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Vulnerability, Resilience and "Neo-ageing": A Brief Gerontological Study

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Abstract:
This paper's central contention is to show how the ageing populace enmeshed in problematics generated in families' copes with a new socio-cultural formation. In other words, their attempt at building up resilience, adaptation helps strategize their identity formation through models of connectivity and re-neighbouring

Keywords: Ageing populance, socio-cultural formation, resilience, re-neighbouring.

1. Introduction: Negotiating the Discourse

This paper aims to develop contextual specificities of the impact of ageing in migrant and non-migrant families in order to explain contemporary trends of resilience and functional competence of aged people in rural West Bengal. In particular, it aims to analyse distinctive parameters of ageing in migrant and non-migrant families that will work as a metonymic statement of a larger discourse of social exclusion and development of resilience. This work draws on and contributes to a growing trend of emigration, thereby focusing on questions relating to functional autonomy, support networks and governance. The problematic of social exclusion is now a worldwide phenomenon that should be addressed as a larger discursive pattern. Till recently the problem of immigration was not viewed as a major problematic in relation to intergenerational families. Moreover, it is imperative to get over some myths related to old age and also to identify the difference between elderly people belonging to migrant and non-migrant families. Contemporary socio-political environment and changing expectations in India may be regarded as a 'postlude' to the gradual breakdown of Indian concept of intergenerational families. This proposal seeks to recommend proper implementation of policies meant for the elderly people who have not been properly assimilated into the socio-political system and to identify the inherent skills developed by the elderly people to cope with the changing situation as also to resist the popular construction of ageing as a traditional trope.

1.1. Socio-Political Paradigm Shift

In West Bengal, two distinctive factors –political and economic—may be regarded as functional to the gradual shift in the familial structuration. In the early 70s of the last century the celebration of the Indian Dream, as an immediate consequence of the British Raj in 1947, came to be shattered by a sharp resistance politics that largely be ruffled the Nehruvian ideology. The Sino-Indian War (1962) and the War with Pakistan (1965) brought about a sharp decline in traditional faith in an ideal era (*Ramrajya*). The rise of socialist ideology and the Naxalite movement of early 70s and its consequent suppression in West Bengal through violent means surprisingly transformed the traditional ethical/ideological family structures by utilitarian pragmatism. The young populace now moved far into an acceptance of the new formulation of utilitarian ideology, thus gradually replacing the monolithic intergenerational family structures.

Apart from this changing socio-political scenario, the Indian Government's acceptance of the new globalized world order and encouragement of cosmopolitanism in the 90s of the last century brought about a revision of Indian economy as a whole. Rise of globalization and cosmopolitanism accelerated a new market economy opening up opportunities in different sectors of multinational corporations all over India. Such opportunities helped the mobility in different economic sectors developing across the world in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai, New Delhi, Singapore, Australia, UK, Canada, and the USA. This mobility of young job-seekers naturally brought about a sharp change in traditional intergenerational family structures.

2.Literature Review

The systematic and coherent thinking with regard to gerontology only began in the 1950s. But significant critical discourses began to develop with the works of *'The Family Life of Old People'*, and Townsend's classic incorporated a study which contested the prevalent conception that a breakdown in family structures has led to the isolation of old people, which in turn leads to an increasing demand for residential care[i]. On the basis of interviews comprising a random sample of 203 elderly people who have reached the pensionable age living in Bethnal Green, East London, the study focused on the fact that significant roles are played by kinship networks, and also highlighted the necessity of extended family, which is essential in the maintenance of community membership. In the *Handbook of Aging and Individual, Psychological and biological Aspects of Aging*, Birren has argued for a psychological, biological and socio

cultural forces in the study of aging. Other significant works around this time were *Handbook of Social Gerontology: Societal Aspects of Aging*, and *Aging and Society*[iii].

It is therefore worthwhile to consider the factors encompass the socio cultural patterns and parameters of gerontology in the rural parts of West Bengal. Here it is pertinent to discuss certain distinctive critical works relevant to the research project. A significant comment by Burgess may be citedin this regard:

 "Social gerontology is an emergent field of research and teaching which is not directly concerned with the biological aspects of ageing but concentrates rather upon its economics, social psychological, sociological, and political aspects. Its object of research is not individual organisms but people as population aggregates, as members of society and its component groups, and as the creators and the carriers of culture. Specifically, social gerontology studies the status and roles of older persons, their cultural patterns, social organization, and collective behaviour as they are affected by and as they affect social change." [Cited in Clarke Tibbit, 1,)

While giving a historical overview of gerontology, the author discusses both pragmatic and philosophical concerns within this disciplinary field. Factors impacting the process and results of ageing are carefully outlined and he addresses such areas as biology, psychology, sociology, economics and politics which intersect the central issues of gerontology. The interpersonal variability of the older population is stressed throughout the book, while recognizing pertinent issues of gender, ethnic, racial and cultural differences.

Critical thinkers contributing to the gerontological studies reflect on specific problematics of their disparate disciplines, consider how key questions have emerged, review how they have changed over decades since gerontology started developing as a distinctive discipline, and speculate what may lie ahead. The following discussion will briefly refer to some seminal works that inflect on comprehensive perspectives on the enduring questions in gerontology, thereby showing how they have shaped our understanding of differences in the experience of old age.

1. Stuart Hamilton's *an Introduction to Gerontology* touches all the main areas in gerontology, encompassing traditional areas, such as biological and social ageing, as well as addressing the contemporary domains, such as technology, the arts, sexuality and education of elderly people[iv].Varying entirely from these areas, my research would focus on a particular issue affecting the ageing populace in the rural areas of Bengal in terms of issues of vulnerability and adaptive capacity in the context of transnational as well national dispersals of families.

2. Blackburn and Dulmus' *Handbook of Gerontology: Evidence-Based Approaches to Theory, Practice, and Policy* is an interesting piece of work consisting of theoretical and applied information on gerontology for the mental health professionals interested in the health and well-being of elderly people. It includes the most current evidence–based practices. The book provides a positive guide to administering care[v].

Based solely on the well- being and caring for the older adults, the book seeks to provide information on gerontology and the well-being and health issues of older adults. My project would focus on social exclusion of the aged community in migrant and non - migrant families.

3. Christina Victor's *The Social Context Of Ageing* is based on the social contexts of ageing, focuses on the diversity of ageing and older people, and highlights the different factors that are essential to experiences of old age and ageing by looking at theoretical, demographic and methodological bases. My proposal seeks to address the issue of adaptive resilience of the ageing community[vi].

4. *Storying Later Life: Issues, Investigations and Interventions in Narrative Gerontology* is a comprehensive text that focuses on narrative gerontology, that provides the biographical, or inside dimensions of the experience of aging. It incorporates a general broadening of narrative gerontology, considering its implications for theory and research carried on in the area of aging, and for the quality of life of elderly people, providing narrative insights to concepts like long term care. My proposal seeks to investigate a comparison of the situation faced by the aged community in migrant and non-migrant families in the rural Bengal.

5. Cole's *Voices and Visions: Toward A Critical Gerontology*[viii] synthesizes multiple perspectives on humanistic gerontology. In other words, it explores the domains of humanities by which the disciplinary field of gerontology can be integrated into the wider knowledge systems of humanities as a whole.

6. Minichiello and Coulson's *Contemporary Issues in Gerontology Promoting Positive Ageing* stands against the conventional terrain of 'ageist stereotypes'. It argues for the centrality of positive ageing in the context of physical, mental, sexual, socio-cultural, medical (dementia, for instance) perspectives.

3. Theoretical Framework: Community, Belonging, Neo-Ageing

This project will particularly build on Vanessa Burholt's thesis[x] of 'community' and 'belonging' among 'rural elders' [xi] as also her analysis of transnational intergenerational families in connection with India and Bangladesh ("Migration from South Asia to the United Kingdom and the maintenance of Transnational Intergenerational Relationships", [xi]. This project has also been inspired by Sarah Lamb's *Ageing and the Indian Diaspora: Cosmopolitan Families in India and Abroad*[xii] and *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Ageing, Gender and Body in North India* [xiii] as also her essay "Ageing, Gender and Widowhood: Perspectives from Rural West Bengal" (Indian *Sociology* 33, No. 3, 1999).

Though Sarah Lamb's work has certainly impacted on my project, her work on diasporic ageing is positioned largely in the transnational problematic in USA. Moreover, her emphasis is essentially on urban cosmopolitan families. Moreover, even when she discusses rural West Bengal, she inflects essentially on gender issues.

Though Burholt analyses perspectives on ageing in terms of Britain in *Countryside Connections*, yet she has extensively worked on South Asian intergenerational families, including those of India and Bangladesh. Moreover, her emphasis on transnational perspectives on ageing and the correlated factors of community and belonging fits in perfectly well with this project's intention to theorize a concept of "neo-ageing" through resilience, re-neighbouring and identity formation of the ageing populace.

This project intends to proceed further by formulating a thesis of "Neo-Ageing". Critics have worked on principles like "positive ageing" (Oliver, 2008) or "active ageing"[xiv] (Vera-Sanso, 2010) and contested the established pre-figurations of traditional perceptions of ageing. But their criticism is mainly directed to attitudinal shifts from biological to socio-cultural perspectives on ageing. But "neo-ageing" seeks to move further into the direction of challenging the problematic of the relationship between temporality factor and life course. It is possible to adopt certain strategies which may include community connectivity, participatory factors of civic society, multiple networking services through even religious organizations (such Ramakrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha etc.), building up independence and mobility motivation of the societal elders through developing resilience and adaptive capacity. In other words, it may new procedural methodologies to undertake innovative initiatives.

4. Vulnerabilities, Resilience and Re-Neighbouring

If we search far into the rural scenario of West Bengal, we may notice two different clusters or variables of vulnerabilities in terms of ageing dynamics. In the course of my primary field study in the rural districts of Bankura, Burdwan and partially in Birbhum, I have been able to establish contacts with a few old people who intended to involve themselves with the project as Older Peoples Reference Group (OPRG). This primary fieldwork in collaboration with OPRG proved to be useful in this initiative of registering how they interact with their vulnerabilities and adaptive capacity.On the one hand, we may locate families in which older people have been left behind by the migrant young generation. On the other hand, they find a place in traditional non-migrant intergenerational families. In both cases, it seems that the traditional Hindu concepts of "*Banaprastha*" or "*Seva*" have become more or less irrelevant. Even in rural or semi-urban families, old man's burden is endured more as a matter of conventional social practice than as an ideological principle. It has also been noted that a large number of older people has voluntarily chosen inter-regional migration. A couple of care homes that we visited and the older inmates we met unraveled their voluntary option to migrate to care homes. Despite their stories of tribulations in their traditional family structures, they chose not to remain tied to traditional place identity.

In most cases, 'age' itself works as a transformative dynamic in the pattern of life course. In other words, ageing itself functions as an apparent factor of vulnerability. In migrant families of rural Bengal, economic stability (rendered possible through support provided by the migrant younger generation) does not seem to be an adequate provision for a stable and positive ageing. In such cases, vulnerability factor occurs through seclusion dynamics. In non-migrant families, poverty, dependence and other correlated factors render the ageing populace vulnerable. The Report of Central Statistics Office, Government of India states that 65% of India's ageing populace has to depend on other resources for their regular maintenance. The Report also states: "Among the rural elderly persons almost 50% had a monthly per capita expenditure between Rs 420 to Rs 775"(Central Statistics Office, Preface).

It has been noticed that vulnerability has often led to enabling capacity building through advocacy and networking. NGOs and Social Work field workers may work out participatory procedures. It has been found in a couple of migrant families, the older people have opted for positive ageing through joining different social organisations or religious groups. Moreover, they even moved to care homes which they prefer to consider an alternative home, a community destination. A care home in Durgapur (District- Burdwan) therefore calls itself "*Acharyadham*", Abode of the Respected Seniors. Another of the same kind calls itself "*Bridhhabhum*", Land of Seniors.

Frederika Meijer, the UNFPA Representative of India and Bhutan, expresses a contemporary anxiety over the overwhelming rate of increase in "elderly population" which has turned into a "compelling demographic reality with widespread socioeconomic and cultural consequences that must be factored into national development policies and plans" (Girdhar, Preface, 2014). The Indian Government Report stresses the need of innovative policy of implementation in view of growing "pressure on various socioeconomic fronts including pension outlays, healthcare expenditures, fiscal discipline, savings level etc." (Central Statistics Office, 2)

Most of the critical works on the problematic of ageing in India deal with the existing data analysis relating to life course, pensionary and healthcare support and the national policy decisions adopted so far. But there should be a critical formulation of strategies aimed at building new methodologies for identifying significant areas of concern. It seems that there is a distinctive attitudinal shift from biological pathways to socioeconomic factors associated with ageing. Euro-American critics have largely identified new modalities of "successful ageing", "active ageing" or "autonomous independence" (Davies& James, 2011; Vera-Sanso, 2010; Binstock, 2006). They have also identified impacts of migration on ageing (Oliver, 2008; Walker, 2014; Davies & James, 2011; Lloyd-Sherlock, 2010; Alvarado & Creedy, 2004). But unfortunately Indian scholars have not yet properly contributed to the development of strategies for identifying vulnerability and resilience or adaptive capacity among the ageing populace in India.

5. Objectives
   a) Families: Transnational/national dispersals
   b) Ageing Populace as Innovative actors in evolving new parameters
   c) Identity formation

The comparison between the impact of immigration on parents left behind and those who belong to non-migrant families in the rural areas in West Bengal has been so far ignored in critical literature. This exploratory study would analyse the effect an adult child's emigration poses on the familial support system of the parents left behind, and on their consequent social and psychological adjustment. The project would also focus on the condition and functional autonomy of the families where emigration has not posed a threat to the wellbeing of the older parents in the rural areas of West Bengal. This will study the reciprocal connections between proximal settings and distal settings. Analysis of proximal setting will involve the old populace in terms of their kinship networks, familial relationships, connections with work organisations etc. At the level of distal settings, it is important to look at the older populace in terms of demographic parameters, their relations with state apparatus like ZillaParishad (District Committee, Panchayats (Local Committees) etc. Such relations and involvements show how the ageing populace, even while deprived of required attention

from their immediate families, may receive community support bestowed through the District Magistrate's office or through diverse state welfare programmes. These state-sponsored social networking systems largely help adaptive capacity building.In the district of Burdwan, the government's initiative to build a care home (as reported verbally by the District Magistrate of Burdwan) for the ageing populace in the region may be considered as an innovative support system. Lower rate of train fare or bus fare and reservation of seats for senior citizens in crowded buses and trains may also be looked upon as effective initiatives.

6. Conclusion

This paper's central contention is to show how the ageing populace enmeshed in problematics generated in family's copes with a new socio-cultural formation. In other words, their attempt at building up resilience, adaptation helps strategize their identity formation through models of connectivity and re-neighbouring.

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