

**Spring School 2017: “Perspectives on an age-friendly culture: Concepts and Methods”  
University of Heidelberg and Jawaharlal Nehru University  
Wednesday, 22nd February, 2017, Day 3**

**Lecture: Demographic Situation of Ageing in India – Prof. K.S. James**

Dr K. S. James discussed about the status of ageing in India based on the study done in seven states of India having a high proportion of elderly which were Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal. The sample for each state was 1280 elderly households.

**Socio-economic and demographic profile**

According to census 2011 the elder population of this country is 103 million and 8.6 percent of the total population; which UNFPA defines to be an ageing country. The female number is slightly higher than the male population in old age which was not the reality earlier. Widowhood is higher among elderly women due to their male spouse belonging to higher age.

With the changing of roles, migration and occupation pattern, family size is reduced to a nuclear one. Interestingly, the study revealed elderly households were headed by 60 per cent of elder population in which male dominated the headship. Around seventy eight per cent of sampled elderly households were Hindu, nine per cent were Muslim and Sikh, twenty one per cent belonged to Scheduled Castes, six per cent to Scheduled Tribes, and thirty five per cent to other backward classes.

**Work participation**

It is considered that older persons work even after sixty years of age not because they desire, but out of compulsion; to run a daily living and meet the expenses they continue to work until their last breath or severe disability. Seventy one per cent elderly work due to financial needs. There has been a close link with poverty, illiteracy and current work participation; this multiplies their vulnerabilities.

Prof. James discussed about the work participation rate among elder males, which is high with around thirty nine per cent in comparison to women having eleven per cent. Majorly young-old population is higher in work force but oldest old population (80 years and above) is relatively high comprising of thirteen per cent men and three per cent women. Main workers population is also more than eighty per cent. Women tend to be doing work in household chores; data revealed their participation in work higher when they are living alone than those who are living with their

spouse or others. Moreover, unskilled and low paid wages have been associated more with the elderly population. This group of elderly persons has been found to be working in the unorganized sector on low wages.

### **Living arrangement**

One in ten elderly found to be living alone. Those elderly who are living with sons are the major source for their financial support. Eighty percent of elderly live with their spouse, children, or other relatives. One fourth of elderly receive money from non- resident children whereas eighty percent transfers finances to their children. Interestingly, majority of them prefers to live with sons and not daughters and a small section prefers to live alone or with their spouse. Ninety- nine percent prefers to live in family and only 0.3 per cent live in an old age home.

### **Health**

The oldest old, poor, illiterate and widows have significant poor health. Self-rated health reported to be about 55 per cent of the elderly having poor or fair health on a five point scale. The self-rated health is lower than that of the elderly population in developed countries. Their reported health has a close connection with mental and physical health.

Nearly two-thirds of the reported chronic ailments have been at least one among in diabetes, asthma, arthritis, heart disease and hypertension in which women have higher prevalence in hypertension, arthritis and osteoporosis while male suffer from heart, skin and renal diseases. Elder abuse is higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Elderly males suffer such abuse from outside while elderly females suffer from their own family members.

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### **Ethical and Methodological Challenges of Researching Old Age (Homes)**

All in all, I found the spring school on “Perspectives on an Age-Friendly Culture: Concepts and Methods” in New Delhi (February 2017) extremely exciting. Although I believe that all topics/focues we discussed during the week were really interesting, for me the third day was

especially exciting. On the third day, the focus lay mainly on environmental gerontology, the methodological and ethical challenges that come with research on old age (homes), as well as new and inventive ways to do and present your research. Relating these topics back to Professor Sax's lecture on "Anthropological Methods for the study of Ageing" the previous day – we started discussing different and new ways to approaching old age. Taking an ethnographic approach – based on a participant-observation method – as our foundation, several interesting questions were raised regarding the way one can (and maybe should) do fieldwork in order to collect data on a topic (old age (homes)/active ageing/age friendly cultures), which can be to various degrees and in different contexts quite a sensitive topic.

We agreed that doing fieldwork, first off all, only works when one speaks the respective language and when one "immerses" oneself for a longer period of time in the respective setting and context. We also (to a certain degree) agreed that holding in-depth interviews is a good way to really delve into the lives of the research subjects. However, these methodologies were immediately questioned as well. What length of doing fieldwork is long enough? At what point can one say, I have now collected enough data to draw conclusions? This is closely connected to the second question that was raised: how many in-depth interviews are enough to make more general statements about a topic that actually is (and maybe should be) studied in a specific cultural, political, historical, social and economical context. To what extent can personal stories and experiences be used – not only to draw conclusions on a specific research topic, but also to relate this to and draw conclusions on a much wider social context? Moreover, to what extent can we take interviewees as representatives of our research subject?

This again raises another question; to what extent can we be certain that we have interpreted personal experiences and stories the right way? As said before, being able to speak the language is a crucial factor here – but is not the body language also very important? How can we be sure that an interviewee is not saying one thing, while at the same time meaning something else? These questions, then, led us to talking about the ethical challenges of doing ethnographic research. How can we actively engage interview participants in our research? How can we be certain that our research does not harm (or hurt) those involved? And how do we make sure that they are freely and willingly participating in our research projects? This question was especially interesting in relation to research that is being done on dementing elderly people.

Whom do we ask permission to do our fieldwork and to hold interviews? Should we involve the family members and institutions as well?

The last thing I found extremely interesting this day, was the fact that we talked about different ways of representing our research. Traditionally, a research project is presented within a paper, an article or a book – hence in written form. However, during the third day we looked at a very interesting transmedia project called “Elderscapes”. Through an interactive website and by using film, text and sound, “Elderscapes” explores the everyday lives of middle class elderly in urban South Asia. Such a project is extremely interesting when we are talking about new methodological approaches. Using sound and video, this project offers a new and non-linear way of exploring a very diverse topic. Moreover, rather than focussing on text, it gives the “reader” not only an opportunity to see interviewees and interpret what the interviewees say themselves, but it also offers the “reader” to become an active participant.

However, such a non-linear approach also comes with several difficulties. Because the “reader” clicks his way through this project individually, it is very challenging to present the full argument and it therefore can become somewhat confusing for the “reader”. The biggest challenge of such a project, I would say, is to make sure that whatever direction the “reader” goes, the argument is always clear. This means that you either have to figure out a way to (passively) guide your “reader” through every aspect of the project, or to make sure that your argument can be/is made by every single element itself. The question is of course, how to do this?

Discussing these different methodological and ethical challenges and approaches to doing research on old age (homes), I believe, has been exceptionally fruitful. Although we did not come up with fixed answers, these kinds of discussions raise awareness about the complexities that come with research on old age and the importance of dealing with and reflecting on these difficulties.

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**Environmental Gerontology: Ageing in Place, Discussant– Prof. Christiane Brosius**

The discussion for this session began with Prof. Christiane Brosius flagging off the key issues in urban gerontology, based on the two readings which were assigned for the session. She raised the concerns about the existing literature on aged population in urban spaces and the impact of urban space on the elderly people. The discussion on the review paper ‘Urbanization and Ageing: Towards a New Environmental Gerontology’ of Chris Phillipson (2004) highlighted the contemporary incidences of the growing ‘spatializing of elderly population’ in western cities. Within the broader ambit of such debates international institutions such as W.H.O. have already indicated for a policy level interest in developing ‘age-friendly cities’ (W.H.O. 2006) to cater to the increasing demographic pressures in those countries particularly in US and UK. On the one hand, the implicit interest in such suggestions is also the corporate bias for attracting global capital to invest in urban architecture as well as to seek popular consensus on institutional care & nursing for the aged population. The concern raised in Phillipson’s article also echoed with the few participants of the session who were of the view that with spatial concentration of elderly people in cities provide crucial possibilities to study their strategies to ‘access’ and ‘negotiate’ the public space. To me, this discussion opened up new empirical questions to explore how do elderly people experience and manage urban spaces, what are the ways through which they get excluded from city life, what is the role of urban infrastructure (roads, urban transportation, parks, CCTV cameras etc.) in these social processes, how do issues of caste and gender come into the picture of their spatial mobility and urban gentrification. Similarly I think it can also be important to explore the opportunity structures available to neighborhoods which inhabit intergenerational residents. For instance, in Indian cities like Delhi, public parks become such spaces for elderly people to associate with each other, even though this remains limited to sections of urban middle classes.

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The second review paper discussed in this session was ‘The Meaning and Significance of Place in Old Age’ by gerontologists Graham D. Rowles and Miriam Bernard. This paper suggests that our lifeworld is shaped by the significance we associate with spaces and the human/environment relationship. The importance of ‘ageing in place’ (also ‘dying in place’) highlights that the environmental experience of growing old is fundamental for both individuals and communities. By transforming spaces into places, the context of our ongoing life gradually comes to embody the self; identity develops, refines and also gets reinforced in the process. The crux of this paper deliberates environmental experience in old age that is the pattern of adjustment within private space in old age. Home is considered to be a coveted place of belonging and strongly attached to it is a sense of ownership. In lieu of this, during the discussion, it was pointed out that a sense of continuity helps to recapture places of the past through familiar and treasured artifacts, especially in the case of migrants’ and refugees’ attachment to one’s roots, language and memories. It was intriguing to note that, like many other commodities, ‘homes’ are things with a particular type of social potential (Appadurai 1986) and it captures the essence of meaning in life. In India though the middle class invests its lifetime savings in building a home, concomitant changes in family structure leads to the disintegration of joint family lifestyle and big houses. In this case, the adequate care of the elderly becomes a matter of concern. Largely, the discussion on a nuanced environmental gerontology advocates a greater sensitivity and awareness of the lived experience of older adults; intrinsic to this is a provision for a culture specific care of the aged.

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### **Student Presentations**

#### **Mizaj K.S. – “Muslim Women and ageing in Kerala” and Esmé Tersteeg – “Culture-sensitive old age homes in the Netherlands”**

Embedded in Wednesday’s overarching topic “Environmental Gerontology: Ageing in Place”, two students – one from the Indian and one from the German side – presented their own work. As one of the main goals of the exchange program is the creation of collaborations among Indian

and German junior scientists, these presentations gave us the opportunity to establish a dialogue based on our own research themes and questions.

Esmé Tersteeg displayed the results of her master thesis stemming from her field-work in culture-sensitive old age homes in the Netherlands. She concentrated on the Indo-Dutch diaspora in the Netherlands and the attempts to establish Indo-Dutch old-age homes that should allow ageing in culture. Of particular interest in the discussion was the way in which such culture-sensitive old-age homes are organized and how the specific culture is embodied in the houses (e.g., by food or decoration) as well as the reasons for the elderly themselves to live in such old-age homes. As a considerable number of Indian elderly follows their emigrated children in countries like the United States or Canada, the idea and implementation of culture-sensitive old-age homes were easily transferable to the Indian context.

The second talk was by Mizaj K. S. who presented the theoretical and preparative part of her PhD studies concentrating on “Muslim Women and Ageing in Kerala”. She started by introducing to us the Muslim culture in Kerala, the important role of women within this culture and more precisely the relation of women to their houses and families, their bodies and their ageing process. Subsequently, the discussion emerged around the implications of the young age of Muslim girls in Kerala at the time of their marriage: Their early motherhood and grandmotherhood and the comparatively young age by which Muslim women in Kerala are considered as “old”. The interplay of societal, objective, and subjective ageing processes and their impact on the perception of body and place promise interesting results of Mizaj’s field studies.

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**Discussion of "Elderscapes" website & Heidelberg-Project <http:kjc-sv013.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/elderscapes/klynt/> - Focus on Delhi and Kathmandu**

Professor Christiane Brosius initiated the discussion by introducing the project "Elderscapes" designed and executed by two PhD scholars from the University of Heidelberg. This project sheds light on the process of ageing in urban South Asia. Several clips depicting the everyday

life of elderly people belonging to middle class help us to understand the process of ageing in the rapidly changing urban spaces in the capital cities Delhi, India and Kathmandu, Nepal. The use of texts, photographs, videos in the project, very vividly communicates what it means for people to grow old in the cities and how they strive to find meaning in their everyday lives. The video clips help us understand how senior citizens are keeping themselves active in their later lives after they have retired from their active economic life. Many of their children are grown up and settled away from home. In most cases, the parents were either living alone or have had to go to elderly care homes as most of their grown up children are not living with them. These video clips generate reflexive understanding, among the researchers engaged in the field of environmental gerontology, visual anthropology, on the diverse aspects of ageing, place, urban design and elderly care. The varied experiences of ageing and concerns that elderly people express are important to understand the city environment and emerging challenges for the elderly care in context of urban South Asia. To tackle the problem of loneliness during old age, the elderly people in Delhi are seen to be connecting with their peers through yoga, morning walks in the public parks and spending time with their contemporaries. In Kathmandu, for instance, many such elderly people were seen to be organizing excursions and temple visits, meeting over tea, felicitating elderly citizens etc. and reflecting upon the changes and challenges they have experienced in the course of their lives. Eventually, engaging in all these activities, sharing life experiences appear to be giving these elderly people belonging to urban middle class, a sense of empowerment and satisfaction. And most importantly, in terms of the methodological point of view, these video clips communicate multiple layers of meanings (the text and sub-texts), through voices, emotions, and visuals which can be interpreted in multiple ways. It is worth examining the diverse experiences of ageing in a broader perspective, expanding this idea to other social classes, gender, caste groups, occupational categories, and region would certainly enrich our understanding about ageing in diverse social and spatial settings.

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