

Ageing in the JJ Colony of Madanpur Khadar: A Report

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While planning urban areas or visualizing it, one usually thinks of a high mobility of vehicles and people, busy working population and high-speed public transport taking people between home and work. What is often left out of this scenario is the population which grows old in these spaces. This workshop titled “Ageing in the City” as a part of the project New Directions in ‘Active Ageing’ and ‘Age-friendly Culture’ in India and Germany, sought to start a discussion exactly on that. The focus being spaces and spatiality of ageing, questions discussed were to do with how the ageing population thought of in the scheme of a city. Are they seen as not productive enough? What kind of images do we see associated with ageing? As burden of the welfare state? Or can one see a city through lens of the ageing population? Where do we incorporate the problems of mobility and immobility, intergenerational exchanges and how space and place shape us? Do we see the ageing population as active agents in placemaking?

We started by asking, is the city of Delhi or parts of it are age-friendly? By age-friendly, it meant all kinds of elements which make a city liveable for all generations. If one concentrates on the physicality or materiality of it, one would ask if planners and architects think about the older populations while designing spaces. This also underlines how aged people are stereotyped as “bearers of traditions” with many pre-conceived notions which filter into the planning. Here, ageing is itself understood here as heterogenous and as a differential process.

I was a part of the group who made field visits to Madanpur Khadar, a low-income neighbourhood in the outskirts of Sarita Vihar and the Okhla industrial area. The closest metro station is Sarita Vihar which is connected to Madanpur Khadar by e-rickshaws or rickshaws (15-20 mins ride). The JJ Colony (jhuggi-jhopri; meaning slums) of Madanpur Khadar was formed after the Supreme Court ruling of 2000 after which land was acquired by Delhi Development Authority (DDA), who then subdivided it in plots and sold it on lease to families who were evicted and relocated from slums across Delhi; namely, Nehru Place, Kalkaji Mandir, Raj Nagar, R.K. Puram, Nizamuddin, Green Park, Alaknanda and ITO. This process can be summed up well by what the authors, Tine Buffel, Sophie Handler and Chris Philipson write, borrowing from Delanty (2010), “...the displacement of urban communities and (the) reorganization of space following the rise of what Sassen (1992) and other term ‘global cities’”. Here globalization is seen to produce the fragmentation and individualization of communities



through processes associated with gentrification, the ride of gated communities, and widening inequalities.”¹ We chose a random area around a park in the JJ colony and divided into two groups of two each to talk to the elderly population there. After having conducted around 25 interviews together, we highlighted some recurring themes which discussed

by the interviewees.²

Some of the major themes discussed were employment, distance from work-places, health issues and the overall environmental and safety factors of the area. Employment and accessibility could be considered one of the most sensitive subjects for a low-income group. These families who were uprooted from their previous neighbourhoods were around the centre of the city where access to employment in various sectors was possible. The resettlement resulted in many people losing their jobs due to the unavailability of accessible public transport to these places. The closest metro station being Sarita Vihar, metro is not even affordable to low-income groups. There is hardly any possibility to travel to the city everyday for work. And even if the younger generations manage to, it becomes even more difficult for the elders. One of the interviewees described it as, “When we came here (Madanpur Khadar), we felt like we went ten years back in time). There are buses provided for the people of the JJ Colony, but the condition of the roads makes it, again, difficult for elders with health problems to travel. Being able to retire or to rest after a certain age is of course a privilege which may not be the case for all. Thus, the elderly in the JJ Colony of Madanpur or Khadar are more or less limited to the area. Another issue in connection with accessibility to transport is the difficulty faced in travelling to hospitals and government offices. Many of the residents in the JJ colony were previous workers public works or other bodies as such. Thus, to go to banks/offices for pension-related issues is also a big hassle. The nearest affordable hospital is Safdarjung hospital, which is around 16 kms away. In case of health emergencies, it is very difficult that either an

¹ Tine Buffel, Sophie Handler, Chris Phillipson. “Age-friendly Cities and Communities: A Global Perspective”. Policy Press Scholarship Online, September 2018, 5.

² Note: these interviews were not in-depth but kept brief with around 6-7 questions asked.



ambulance reaches or anyone is able to rush someone to the hospital; an aspect which is of great importance while thinking about ageing.



The JJ Colony also has cleanliness problems which leads to complex health problems. The area has open drainage and most of the houses are constructed on top of the drainage. A huge garbage dump is right behind the colony, even more houses constructed on/next to it. The whole area is filled with pigs and dogs which also lie around in the drainage. All of this causes a lot of health problems, especially for the elderly.



Another observation that we sought to make is usage of public spaces like parks and streets for social gathering. These observations happened organically as we looked for people to interview. We mostly found women sitting in front of their main doors, on the steps or *chabutara*. They were usually alone or with a group of two or maximum three women. Some women were also found working in a small shop.

On the other hand, men were more likely to be found in front of shops, on the corners of streets playing cards, and in groups of four to five. This gendered way of social gathering was very interesting to observe. We also wanted to observe if the spaces of the park are used by people, that being the reason that we chose an area around a park. Through observations and talking to people we came to know that the park was rather used for drug-related activities which also led to an unsafe environment after the sunset.

The park was devoid of trees or benches which would welcome people to use it for recreational purposes, that being a reason that no elderly was willing to use it.



We also observed how the word ‘community’ ‘friendships’ and ‘hanging out’ (all translated roughly in Hindi) which we use loosely acquire different connotations when used in different contexts. Many people we spoke to, understood “friendships” as something negative or some kind of relations that influences one negatively. The term ‘community’ was understood in terms of ethnicity instead of thinking of it in terms of the immediate neighbourhood. One would expect that, as Buffel, Handler and Philipson write, “later in life, the immediate locality is often vital in terms of contributing resources, as a backdrop for memories of the past, and a source of identity and

meaningful ties.”³ But one of the families that we interviewed a little bit more in depth still talked about everyone around them as the “others” and think of themselves as people who immigrated from Maharashtra and their community still in another part of the country. We observed a kind of “placelessness” of sort in their conversation. But in the case of another elder woman who was almost trapped in a box-like-home, the immediate neighbourhood became especially important as support beyond the locality was absent; especially in circumstances of limited social ties, financial constraints and issues with physical mobility.⁴ She was brought food and water by people around or those passing by. They also talked to her and kept her entertained as she had no family and no financial resources. Therefore, she completely

³ Buffel, Handler, Phillipson. “Age-friendly Cities and Communities: A Global Perspective”, 4.

⁴ Buffel, Handler, Phillipson. “Age-friendly Cities and Communities: A Global Perspective”, 4.

depended on her neighbourhood for social contact. Thus, we came across as very different ideas of neighbourhood and community in just two days. It also made me think of the amount of fluctuation in the connotation and understanding of these words based on one's own experiences, lifestyle and surroundings. Some preferred to stick their families and some said that people who live here, who they talk to everyday, that is itself their community. Thus, 'ageing in place' is a highly differential experience of each one.

This whole experience of conducting interviews and thinking about different parts of the city from a perspective of age-friendliness along with colleagues from different faculties was a really enriching experiences for me. We are aware of the different perspectives from which each of us sees the world, but to experience it first hand and see the details of it was a great learning. For example, the first hand experience of seeing how infrastructure and the actual, physical planning of a part of a city affects everyday lives to such an extent enlightened my view of what is possible in the field of urban planning. I learnt that the built environment can play a huge role in promotion of elderly peoples' social participation and sense of safety and wellbeing, and that a neighbourhood change can lead to social exclusion or inclusion at older age.⁵ As a student of another discipline, but also giving importance to interdisciplinary approach, I was trying to analyse community-conscience or social activities during the field work; and I realised that how much of it can really be solved through good and thoughtful planning and very simple infrastructure. Age-friendliness is definitely a subject which can be enriched by having expertise of different faculties which would look at the same challenge from different angles and a collaborative effort could promote a holistic understanding.

⁵ Buffel, Handler, Phillipson. "Age-friendly Cities and Communities: A Global Perspective", 5.

References:

Buffel, Tine, Sophie Handler, Chris Phillipson. "Age-friendly Cities and Communities: A Global Perspective". Policy Press Scholarship Online, September 2018, 5.

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