

BOOK REVIEW

Roy, Sinjini, 2019, *LIFE OF THE MIDDLECLASS AGED IN KOLKATA*. Kalpaz Publications: Delhi. ISBN110052. Pp. 255, Tables 35,
Price: Rs. 850.

There are innumerable narratives from all over the world, detailing the phenomena of sunset years of their respective populations. Despite availability of adequate details of such facts of life of the elderly persons, nowhere as it appears, the societies and cultures have been in a position to tackle the issues related to their problems with adequate confidence. Somewhat puzzling though a reality that almost all societies looked upon this very natural phenomenon as if a nagging problem. According to chronological analyses, exactly at what historical phase this apparently obvious natural phenomenon of ageing assumed the character of a serious problem is still a subject of mere speculation. Significant differences across societies and cultures notwithstanding, it should have been possible to associate this very phenomenon with the sequences of development of societies and cultures. Somewhat strangely though, the narratives often seem to prefer remaining rather vague. Traditional India, instead, appears to stand out somewhat distinctly in this respect. When through their approach of *chaturashram*, the people tended to look upon at this very fact only as an expression of a unique natural process, through application of the method of extrapolation, it should not have been altogether impossible to determine the cultural stage or point of time, since when this practice got into general usage in public behaviour.

According to Hindu Sacred Law, when a householder is greeted with grandchildren, that announces the time for him to become a hermit, leaving all earthly pleasures, material as well as non-material, behind. This stage of life or *vanaprastha*, is further followed by *sanyas*, a stage ever-eager to meet the ultimate.

Opinions differ among scholars, whether such a way of life of the elderly citizens was ever in usual practice in real life or the stages just indicate an

ideal, ever to be aspired. In either way, this suggests a cognition yet to be found anywhere else. Therefore, whether life-style of the aged is a problematic or otherwise, could be analysed without necessarily assigning any value judgement.

Life of the Middleclass Aged in Kolkata by Sinjini Roy is a welcome addition to the literature of individuals belonging to the sunset years. It is no doubt a fairly intimate description of what is happening to the elderly people of the middleclass no matter howsoever defined, particularly in terms of what may broadly be categorized as the family relations in an ever-changing urban social space of contemporary Kolkata. As the author highlights the limitations of scope of the present exercise, she also proposes that the study has been designed to explore the basic processes that transform the multi-generational large family set ups to single-member units, resulting in sharp loss of family-care system. In fact, her emphasis has been to examine in the context of urban middle class and the validity of the predominant discourses on aging in India, which by and large propagates that the rush for materialism that encourages individualism among the new generations, in fact practically leaving the aged rather lonely, if not somewhat uncared.

Her basic assumption is that the middle class often provides the cultural space where elements of tradition as well as modernity seem to closely interplay. To be relatively more specific, her significant question is, the middle class being the target of the ever-growing consumer culture, how do they negotiate with the pressures of tradition as well as modernity? The impact seems obvious to her. When the elderly individuals need the warmth and care of the family most, they are scarcely to be found. This results in a care crisis situation, intricacies of which are not yet sufficiently explained. How do the middleclass aged comprehend the crisis and what have been the strategy for adjustment to the new situation remain to be adequately known.

In Roy's study, research samples have been drawn from among two sets: (i) those who live in their own houses along with some family members and also (ii) those who shifted to old-age homes. The former is likely to demonstrate continuity, to what extent the traditional family system is still in a position to act as the binding force. The latter is supposed to highlight the pressures that compel the aged to seek shelter in old-age homes. Nevertheless, the major part of the study devoted itself to reflect the nature and character of relationship of the aged and their respective children, particularly in highlighting the nature of problems the aged suffer from.

The overall picture further demonstrates the character of family support system, as still exists as a binding force. Although the author notes with apparent awe, the pre-dominance of female inmates in the old-age homes, her analysis tried to offer an explanation. She further demonstrates the process through which the families of orientation over time lose members, ultimately leaving the elderly of the family rather lonely. This, to the author, appears to be the integral part of the modern urban middle-class families.

As Roy asserts in this context, elderly persons who continue to live in their respective houses, still value a great deal the notions of family, kinship, community, neighbourhood, family care, support system, empathy, traditional way of life, and such others. For those, whose support system is weak or non-existent, no matter whatever the reasons may be, are rather compelled to move to the old-age homes.

Growing life expectancy, down-sizing of the family as such, and dispersal of family members together create a crisis situation for the aged in general, and particularly for those who have moved to the old-age homes. Nevertheless, the author establishes with an appreciable degree of confidence that despite stresses and strains of the wider social forces, the institutions like family, kinship, community, neighbourhood, friendship, and values like care, support, empathy, etc. have not altogether become redundant yet in the life and living of the urban middle class.

Chaturashram, either as practice or ideal, obviously refers to the life-style of pre-industrial, pre-urban societies and cultures. In the contemporary context, they are almost nowhere to be available. There is sparingly any society or culture, where penetration of urban-industrial forces is yet to be sufficiently experienced. Thus, problems related to aged are several though, going to stay. Under the circumstance, as pointed out by Sinjini Roy, strategies toward stress-free adjustment seem to be the only way out.

By way of drawing up her conclusions, the author observed that the seminal issues covered by the account under review are stresses and strains of the larger social forces internal as well as global, notwithstanding the fact that the institutions like family, kinship, community, neighbourhood, and friendship and values like care, support, empathy, etc. have not altogether been redundant yet in the life and living of the urban middleclass aged populations. The author considered it important to touch upon issues related to most of the major sociological thoughts, several among whom do not necessarily extend or receive any direct support from the data so meticulously generated

by the scholar. Nevertheless, a close editing, particularly to eliminate avoidable repetitions, could have immensely enhanced the value of this otherwise excellent study.

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