

BOOK REVIEW

***Life of the Middleclass Aged in Kolkata***

By Sinjini Roy

New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, Gyan Books Pvt. Ltd.,  
ISBN 9789353240554, Rs.850/, Pp 255

The book under review is based on the author's PhD thesis in Sociology of the University of North Bengal. This is the outcome of her in depth empirical research among the middleclass aged of the city of Kolkata. In her study, the author has meticulously examined, analyzed and diagnosed the issues and problems of the elderly male and female living with or without family members both in their own houses or flats and in the old age homes on the basis of her field data. The study explores the social processes through which the elderly population moves from multigenerational big joint and extended households to the stage of living alone, where the institution of family and kinship-oriented care system breaks down for the interplay of various endogenous and exogenous forces. There are altogether nine chapters in this book followed by a rich bibliography, index and glossary of popular Bengali terms.

Chapter 1 is *Introduction*, dealing mainly with the context and background of the study, objectives of research, conceptual framework and methodology of the study. While dealing with the methodology the nature and strategy of field work as well as the problems faced in field studies are also highlighted, which is usually not a practice in most of the ethnographic discourses. To this extent the methodology section of this book is a unique one. However, it would have been more interesting and attractive if the ethical issues in field work and data collection were also included in this section.

Chapter 2 is *Aged in Literature*, primarily dealing with the review of important literatures on the subject under study. While reviewing the literatures the author basically reviewed the works those dealt with the relationship of the aged with their children and kin members those who live in their own houses /flats and also among the aged and their relations with

the inmates of old age home. Review also covers the literatures dealing with the problems of the aged living either in their own home or in old age home. The literatures dealing with the policies and programmes for the wellbeing of the aged, including the literatures on theoretical and methodological discourses for the study of elderly were also reviewed. On the basis of review works the author identified the research gaps and those helped her to justify the significance of the present research.

Chapter 3 is *Socio-economic Background of the Elderly*. In this section the author presented the various aspects of demographic attributes and socio-economic background of the elderly with the help of tables and figures. There are altogether 31 tables in this chapter. The tables presented in this section are very rich with valuable facts and findings and those are analyzed both in quantitative and qualitative manners. In this chapter the author clearly noted that there are significant differences in life ways as well as in quality of life between the elderly living in their own houses and in the old age homes.

Chapter 4 is *Household and Families of the Aged in Salt Lake City*, in which one can get the details of household and family including their various types and forms which have been presented through micro genealogical diagrams. Family relations, care system and the problems of the aged are also discussed in this section. This chapter clearly shows the micro-changes those have taken place in urban middle-class families and how such forces significantly impacted upon the life of the aged living in Salt Lake City of Kolkata.

Chapter 5 is *Households and Families of the Aged Living in Old Age Homes*. In this section the aged living in old age homes and their previous household dimensions and dynamics of inter personal family relations are thoroughly discussed with the help of diagrams and their scientific analyses. The issues like burden, loss of values, cruelty those have emerged in urban, middle class families of Kolkata as new social phenomena are also highlighted very brilliantly.

Chapter 6 is *Dispersal of Family Members and its Impact on the Life of the Aged*. Here the author examined the nature of dispersal among the members of urban middleclass families due to various reasons as per demands of the emerged situation. How the dispersal of members has changed the structure and pattern of relationship in traditional middleclass families in Kolkata are discussed and analyzed thoroughly. The consequences of dispersal and the mechanisms evolved out of such structural and

functional transformation in household pattern and family relations are also examined and discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 7 & 8 are *Life of the Aged in Salt Lake City* and *Life of the Aged in Old Age Homes* respectively. These two chapters are basically dealing with the details of daily life as well as quality of life of the aged, both men and women, in two different social settings. The challenges and opportunities in the life of the aged living in both the contexts are discussed in this chapter through concrete case studies and narratives of the elderly. The various problems of the aged as well as the mechanisms of their adaptation and adjustment for survival and live a (good) life at the old age are also discussed from the perspectives of the aged. These two chapters represented the real picture of aspirations, hopes, desires and failures of the “aged” and the mechanism through which they are confronting with the realities (joys and pains) of life under emerged situation. The most crucial findings of these two chapters are the aged irrespective of their place of residence have made the constant efforts not only to live by fighting with the problems of aging, but also to lead a good life by engaging themselves in various forms of creative activities. The gender differences in adaptive process of the elderly under changing circumstances are also discussed in these two chapters.

Chapter 9 is *Conclusion*, divided into ten small sections primarily dealing with the summary of the findings, their critical analysis and interrelations based on data gathered for the present study. Various theoretical debates in understanding the issues and problems under study are nicely explained to arrive at logical conclusions. Concluding remarks are drawn on the basis of analytical discussions of facts and findings within the help of theoretical frame and analytical tools of sociology, anthropology and social science research.

This study clearly reveals that the middle class aged under scrutiny are leading their life in a serious care crisis. As a result, they themselves are making and finding their own ways and means for making manifold adjustments to cope with the system in which they are a part of the whole. Their adaptation process sometimes cuts across the conventional means, customs and relations, but that does not drastically affect the social relations. The face to face and day to day relations, specially the parent-child relation is gradually replaced by occasional visits of parents to sons and daughters or vice-versa is an emerging trend. The use of modern gadgets for maintaining interpersonal relations between family members is a very popular trend. It has also been pointed out that there are significant differences in

life ways between the aged those who lead their life in own homes and those who stay in old age homes. It is very painful to learn that the aged living in homes have either failed all efforts to stay with their family members or have lost their own home and family together.

The study suggests that the conventional theoretical scheme and methodological tools of examining the dynamics of family in Indian context by way of rigid dichotomy between “tradition and modern”, “collectivism and individualism”, “localism and globalism”, “modernity and alternative modernity” “continuity of east and historicity of west” are gradually losing their significance under contemporary and fast changing social situation which is not only very complex but also hybridized and determined much by market forces and consumer culture. The empirical realities compel us to think about evolving composite approaches and perspectives for understanding the social realities of the nature and functions of family. Here the author deserve credit as she has pointed out that in post-modern time no theoretical discourse is comprehensive and good enough to capture the complex and changing realities of family and social life.

The book will serve the interests of the researchers not only in the field of sociology and anthropology but also of a number of disciplines like social work, social welfare, social development, psychology and policy studies. The book reflects the labor and interest of the author to handle this complex subject. The author deserves all appreciations for her pioneering work on “aged” in the background of urban middle-class family in Kolkata. I would recommend this book for those who want food for thought in the era of risk society. This book would prove to be of value to the policy makers and planners.

It is expected that the author will continue her research on “elderly” in coming days in the light of new paradigms and cross-cultural perspectives.

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