

Life of the Middleclass Aged in the Light of Changing Family Relations: A Study in Kolkata¹

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Abstract: *The present paper explores the life of the middleclass aged in Kolkata metropolis. The life of the aged has been studied in two different locations – in the family setup and in the old-age homes – in a comparative mode. The uniqueness of the study lies in the observation that the kind of life that the aged live depends much on the changing family situations. The composition of the family, the marital status of the aged, the dispersal of the family members and the household arrangements, the health status of the elderly, the kinship and neighbourhood support systems impact the life of the senior citizens significantly. One of the key findings of the study is that the aged women, especially those who have been single, are more vulnerable to take refuge in the old-age homes. Another key finding is that the aged move to old-age homes as the last resort, when the family care system breaks down completely, particularly when they lose their spouses and have broken health. I have found in this study that although the dispersal of the younger members is on the rise the aged take this as a logical and welcome development, although it takes a toll on the conventional care system in the family. I have also found that the stigma that was attached to old-age living is withering and the aged and the larger society have started accepting it as a rational solution to their real-life problems. My study does not support the widely held perception that the middleclass aged are the victims of the growing calculative rationalism and inhumanity in the younger generation.*

Keywords: aging, rationalization of family size, dispersal of family members, old-age homes, 'pity'.

Introduction

The present paper is an outcome of my PhD thesis on *The Life of the Urban Middleclass Aged in Kolkata Metropolis* (Roy 2016). The study was located against the backdrop of the universal trend of greying population¹, rationalization of family size and household arrangement, and widespread dispersal of the younger members, which leave the elderly lonely, having to resort to self-care, or depend on the professional service

providers. The life of the aged, both men and women, has been looked into in the light of changing social relations, which include family relations, kinship relations and neighbourhood relations. The study was designed to bring to light the significant impact of rationalization of family size and the large-scale dispersal of the younger members on the life of the elderly members of the family and on overall intergenerational relationship, which, I feel, is yet to be adequately documented in sociological or anthropological literature. The prime objective of the study was to prepare a sociological account of the life of the middleclass aged in metropolitan Kolkata, based on life-history of the senior citizens and their lived experiences (as expressed by them in their subjective articulation) in the changing family locale.

I have studied only the aged (loosely defined as the people above 60 years of age) among the urban middleclass in order to delimit the scope of my study since life of the aged in other locales (say, rural and semi-urban) and classes (upper and lower classes) is presumed to be significantly different. The scholars in disciplines like social work, psychology, physical anthropology have been studying the aged from their respective perspectives; my objective, however, would be to prepare a sociological account of the aged based on their life history (autobiography) and lived experiences, and interpret their life in the light of relevant sociological theories.

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 (Weber 1994). 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 trade 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. Although a highly heterogeneous category, those who constitute the urban middleclass are expected to share a common social and cultural locale 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 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 Indian traditions.

The Indian families are undergoing a course of rapid changes 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 and are running the last lap of their life. The approaches toward the elderly members need not be 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 will be important to observe if family level variations or common pattern(s) emerge in the social locale of the aged and the familial/social approach(es) towards them.

The universe, sample and field study

The metropolitan Kolkata and its aged persons (men and women above 60 years with middleclass background) constituted the universe of the study. Fieldwork was done in two social locales; the *old-age homes* and the *urban neighbourhoods* with a view to have an understanding of the conditions that keep the elderly attached to their own house and the point of breakdown of the family support system that takes the elderly to the old-age homes. I have done 32 case studies from amongst those who live in their own houses with family members in the urban neighbourhood and 32 case studies from old-age homes in order to understand the micro level familial changes and their impact on the life of the aged.

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 to collect information and had telephonic conversation with some of them to fill-in the information gap. The reason behind choosing only middleclass population is that the members of this particular class are

presumably the bearers of the elements of modernity and rationalization which find manifestation in the control of family size by using various methods of contraception, in arrangement of household, in growing individualism and careerism and most importantly in changing family relations. In documenting information (mostly qualitative) and writing the 'text', the biographical/phenomenological method has been used, where the respondents were asked to narrate the stories of their life and their versions have been presented in descriptive style without much of analytical input or any factual distortion.

How is my study different from other works on ageing?

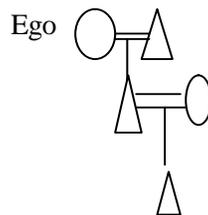
The available literatures on ageing have primarily covered the health aspects of the aged, support and care system, elder abuse and on old age home. I have, on the other hand, tried to comprehend the relationship between aged parents and their children against the backdrop of urbanization, modernization and calculative rationalization. I have examined how these external forces impact upon their relations, care-system, bonding between the aged parents and their children. I have tried to find out how Rousseau's idea of 'pity' (expressed in emotions, values, sentiments, love and care) comes into play in defeating these exogenous forces (Rousseau 1992). I have examined whether the relationships break down as a consequence of Western modernism and calculative rationalism (Weber) or the conventional values and care system still work in the life of the elderly. In sum, the study has focussed on how the micro and macro social forces bring about rational changes, which, in turn, impact upon the lives and relations between the aged and their children and extended kin. The study has found out that the incidents (as reported in the media and literature) of aged being the victims of inhumanity and ill treatment at the hands of their 'own relations' are not yet strong enough to defeat the care, compassion and humanity that constitute the foundation of all relations.

Aged Living in their own Houses

Based on the differential family compositions I have classified 32 families into five categories in order to draw an understanding of a few divergent facets of the life of the aged amidst the changing family relations in an urban setting. In the following section I would talk about five case studies,

selecting one from the five different categories. Keeping with research ethic I have hidden the actual names of my respondents.

An ideal urban joint family: Despite large-scale nuclearization of families and ‘rationalization’ of family size joint families are still common in Kolkata and the members of such families preserve the values of love and care. The family of Mrs. A. Aich (61) is an example. Mrs. Aich has been living in her own flat with her family at DL 221, Nonamati Cooperative, Salt Lake, Kolkata, for the last 13 years. It is an 850 sq. ft. flat consisting of three bed rooms, a hall and a kitchen. She is Hindu by faith and Kayastha by caste. In her parental family she had two sisters and two brothers. Her husband had five brothers and five sisters. In her own family she lives with her husband, son, daughter-in-law and her four-month-old grandson – a standard joint family-cum-joint-household.

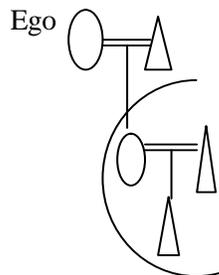


Mrs. Aich's household

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. Such family values also extend to kinship relations beyond the immediate family or household. 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 downsizing of family has cemented the relationship among the members of the family who constitute the same household and where the emotional interdependence is total. The members of the family nurture

a strong neighbourhood bond which has assumed much of the functions of the waning kinship groups. It is revealing that even in an urban setting neighbourhood community plays an important role in terms of mutual support, care and recreation. The joint family, in the present case, works perfectly without any problem.

Care from a distance: The children of the aged in the city disperse to different places within the city and to different other cities, within and outside the country, primarily because of marriage (of daughters) and career compulsions (both of the sons and daughters). The dispersed child or children do not cease to take care of their aging parents. Here is a case. **Mrs. P. Sengupta**, aged 80, a Hindu, Baidya by caste, lives with her 87-year old husband in their own house at DI- 86, Salt Lake. They have been living in this house for the last 27 years. It is 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 doing M. Tech. in the USA. In her parental family Mrs. Sengupta had a brother and four sisters. Her husband had three brothers and four sisters. Mrs. Sengupta is a graduate and so is her husband. Her father was a graduate and her mother had primary level education. Her daughter is MA in Economics and has done B. Ed. After graduation Mrs. Sengupta taught in a school for some years but after marriage she left the job. Her husband worked with the Reserve Bank of India. Her father was headmaster and mother a housewife. Her daughter who now lives in Mumbai teaches Mathematics in a school. Mrs. Sengupta's monthly family income is Rs. 25000 approximately. She uses the modern gadgets like television, fridge, microwave, cell phone, washing machine etc. She has cardiac problem and high blood pressure.

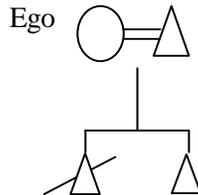


Mrs. Sengupta's household

In case of Mrs. Sengupta we find that, although dispersal of the younger generation is a fact of life it does not necessarily impact negatively on the relations among the family members. Mrs. Sengupta had a normal upbringing in a large family along with her siblings. Since the members of her family of orientation were refugees from Myanmar they had to undergo a long phase of hardship when they received support from their relatives. Mrs. Sengupta received a mixed kind of treatment from her in-laws; while her mother-in-law and her husband were supportive and caring the other members of her in-law's family did not treat her well. The tensions in the in-law's house prompted her and her husband to set up a separate household. Rationalization of family size is evident as her family of orientation had eight members, her husband's family of orientation had nine members but her family of procreation has only three members. The kinship bond, from both affinal and consanguinal sides, is weak; the neighbourhood bond has distinctly taken its place. Mrs. Sengupta now enjoys supreme authority as her aged husband is down with ailments. With her only child away, the relationship between the aging husband and wife has cemented further; they recognize this relation to be the most trustworthy of all relations. When the husband is ailing the wife, with relatively better health, steps out of the house to take care of the out-door activities. Only daughter lives in Mumbai with her family but takes all possible care of her parents. The aged parents' life centers on their daughter and her family. While dispersal is an inevitable process in urban middleclass families it does not necessarily impact 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.

Family with a case of untimely death: There is no denying that in urban India the fertility rate is dropping and the number of children is being restricted to one or two. In the absence of the extended kin the members of the smaller families now become emotionally more dependent on one another. Untimely death of a member, either one of the parents or one of the children, spells disaster on the living members. I have come across some such cases in my study. **Mrs. K. Chatterjee** (aged 62), a Hindu Brahmin, has been living in her own flat (DL 224) with her husband and son since 1998. It is 1160 sq. feet flat consisting of three bed rooms, a drawing room and a kitchen. In her parental family Mrs. Chatterjee had two brothers while her husband had three brothers and five sisters. Mrs.

Chatterjee had two sons. Her elder son committed suicide in 2012. Her unmarried younger son works in a Bank.



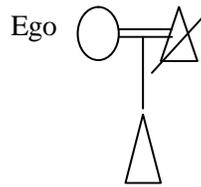
Mrs. Chatterjee's household

Mrs. Chatterjee was born in their rented house at Vivekananda road in North Kolkata. She grew up in a joint family consisting of her parents and two brothers and uncles. When she was three-year-old her parental family, along with her uncle and aunt, shifted to Dumdum, where her second brother had died. Her mother was in a state of shock and did not want to stay in that house; they shifted to a rented house at Nilmoni Mitra Street.

Mrs. Chatterjee's family, like all other families in the present study, appears rationalized in terms of size. Her family of orientation had 5 members and her husband's family of orientation had 10 members while her own family of procreation has four members. The affinal and consanguinal kin are widespread in the city and they are in touch through phone and social meetings, although they do not have any material interdependence. The family maintains a strong bond with neighbours. The life of the members is too much family-centric; parents' life is children-centric. The untimely death of the elder son has left the parents, particularly mother, in perpetual state of trauma and depression. The life of the parents has changed so much that they have lost the will to live, despite support from the younger son. When the family size is small, procreation is restricted to one child or two children, the emotional interdependence becomes total and any untimely death leaves a destabilizing effect on the living members, particularly on the aged parents, who are not emotionally strong to take the blow of the death of a grown-up child. Mrs. Chatterjee enjoys some authority only in matters of home-making, while Mr. Chatterjee and their grown-up son take care of the outdoor responsibilities.

Family with troubled relations: Although rare, the urban middleclass families go through different forms of relational crises. One such crisis is strained conjugal relation leading to separation or divorce. Here is an

example. **Mrs. P. Saha**, a 66-year old Hindu Baishya lady, has been living in her 2300 sq. ft. house at DL 93, Salt Lake for the past 26 years. The house has three bedrooms, one guest room, and a drawing room. She lives in this house with her only son. Her husband died 8 years ago. In her own family of orientation Mrs. Saha had two brothers and a sister while her husband had a brother and a sister.



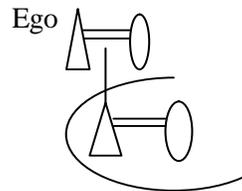
Mrs. Saha's household

Mrs. Saha is a graduate while her husband was MBBS-MS. Her father was also an MBBS. Her mother had school level education and her son is MBBS and MD who works as a radiologist in Medica Super Speciality Hospital in Kolkata. Her husband had built the present house spending all his savings. Mr. Saha draws Rs. 30000 as her husband's pension. Mrs. Saha uses modern gadgets like cell phone, microwave, and television and music system. She has high blood pressure and blood sugar and few years back she had an appendix operation. Now she is more or less fit.

Mrs. Saha's family is also rationalized in line with one-child norm, which is widely accepted in the urban middleclass. While Mrs. Saha's family of orientation had 6 members her husband's family had 4 members, her own family of procreation is restricted to one child (three members). Mrs. Saha grew up as a part of a joint family amidst siblings and cousins but ended up having a simple nuclear family. She maintains strong kinship bond with the members of her family of orientation, who are dispersed in different parts of the city, and maintains strong bond with neighbours, who come forward to help in times of crisis. Death of her husband has made her strong as a person; she now takes crucial decisions and handles both indoor and outdoor activities with confidence; she does community service as an office bearer of the block committee and ladies' club in the neighbourhood. Mrs. Saha's case bears testimony to the fact that given the space and challenge the 'agency' in the woman flourishes to its full while the elements of patriarchy take a back seat. Mrs. Saha had a cared upbringing and she has brought up her only son with utmost care and love. She maintains good relation with her in-laws and sustains good memories of living in a joint family. She is

economically self-reliant; emotionally, however, she is completely dependent on her son. She draws pride of the achievements of her son and her daily routine, future thoughts, worries are rooted in her son. Here is a rare case where her son and daughter-in-law fell apart; a case of domestic violence was registered by the parents of her daughter-in-law, following which Mrs. Saha's family members were put in jail custody, which inflicted so much of humiliation that her husband died of shock. Going to jail carried a lot of stigma in middleclass and there was a brief period of social isolation until they were acquitted of all charges by the court. Disturbance in conjugal life, domestic violence, police case and divorce, none of these fits into the middleclass values and when they occur there is always a risk of social seclusion.

Longing father, careerist son: Some members of the younger generation are coming are the grip of careerism and calculative rationalism, which impacts upon the familial relations negatively. **Mr. M. Dutta**, aged 76 years, a Hindu Kayestha, lives in his flat at DL-12/1 since 1999. It is 1200 sq. ft. flat consisting of three bed rooms and a drawing room. He had four sisters while his spouse had two brothers and a sister. Mr. Dutta has a son who now stays in his own apartment with his wife.



Mr. Dutta's household

Mr. Dutta is Ph. D. in economics while his wife is Ph. D. in Bengali. His father was engineer and mother had school level education. His son did MCA. Mr. Dutta taught in David Hare College and in Calcutta University. He was also the Dean of Calcutta University for five years and shouldered the administrative responsibility of W.B.B.S.E. His wife worked as a lecturer in Diamond Harbour College. His son works in a multinational company. Mr. Dutta draws a monthly pension of Rs. 35000. He uses modern gadgets like cell phone, television, music system, and computer. He doesn't have any serious ailment and is physically active.

Mr. Dutta's family is also rationalized in terms of size; his family of orientation had 7 members, his wife's family of orientation had 6 members, but his own family of procreation has only 3 members. 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. The parents seem to have reconciled with this spiritual rupture. Mr. Dutta has a trusted and trouble-free relation with his wife but does not allow her much free space in terms of decision-making. Mr. Dutta visits his sister who lives close by but his relation with other consanguinal kin has become loose. He maintains good rapport with his neighbours and trusts them more than his relatives. 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 relegating the conventional family values, emotions, sentiments and care into wilderness.

What do the Case Studies Transpire?

The five case studies represent five of many distinct patterns indicative of the changes taking place in the micro locales of urban middleclass families, ranging between continuation of an ideal joint family that preserves all family values and a rationalized (both in terms of size and relations) family with selfish careerism overshadowing family values and responsibilities. In-between these two extremes, there are family with dispersal of its members, family nursing the wound of losing a grown-up son and family with strained conjugal relation ending in divorce. Since the family locales and the micro social space in each family are unique it is always difficult to identify a common or uniform pattern of change in urban middleclass families. One can see from the case studies that rationalization of family size and dispersal of family members are almost universal. Also universal is peoples' efforts to preserve family values and protect the otherwise flagging family relations and even extended kinship relations, both affinal and consanguinal. 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. 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 obligation.

Life of the Aged in Old Age Home

At one stage of life some of the city elderly move to the old-age homes leaving behind their houses primarily because the family care system collapses and they change their living arrangements in search of security and a better care system. I have covered two old-age homes of Kolkata. One is Mukta Bihanga, situated in Sonarpur area of South Kolkata, and the second one is Rabindra Niketan, which is located in Naktala area, again in South Kolkata. I began with a field survey where I interviewed 56 respondents with the help of a survey schedule for a background survey and, in the second phase, I have done detailed case studies of 32 elderly selected from both the Homes.

In the old-age homes in Kolkata one can generally find three categories of aged: (1) the aged couples whose children live abroad or in a distant city, (2) the aged who have lost their spouses and have child or children who stay away, and (3) the unmarried women (or men) who did not have a family to support in their old age. Interestingly, the aged in old-age homes in Kolkata do not attach any 'stigma' to their Home-stay and consider the decision to move to old-age home as a rational solution to their problems like aging related insecurities and loneliness. They largely consider the move as a step forward in search of a better life. The general feeling about old-age homes is that since they work on profit motive the humane side of empathy for the elderly is by and large absent. Such a view may not be

true about all the Homes as one can find elements of 'care' in the treatment of the elderly, the ailing, 'dependent' Home inmates. Apart from the caring arrangement in the Homes the elderly inmates find the warmth of company of the other inmates, make informal groups to combat boredom and loneliness. The care-package, even for the ailing, half-crippled aged, proves to be handy. The prime questions of sociological relevance, therefore, are (1) whether the aged, living in homes, are the victims of neglect and desertion by their children and (2) whether wider kinship and social support get cut as the aged move into the homes.

Reasons for moving to old-age Home: Quantifying the factors that take the aged to the Homes we can see that 40 out of 56 (71 per cent) Home inmates were living alone in their own house; loneliness, insecurity, ill-health, unreliable service providers prompted their shift. Five of the respondents moved to Home leaving their sons, daughters-in-law and even grandchildren because they wanted to live a life with freedom while granting freedom to their children to live the life of their choice. It is quite possible that they had tension in the family and the elderly could not take the strain and pain of soared relation with their close ones, the family members. For some, it was a mutually agreed upon decision for the convenience of both sides. In a way they preferred separation in order to save the relation. Three of the respondents have directly blamed the sons and particularly daughter-in-law for ill-treatment or cold treatment as reasons for their move to old-age homes. Two of the respondents, both widow, said their sons work in a distant city and they did not want to go with them. Two others have said that they have lost their spouses and their daughters are dispersed after marriage and therefore they have moved to old-age Home. Three respondents have mentioned space crunch in their house with the expansion of the family while one couple has chosen to live in the Home together. Besides, one childless couple moved to Home.

Table 1: Reasons for movement to old-age homes

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

How the aged felt while moving to the Homes: The social perceptions, the pressure of tradition, the stigma attached to living in the Homes, the micro situation in the family together create individual perceptions, a world of feelings, which determine how the aged members would feel about their movement to the Homes. Being asked how they felt while leaving their own house for the Home, 30 of the respondents out of 56 (53.5 per cent) unequivocally said they felt very bad and had problems in accepting Home life and the remaining 26 respondents (46.4 per cent) said they did not feel bad and they had no problem in accepting the Home life. The micro family circumstances are responsible for such contrasting responses. Those who felt bad might have had family members to leave behind and did not have a clear idea about the ambience in Homes while most other elderly who might have been living alone for some time (since they were unmarried, widow or widower or have children who live away) and they wanted to escape the loneliness and insecurities of life. For the latter group moving to the Home meant an escape from loneliness and an opportunity to explore a new social situation, in the company of fellow senior citizens.

The relation of the aged with their children and extended kin after their shift: One crucial sociological question to probe is whether family and kinship support system breaks down completely as the aged move to the Homes. The information at hand suggests that the relations do continue to work even after the shift. Out of 56 respondents, 28 (i.e., 50 per cent) informed that their children and relatives come and visit them frequently (once or twice a month), 17 (30 per cent) have said that their children and relatives visit them once in every two-four months while nine (16 per cent)

respondents have said that their relatives and children visit them once or twice a year; only two of the respondents have told me that they have no contact either with their children or relatives. In other words, 96 per cent of the Home boarders maintain contacts with their close kin and family members. Thus, the shift to the Homes does not mean, in any way, the end of family and kinship care system. The children and relatives of the aged try to maintain some form of relation with them and extend some kind of support (financial, material or in terms of care). Placing them in a scale it can be seen that in most of the cases the relation is very cordial although there are cases (very few in number) where there is no relation or a very faint relation. Although most of the respondents maintain some kind of relation with their family members and close kin the degree of emotive involvement varies from case to case depending on the micro family situations, particularly micro family composition at present and the quality of pre-existing relations.

How do the aged compare their past life with Home life? The aged, in most cases, came to the Homes as a rational choice compelled by the circumstances; they, excepting a very few, are not necessarily the victims of the cruelty of their heartless child/children. They feel that the aged, after certain point in life, should come to the Home giving space to their children to live their life of their own. In the process, the aged also can live life peacefully and independently in the Homes. Most of the aged boarders miss their life spent in their own house with their close family members and recollect their fond memories but they gradually learn to enjoy their life at Home. In a way, they are not left with a choice; they accept the fact that this is the place from where they will leave this world one day. They Home-inmates, therefore, make efforts to make their life better. They engage themselves in lot of group activities and make positive efforts to make life better. In Rabindra Niketan the group activities are more compared to Mukto Bihanga, where the boarders do not do yoga or music classes; they prefer spending their time inside their rooms or by chatting among themselves at the veranda for long hours. The care and services are much better in Mukto Bihanga than in Rabindra Niketan. In Rabindra Niketan there are a lot of complaints about food, discriminatory treatment and indifference to the problems of the boarders but in Mukto Bihanga the boarders do not have many complaints; food is good, and what they like the most is the personal care of the owners-cum-managers. The boarders in general miss the luxury, comfort and the food that they used to have in their own houses

but here they have got a number of friends and are involved into a number of activities to make their life meaningful. The boarders have to adhere to the rules of the Home and compromise with many things which are beyond their control but what they appreciate is that their life here is secure, full of freedom and they are not answerable to their children or relative for their activities and do not have to think of their security or health. The boarders feel that the people outside have a negative perception about the Homes which does not match with their experience. They probably think that everything is rule bound, the manager and staffs are very strict, the boarders have to take permission to visit their relatives, and the services are also of very poor quality, and so on. The boarders admit that they also had this kind of perception before coming to the Home. They were not free of the social stigma that is attached to Home living. But from their experience of living in Homes they have realized that all such perceptions stereotypical and do not hold much water. Most importantly, living here they can keep healthy relations with their kin and family members and friends who live somewhere in the city. Those who have their sons and daughters living in the city feel that separate living saves them from being seen as ‘burdens’ and helps maintain the relations healthy.

One prominent observation that comes out of the study is that the women and men, who have lost their spouses, the women who never married, the ailing people who have none to take care of, the parents whose child/children stay away – all belonging to urban educated middleclass - are the ones who are numerically dominant among the residents in the two old-age homes. The women, particularly the unmarried ones and those who have lost their spouses, outnumber the men among the boarders; this points to their greater vulnerability in society. Living in the Homes is increasingly becoming a rational solution to the multiple problems that face the middleclass aging urbanites. The relations between the aged and their family members and larger kin evolve in course of time and go through different phases of stresses and strains. It has also been seen that the members largely value the relations even when the members lose warmth for one another. The close family relations work in finding the right kind of old-age home, extending financial support when necessary, keeping in touch and standing by the side of the elderly in moments of crisis. The siblings and close relations keep in touch with one another over telephone and by exchanging occasional visits.

Neither the Home inmates nor their family members feel ashamed of this fact of modern life. A large section of the elderly is not keeping good health.

They do not want to be 'burden'; on any one; they move to old-age home to live a life of freedom and dignity while allowing their children to live the life of their choice. The elderly, particularly the women, in some cases take the decision to move to old-age homes on their own in search of a secure and better life and this could be interpreted as an expression of 'agency' or assertion of 'self'. Thus, the stigma that was long associated with Home-living (and still is) is gradually weaning both from the shared perception of the urban middleclass and from the perceptions of those who live in old-age homes.

In this chapter we had set out to examine (1) whether the aged, living in Homes, are the victims of neglect and desertion by their children and (2) whether wider kinship and social support break down as the aged move into the Homes. The findings indicate that the answers to both the queries are in the negative. Only in a very few cases, the boarders have mentioned of troubled relation with their family members as the reason for their shift to the Home. There are a few cases where the elderly have cited 'neglect' and 'ill-treatment' at the hands of their daughters-in-law and sons as reasons for their movement to the Home. But even in those cases the relations and mutual care continue in one form or the other. In most cases the social circumstances, mainly lack of care and a sense of insecurity, took the elderly to the Home. After the shift of the elderly to the Home the family members and relatives do not shrug off their responsibilities towards them. The middle-class values of care and responsibility are strongly upheld by both sides.

The aged boarders in the Homes make efforts to live a meaningful life. They make efforts to be happy and enjoy their life in the Home. They are not in a mood to surrender to the burdens that aging heaps on them. Over time, they develop a sense of belonging with the Home and the room they live in. On the whole, one can see that most of the boarders in both the Homes make constant efforts not only to live fighting the problems of aging but to live a good life by engaging in creative, collective activities; they also engage in constant dialogues with the Home authorities over their problems in order to make the Home ambience better.

Concluding observations

The study has found out that some of the changes in the relationships in the middleclass families in Kolkata, which impact upon the lives of the aged, result from multiple tensions. One such tension emanates, on the one hand,

from the conventional urge to uphold the middleclass familial values (which can be termed as 'traditional consciousness' that demands holding all the members together) and, on the other, the pragmatic career considerations, on the part of the members, to disperse to different places and relay the relations on rational terms (i.e., 'practical consciousness', to use the terminology of Giddens 1984). The dispersal of the siblings, as they grow up, results into the family of orientation getting fragmented into a number of nuclear households (the families of procreation). Similarly, the child/children of the families of procreation (the families I have studied) also disperse because of marriage or career compulsions which again results setting up of new households. Thus, one can see that the urban middleclass families are going through a process of rationalization in terms of their size, living arrangements, relations and mutual expectations. While such rationalizations are inevitable the emotive side of the family relations largely remain intact, if not further cemented. The members of the smaller families make efforts to keep their ties close and keep the care system afloat even when they live in different places. The downsizing of family has actually brought the members even closer, at least in terms of emotive interdependence, although the aging parents and their children live with much economic independence. Away from each other, the family members make use of modern communication system in order to keep in close touch and evolve new mechanisms for sustaining the care system. Untimely death of any member of the small family or household leaves a serious destabilizing impact on the living members. In some cases, however, the extended family ties are retained although the emotive elements have withered from such relations.

The study has found that the urban elderly, in most cases, take shelter in the old-age homes when all their efforts to live as a part of their family in their own house fail because of dispersal of the children, death of the spouse, ill-health and insecurity, and strained relation with family members (in a few cases). The study has found that the unmarried women and those women who have lost their spouses are more vulnerable, compared to their male counterparts, and are the more likely to move to old-age homes. The study also shows that in the whole scheme of maintaining familial relationships, the female members exert (interestingly, I had a significant number of unmarried women as my informants) strong 'agency'. However, some of the middleclass elderly move to old-age homes (the number of which is growing fast) *by choice* in order to live in freedom while allowing their married children to live a life of their own. This, according to them, helps maintain healthy family relations.

The study comes out with the observation that the living in old-age homes, which is a logical solution to a complex body of worries associated with old-age, is fast becoming accommodated into the urban middleclass values. The elderly, who live in the Homes and their family members are getting over the 'stigma' that was long (and still is) associated with the *bridhyasram* and are getting in terms with the fact that the care system in the fragmented middleclass families is under serious threat and it is only 'rational' for the elderly and their close ones to accept living in old-age homes to take as a possible solution to the 'crises' that the urban middleclass life is bringing them. The decision to move to old-age homes, in most cases, is 'egotiated and agreed upon' in the small circles of close relations, and the care of the elderly by the close kin, in one form or the other, continues even when the latter live far and wide.

Notes

1. An earlier version of the paper was presented at the 5th International Congress of Bengal Studies held at Jahangirnagar University, Bangladesh, on 25-28 January 2018. I am thankful to Prof. Rajat Subhra Mukhopadhyaya and Prof. Sanjay K. Roy of the Department of Sociology for their kind editorial help.
2. Although India is generally considered a young population compared to the West in recent decades the population above 60 years has grown sharply – 56.7 million in 1991, 76.6 million in 2001 and 103.8 million in 2011 (Source: Office of the Registrar General, India 2013). The share of the aged population to total population stands at 6.8 per cent, which is expected to grow steadily over the next few decades (Mishra and Rajan 2017: 1-3).

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