Title: Examining the role of civil societies in shaping the process of growing old among older adults across India

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Abstract

The world's population is aging. In particular, population aging remains a major challenge for the developing world as these countries continue to adjust to the growing demographic bulge of older populations. India is no exception in this as it races towards a future of an increasingly higher share of older adults in its total population distribution. In particular, India has the world's fastest growing 60 plus population after China. According to the Census (1991-2011), while India's older population (aged 60 and above) was 57 million older adults in 1991 (6.6%), it increased to 104 million by 2011 (8.6%). With the steady rise of the older adult population in the country, there have been growing concerns about economic security, loneliness and safety measures for older adults. Despite the growth in the elderly population, the elderly continue to be ignored by the State and its policies and the main responsibility of care rests with the adult child (most cases the adult son). As a result in recent years (2016-2018), cases of elder abuse, elderly suicides and abandonment of elderly have increased markedly in India. Due to the lack of State support several civil society bodies, in the form of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged to provide later life care to the older population of India. In particular, these NGOs provide economic, social and emotional support to older adults from both urban and rural areas of India. Adopting a socio-gerontological lens, the present paper examines the intervention of these civil bodies to understand their caregiving arrangements for older adults across India. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews this paper demonstrates how these NGOs transcend the lines of caste, class, gender and ethnicity and shape the subjective experiences of growing old among these older adults who are receiving support from these NGOs. Finally, this paper draws from Disengagement theory to highlight how these NGOs rely on religion and spirituality to enable these older adults to cope with the inevitability of death.

Keywords: civil societies, aging, caregiving arrangements, religion, India

Background

Population aging is gradually becoming a concern for both the developed and the developing nations. Demographic forces such as increasing life expectancy and rapidly falling fertility rates are contributing to a growing bulge in the age group of 60 and above. This global aging has the potential to transform economies and trade, migration, disease burdens and social relations, all very significantly. In this India is no exception. In fact, projections suggest that India's older adult population (60 and above) will rise from 8% in 2010 (~ 60 million) to 19% in 2050 (approximately 300 million) (UNESA, 2009; Census of India, 2011). This demographic bulge of older adults is growing at a time when India is also experiencing significant shifts in family structures, security provisions and social policies.

Despite the rise of the elderly population, the Government of India does not provide any form of emotional or financial support to older adults in India (Rajan and Kumar, 1999; Vera-Sanso, 2005; 2007). The entire burden of later life caregiving arrangements falls on the family in India (Shah, 1999). However, with the disruption of the joint family system, more and more older adults are being abandoned in rural areas or choosing to live alone in urban India. As a result these older adults are turning to civil societies, mostly NGOs, to have a sustaining and peaceful old age. Against this backdrop, the present study adopts a socio-gerontological lens and analyses the various measures provided by these NGOs to ensure that these older adults have a meaningful process of aging. Additionally, the study will also examine how these NGOs eclipse social barriers such as caste, class and gender and rely on religion to provide a holistic old age to older adults across India.

Literature Review

Traditionally, later life caregiving arrangements were undertaken by the joint family system in rural and urban India (Dandekar, 1996; Gulati and Rajan, 1999; Vera-Sanso, 2005; 2007; Lamb, 2009; Gangopadhyay and Samanta, 2017). However, with the rupture of the family system in urban India, older adults have resorted to other forms of caregiving provisions. For instance, one group of older adults has shifted to formal care homes (also known as old age homes) for their later life care (Lamb, 2009; Kalavar and Jamuna, 2011; Samanta and Gangopadhyay, 2016). Though old age homes are gradually becoming popular, a recent survey

found that a substantial number of older adults are choosing to live alone in urban India (Perappadan, 2018). In particular, the survey suggested that these older adults are struggling to have an active social life to cope with loneliness on a regular basis (Perappadan, 2018). The problem is more acute in rural India. With rapid urbanization and the decline of agriculture (Financial Express, 2019) as a revenue generator, most of the rural youth are migrating to urban areas in search of employment opportunities (Census of India, 2011). As a result, rural elderly in India face constant abandonment and rely on alcohol and substance abuse to cope with financial and emotional constraints (Rajan and Kumar, 1999; Goswami, 2005; Rajkumar, 2009; Datta, 2018). Though older adults are opting to live alone and being abandoned, nonetheless, scholarship on these elderly continues to be limited. Notable exceptions include, a study done by van Willigen and colleagues (1995, 2003) in a Delhi neighborhood, which highlighted how neighbors are a part of the everyday narrative in the lives of the older adults. In particular, the study suggested that the older generation in this Delhi neighborhood rely on their neighbors for financial aid, exchange of daily groceries and even their daily activities. In another study in urban India, Lamb (2009) indicates that older adults living alone become members of self-focused senior citizens clubs to have a meaningful old age. A more recent study by Gangopadhyay and Samanta (2017) in urban Ahmedabad, found that gender plays an important role in determining the choice of network ties. For example, the older men are part of retired communities and discuss politics, weather and current affairs, while older women are part of neighborhood communities and discuss gossip, television serials and their daily problems. Given the lack of State support, the present study draws from these studies and highlights how various NGOs run by philanthropists play a role in improving the wellbeing of older adults in India.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to understand the importance of civil societies in the lives of older adults in urban India. A total of thirty older adults were interviewed. Given the specific nature of the group, the study relied on snowball and purposive sampling to identify potential respondents for the study. Since the study relied on snowball sampling (Babbie, 2012), the author used the contacts of a few NGO personal to recruit the older adults. Due to the nature

of sampling, interviews could not be conducted all over urban areas of India. Interviews were conducted in areas where the author could establish some point of reference or contact. Chronically ill and permanently disabled older adults were excluded from the study. Out of the thirty adults twenty were Hindus, five were Muslims and five were Christians. Given the predominance of Hinduism as a religion in India (Census of India, 2011), the majority of the respondents belonged to the Hindu religious order. The age range of the respondents was from 60-80 years. The interviews were conducted in English and Bengali.

The interview instrument was a semi structured questionnaire which was developed using the deductive method (Babbie, 2012). The questionnaire had both open- and close-ended questions. For instance, the study drew from the existing gerontological literature and theoretical models to construct the questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: PART I: Demographic Information, PART II: Identifying daily activities at the NGOs and PART III: Mapping caste, class and gender lines.

To understand the significance of civil societies in the lives of these older adults, in-depth narrative style interviews were conducted. Once the interviews were conducted, a thematic analysis (Boyatsiz, 1988) was used to do a systematic analysis of the responses.

Major Findings

Civil Societies and the process of aging

In the course of aging in India, scholarship has majorly focused on the State and the role of the family. However independent civil societies such as NGOs have gradually started emerging as important contributors in shaping the process of aging in India. Several NGOs across India distribute food and clothes to abandoned older adults and also help them relocate to free shelter homes. Additionally, these NGOs also offer counseling services and organize events to avoid older adults from feeling lonely. The quotes below further highlight these findings:

"I was facing property issues with my children. My sons were pressurizing me to transfer all my property to them. I was confused. At that point this NGO helped me both legally and psychologically. They made me realize that I should not give up my property as well as wealth for my and wife's health. They were a huge support system." (Older male respondent, aged 73).

"After my husband died, my son and daughter in law left with the grandchildren for the city.

They promised to send me money but nothing happened. I was left to starve to death. Then these people (NGO volunteers) came and rescued me. They took me to this shelter house and saved me. They still come and check on me. My son never came or got in touch. But these volunteers gave me a new lease of life." (Older female respondent, aged 64).

"I miss my grandchildren a lot. Most of these NGOs now send some children from the orphanage to spend time with older people who are lonely. We had signed up for this program and now have adopted a child. She is our granddaughter and we are very attached to her. In fact, I have also going to leave some property to her as I don't know what will happen to her after my wife and I die. But I am grateful that these NGOs got us in touch with this orphanage." (Older male respondent aged 65).

"In India the older poor have to continue working. There is no retirement policy. Once you retire you have no place to go. You will die of starvation. So in that sense this NGO-cum-shelter home has saved us. They give us food and shelter and in turn we clean the temple of the home. We were construction workers. This job is much easier than our previous occupation." (Older female respondent, aged 74).

Apart from providing legal, psychological and financial support, these NGOs also planned events to keep these older adults engaged. Most of the older respondents indicated that they were indebted to these NGOs for assisting them in their old age. Thus based on the quotes and the responses it may be suggested that these NGOs act as major agents of caregiving arrangements for older adults both in urban and rural India.

Caste, class, gender and aging

There are several stratifications in India society, such as caste, class and gender (Gupta, 2004). In fact, there are numerous studies on the various oppressions faced by older adults belonging to the lower castes and classes (Shah, 1999; Liebig and Rajan, 2003; Lamb, 2009). Another set of studies have highlighted the various atrocities faced by older women in India (Chen and Dreze, 1992; Lamb, 2000; Gangopadhyay, 2017). However in these NGOs go beyond social categories such as caste, class and gender in their care provisions. The quotes below further elucidate these findings:

"In the activities people from all backgrounds come and participate. We don't think about which caste who belongs to or what the class of the person is. We are individuals with the same

set of problems and this is a platform to come together." (Older male respondent, aged 66).

"After I began coming to these activities I realized that older adults in upper classes are also lonely. In these activities we all perform various cultural activities. Some of us sing, some recite poetry. We also do plays together. Class or caste does not really matter." (Older female respondent, aged 69).

"Women have been oppressed for generations. In this NGO, we the educated women teach uneducated older women. This way women from both classes connect. We act as support systems for each other." (Older female respondent, aged 71).

"There is no discrimination in terms of gender. Older men and women do everything together. We play games, perform cultural activities and also celebrate our birthdays and festivals. In fact, there is no form of discrimination at all in these organizations." (Older male respondent, aged 76).

Based on the quotes it may be suggested that stratifying factors such as caste, class and gender do not play important factors in later life. In particular, these NGOs act as binding forces to bring older adults from different communities and be a support system for each other. Thus, in their course of care management, these NGOs also goes beyond these social barriers and chart a new form of aging.

Religion and Growing Old in India

Several studies in India have emphasized on the importance of religion in the lives of older adults all over India (Lamb, 1997; Mehta, 1997; Bhat and Dhruvarajan, 2001; Gangopadhyay and Samanta, 2017). In particular, these studies have suggested that older adults rely on religion to seek meaning in their lives (Lamb, 1997; Mehta, 1997; Bhat and Dhruvarajan, 2001; Gangopadhyay and Samanta, 2017). Building on these studies, the present study argues that in addition to adding meaning, these religious groups also act as spaces of interactions. Among the various religious groups, the Ramakrishna Mission (a religious foundation cum NGO, popular all across India), is the most popular religious community all over India. Though Saint Ramakrishna was from Bengal (Belur Math Website), the Ramakrishna Mission has many followers all over the country. They regularly visit the Belur Math (Ramakrishna Shrine) located in the state of West Bengal (eastern side of the country), and also attended all functions

and cultural programmes of the Mission. Despite, Ramakrishna being a Hindu, the mission has followers from all religious community due to the mutual respect for all religions by the mission (Mukherjee and Basu, 2018). Hence, the weekly meetings of the mission act as a huge source of get-togethers for the older adults from all backgrounds. The quotes below further elaborate on this point:

"I look forward to the meetings. The meetings begin with the preaching of a particular Saint and then end with singing of bhajans (religious songs). Members from all age groups come for these meetings. However, I met a lot of people of my own age group in these meetings. After the meetings we often hang out in a coffee shop and have very interesting conversations which range from politics, movies to food. My wife and I often joke that we actually are more interested in the meetings after the religious gathering is over. We have made many friends there and they help us during overcome loneliness." (Older male respondent, aged 66).

"So I got introduced to the mission through a relative of ours and it peaked my curiosity. Earlier I was not regular. But after we visited the Math (shrine), I was struck by the beauty of it. Since then not only do my husband and I attend the meetings, but a few of us of the same age group also visit the Math every weekend. Visiting the Math gives us a huge sense of peace and we also love the puchka (a road side snack) near the Math. We Bengalis are huge foodies and we truly look forward to the puchka there. Yes, it helps a lot to overcome loneliness as these meetings help us to be with different people." (Older female respondent, aged 64).

"Earlier I was just a member of the Mission. Then I got so influenced that I wanted to do something more than just listening to the preaching. So a few of us, people of my age group, meet every weekend to distribute free food to the poor. My wife and I really feel good about this and we believe that we are doing something useful in our later lives." (Older male respondent, aged 74).

"We met a lot of interesting people at the Mission. I read about it in the papers and my husband and I started going for the meetings. We realized a lot of old people come for these gatherings and we started talking after the prayers were over. In fact, we also organize some religious discussions in our own house where all of us share our individual spiritual inclinations and beliefs. Sometimes we also argue and have very stimulating conversations. Of course, I have been able to cope with loneliness better after going for these meetings, but I have

also learnt a lot from our own home based discussions as well" (Older female respondent, aged 71).

In addition to these quotes, the respondents also mentioned that they also have a dedicated Mission WhatsApp group where they are constantly updated about the activities of the Mission. A closer analysis of the responses indicated that these meetings at the Mission helped older couples deal with loneliness and it also gave them a purpose in their later lives. In particular, most of the older adults suggested that these meeting groups act as huge sources of emotional strength and helps them to have a fulfilling old age. In this context, it needs to be highlighted that these religious groups have more significance in the lives of the older couples as opposed to their neighbors and friends because here the meetings happen for a purpose. Most of the network ties in these groups were strangers before but have now become close to each other. As the quotes suggest, the older couples look forward to these meetings and rely on these network ties for later life meaning, intellectual stimulation and a productive later life. In addition to giving a meaning and purpose to older adults in urban parts of the country, the Mission has also given food and shelter to several needy and abandoned older adults. Thus, through the support of religion, this Mission group has helped bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in the country.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to highlight how later life caregiving arrangements are shifting from the family to civil societies such as NGOs. In the process the paper also demonstrated how external and macro constructs such as caste, class and gender lines are blurred in the course of aging determined by these NGOs. Specifically, the paper also indicated how religion plays a role in reducing inequality among older adults in India. In closing, the paper sheds light on the how these NGOs should be included at the policy level to improve the wellbeing of older adults in India. Though these NGOs are acting as agents of care providers for the elderly population of India, nonetheless, it needs to be noted that there are not many NGOs in this segment. Across the country there are around a total of ten NGOs working for the older population of India. Given that longevity is increasing and the family system of care is breaking down, it is important for the State to encourage more civil societies to take up the cause of older

adults in the country. Additionally, the State should also provide opportunities of funding for these NGOs to aid them in their cause and for the advancement of the older population in India.

By focusing on the role of the NGOs in determining the course of aging in India, this paper hopes to have contributed to the intellectual tradition of the Global South.

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