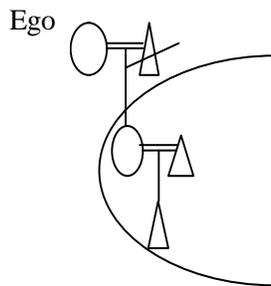
Mrs. Chatterjee maintains a warm relation with her neighbours. For the initial couple of years after they moved to Salt Lake in 1998 they did not know much about their neighbours. But ever since she became a member

of DL Block Cultural Committee the intimacy with her neighbours grew. Because of her “cultural capital” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase) she soon took a lead role in organizing the community cultural programmes. She had to plan the programme, select the performers, train them and perform as an artist. She did this year after year. After her son’s death everyone in this block came to console her. But, she had withdrawn from all the community activities. Everyone in the neighbourhood loves her so much that they keep inviting her for all community programmes. For two-three weeks after her son’s death her neighbours sent prepared food for breakfast, lunch and dinner for three of them. She was overwhelmed with the kind of support their neighbours had extended.

***The relationship of the aged respondents with the extended kin***

Out of 54 respondents, 51 (94.44%) have claimed that they maintain a kind of affable relation with their relatives and extended kin. They maintain a good contact with the aged respondents over phone. As most of their kin are busy with their own life and family they hardly get time to visit each other. However they keep on enquiring about their health over phone. During festivals like Durga Puja, Poila Baisakh they visit each other’s place. On family occasions like marriage or birthdays or whenever there is a family get together the aged respondents meet their relatives and extended kin. Most of the aged informed me that at the time of crisis they received help and support from their kinsmen. In order to comprehend the relationship of the aged respondents with their relatives and extended kin we can cite a few case studies.

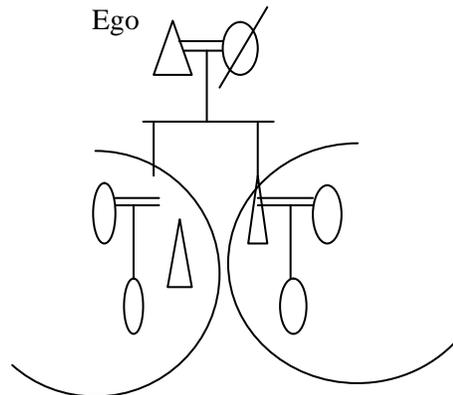
Mrs. Gita Banerjee, aged 78, a Hindu Brahmin lives alone in her own residence at EE- 121/5, Salt Lake. She has been living in this flat since 2001. Her husband died a few years back. Mrs. Banerjee has a daughter who was married in 1989 and now lives in another part of Salt Lake with her husband and son.



Mrs. Banerjee’s family/household

Mrs. Banerjee maintains a strong bond with her relatives particularly with those of her own family, all her brothers and sisters, who are scattered in the city. Her relatives visit her occasionally and maintain contact over phone. She also calls them frequently. On social occasions she meets her relatives. Last month, she attended a function on the occasion of her younger brother's grandson's *upanayana*, where she met all her siblings and their family members. She also maintains contact with her-in-laws. Her sisters-in-law sometimes come to see her. She hasn't faced any serious crisis for which she had to take help from her relatives but when her husband died they all came and stood by her.

Mr. Nimai Chand Gupta, a 69 year old man, Vaidya by caste, has been living in his own house at BJ-192 Salt Lake since 1987 alone. It is 1200sq. ft. two storied house. Mr. Gupta has two sons; both of whom live in the USA. Mr. Gupta's wife died in 2004. There is a domestic help, who takes care of Mr. Gupta, stays in the house the whole day.



*Mr. Gupta's family/ household diagram*

Mr. Gupta is financially independent, in good health and active. He doesn't really need anyone to take care of him. But when he falls sick he feels scared. The thought of long illness scares him. He knows that it would not be possible for his sons to come back leaving their jobs and stay with him. He thus wants to die without suffering much. He would not want his sons to come to India just because he is alone here. As long as he is healthy he doesn't have any problem. Both his sons and his daughters-in-law take as much care as possible living away from home. He is happy with whatever they do for him. He genuinely feels that his sons and daughters-in-law love him and care for him.

Mr. Gupta is in regular contact with his siblings, particularly with his brothers and elder sister. His elder brother and his wife have died. His siblings do not visit each other frequently but maintain contact over phone. During Durga puja or on family occasions they meet each other. In the time of crisis he gets help from all his siblings. In 2004 when his wife died all of them had come and stood by him with their support. His elder sister stayed with him for months. Although he maintains a very strong relation with his siblings he does not have a strong and emotional bond with his nephews and nieces. When he was a child, he along with his brothers, often visited his uncles and aunts who used to stay miles away from their place. But now because of advancement in technology relatives do not visit each other's place often. Be it *bijoya dhashami* or *poila baishakh* people send their good wishes over phone or through emails. Mr. Gupta's nephews and nieces hardly visit his place and they do not even call him as they are busy with their studies and career preparations. He gets to see them only on any family occasion and refresh the memory that he has relations with them.

### **Conclusion**

The present paper is indicative of the changes taking place in the micro locales of urban middleclass families. We can trace the continuation of an ideal joint family that preserves all family values on the one hand and a rationalized (both in terms of size and relations) family with selfish careerism overshadowing family values and responsibilities on the other. In-between these two extremes there are families that experience dispersal of its younger members, but they take all possible care in maintaining a strong bond among the members. Since the family locales and the micro social space are unique in each family it is always difficult to identify a common and uniform pattern of change in urban middleclass families. A study on a larger universe would give us a clearer picture. Interestingly one can notice a strong urge among the members, aged or young, to preserve family values and protect the otherwise flagging family relations and even extended kinship relations, both affinal and consanguinal. The solidity and functionality of relations among the extended kin has definitely weakened; one can notice the difference between the members of parents' generation (many of whom grew up in joint or large families) and children's' generation (who grow up mostly in small and nuclear families) in terms of the differential values they attach to kinship relations. With downsizing and nuclearization the family bonds have cemented and the emotional, not material, interdependence among the members has become total. The incidents like untimely and

sudden death, tension in conjugal life or in other relations leave a serious destabilizing effect on the life of the members.

When dispersal of family members has become a fact of urban life the members (both the parents and children) have geared up to accept it and face its consequences. Besides taking mental preparation to face the dispersal they widely make use of modern communication system, modern gadgets to keep close contact with their children who stay far. Even in crisis time the children living at a faraway place rush to be with their parents. The parents and relatives draw a great deal of pride from the achievements of their children and of the trips they make to the places where they live.

The urban middleclass families can access standard services (hospitals, child-rearing, bill payment, delegation of domestic work to domestic help) with ease because of their access to information and affluence. The neighbourhood communities (bloc/ward committees and housing cooperatives) have made a dent into the space earlier occupied by the kinship network. The key decisions are taken at the nuclear-family level, not even at the extended family level, although the extended kin occasionally meet on family events (marriage, *sradh*, *annoprashan*, *upanayan*, birthday party, and so on). This observation does not corroborate the view of sociologists like Desai (1956) and Shah (1991) that despite dispersal of family members and splitting of family into smaller households the “spirit of joint family” is retained as the key decisions are taken at the larger family level rather than at the level of a nuclear household. How closely the kinship relations would be maintained depends largely on the micro-circumstances in the family of orientation. The relations are valued when the members grew up together, lived in the same house and shared the same hearth for a considerable period, had a great deal of mutual love and care, and had no major bad blood on sharing of property or responsibility. In the generation of the elderly members there are some sincere efforts to sustain kinship relations. In a situation where the members are dispersed, but there is no material or emotional/spiritual dependence, the relations are reduced to something of only symbolic value and the occasional interaction that they maintain stem from normative obligations.

The aged in Salt Lake fall back on their neighbours for support when their kin and child/children are away. But the neighbourhood relationship may not be as unproblematic as a few case studies would depict. All their neighbours do not necessarily constitute the “neighbours”. The aged are careful in avoiding some neighbours, do not even maintain a formal talking term, which nursing relationship with other neighbours with great care. Old

friendship, the experience of working in the same office, ideological liking, and reading of the neighbours in terms of existential experience might be the factors that determine the relationship among the neighbours.

The most significant finding of the study is that with their children away and “successful” in their life the aged couple live with a shared gratification that they have done their job (responsibilities) well and it is time to sit face to face and rediscover the finer aspects of conjugal life, which were unexplored thus far and rediscover the love, care, passion and compassion in their relationship. The aged now rightly realise that conjugal relation is perhaps the most trustworthy of all relations and the surviving members realise it the most when their spouses are gone. It is the mutual “pity” for each other’s sufferings and care that cements the conjugal bond in this late age. They share their tensions, anxiety about their dispersed children with each other. They help each other in the household work and also take care of each other’s health. In the time of crisis they also act as a support system to each other. After the dispersal of the children the aged parents get so much time to spend with each other and they rediscover their relationship. It is this conjugal relation which gives them strength and courage to fight the most difficult and adverse moments of life.

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