



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

Book Review

Review of Gangopadhyay, Jagriti. *Culture, Context and Aging of Older Indians: Narratives from India and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer. 2021. pp. xxxiii, 132. Price: \$120 (Hardcover); \$97 (eBook).

Ketaki Chowkhani

Manipal Academy of Higher Education
kchowkhani@gmail.com

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 43, No 1 (2022), pp. 81-83

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2022.392



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

Book Review

Review of Gangopadhyay, Jagriti. *Culture, Context and Aging of Older Indians: Narratives from India and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer. 2021. pp. xxxiii, 132. Price: \$120 (Hardcover); \$97 (eBook).

Ketaki Chowkhani

Manipal Academy of Higher Education
kchowkhani@gmail.com

Culture, Context and Aging of Older Indians examines the subjective experiences of older Indians in various cultural contexts. Through a multi-pronged approach, this book explores all relevant facets of aging such as inter-generational relationships, filial piety, care within and outside the family, transnational aging and identity, global aging of elite couples in metropolitan India, and aging alone. It is a first-of-its-kind study within gerontology since it adopts a qualitative and multi-sited approach. Jagriti Gangopadhyay here covers the experiences of older Indians living in different regions of both India and Canada. This publication is timely and relevant within aging studies and examines how the 'successful aging model' is adopted in various ways, through the eldercare homes, to business families in Gujarat, to elite couples in Delhi, and widowed older adults in Kolkata. The book is rich in ethnographic data, which include in-depth narrative style interviews, and each chapter has the potential to become an entire book. As such, Gangopadhyay effectively opens up a vast area of research on social gerontology in India.

Gangopadhyay's methodology together with her critical gerontological analysis make for some surprising findings. She demonstrates how Indian older adults maintain agency over their lives, like the members of the business communities in Gujarat (Chapter 2) and the elite couples in urban Delhi (Chapter 4). The older adults in Gujarat maintain agency by retaining authority in their family business and over their children's lives. The elite couples in Delhi, on the other hand, resort to the global market of anti-aging to remain healthy and look younger. These findings challenge the notion of dependency and loss of agency in old age. Gangopadhyay's analysis of the role of religion in aging among older adults in Saskatoon (Chapter 6) is also an insightful examination of the complexities of older adults lives. These older adults deal with grief, loss, and lack of community by turning towards religion. Since older adults' turn to religion is often associated with a manifestation of fundamentalism or conservatism, the author here contrarily points to the ways in which religion can become a source of meaning and comfort rather than sectarianism for these older adults. It is a way for them to sustain and build one's life.

I found "Loss of a Life Partner: Self-Isolation in Urban Kolkata" (Chapter 5) to be the most interesting chapter. Here, the author traces the modes of grieving among Indian men and women who have lost a spouse and succeeds in presenting three fascinating insights on the impact of this life event. Through her interviews, she notes that today, in an Indian context, death and grieving is more of an individual

and personal process than a social experience. Older people are more likely to grieve in isolation. She uses disengagement theory (Cumming and Henry 1961) to analyze how older Indian adults, especially in Kolkata, are detaching themselves from worldly pleasures as well as family ties after the loss of a beloved one. Since most of the adults she interviewed were solely engaged in looking after their ailing spouse, the latter's death rendered these older adults' lives meaningless. They are faced with the question of how to regain purpose in life. Here Gangopadhyay surprisingly shows how solitude, self-isolation, and living alone is exactly what helps these older adults overcome their loss, prevent depression, and fight loneliness. Through the interviews, she analyses how older adults use activities such as self-development, yoga, listening to music, etc. as aids in overcoming loss. These findings contrast starkly with how governments in the Western context are trying to avoid self-isolation and foster increased social interaction among older adults (Kislev 2019). Thus, Gangopadhyay's book adds to the valuable body of research on aging, living alone, and solitude (see e.g., Bella DePaulo 2020) by letting her ethnographic data speak back to a hegemonic ethos that equates aging and loneliness with a loss of agency, self-governance, and meaning in life.

The second novel finding is that the close encounters with the death of a spouse makes the older adults that are left behind lose their fear of death. The author's third important contribution to a nuanced understanding of aging, agency, and sociability is the introduction of a cultural reading of this self-isolation. Building on previous studies, she coins the term 'enforced *sanyasa*¹' as a way to understand this phase of life and the positive role it comes to play. Gangopadhyay reads this self-imposed *sanyasa* as a new form of agency that also enables a detachment from emotional bonds and worldly life. She notes that this form of solitude plays a crucial affective role in older adults' lives. In tracing these different forms of agency – of solitude (Chapter 5), of retaining authority over the family business and children (Chapter 2), and of maintaining health and fitness (Chapter 4) – Gangopadhyay is effectively proving and demonstrating the successful aging model, as well as overturning the popular discourse of helpless older adults.

Some other remarkable findings in the book would have benefited from a little more analysis. In Chapter 4, we see that elite couples, while following global models of aging, continue to perpetuate traditional gender roles among themselves. Gangopadhyay provides only a surface account of elite culture and global models, and fails to explicate it further, especially in relation to gender and aging. Similarly, in Chapter 6, she notes that the Indian identity takes precedence over the Canadian one among aging Indians in Saskatoon (Canada). Gangopadhyay could have analysed the reason for this to provide us an insight into how transnational identities are formed. Throughout the book, the author also examines inter-generational relationships, especially between older adults and their adult children. It might have enriched the book to draw on the cultural trope of villainous adult children and elder abuse in Indian cinema, of which Baghban (2003) is the most famous example, to contextualize this better.

Methodologically, Gangopadhyay adopts a self-reflexivity that is refreshing for an academic book. She recounts how her caste, religion, gender, marital status and educational background inform her interactions with the participants, and in turn affects the data that she collects. This is important because it reveals more about the field, older adults and their perceptions regarding family, marriage, gender, caste, and religion, than mere interviews. The book will be useful to students since it presents them with a model for gerontological research, starting from designing the research to the complexities of fieldwork, self-reflexivity, analysis of data, and possible contributions to theory and recommendations for policymaking. This text must also be read by Indian policymakers since it offers important insights into how the state might take appropriate responsibility for its aging population. It will also be of interest to lay readers in India, especially those who are aging themselves, or who have aging parents,

to understand the issues older adults face. The book, while being academically rigorous, is written in an accessible manner, which is its major strength and will ensure its reach to a wider audience.

Notes

1. *Sanyasa* is the last phase of the fourfold life cycle in the Hindu system. After fulfilling their household duties, an individual gives up all worldly attachment and enters into *Sanyasa*, as a way to achieve salvation.

References

Chopra, Ravi, dir. 2003. *Baghban*. B.R. Films.

Cumming, Elaine and William Henry. 1961. *Growing Old, the Process of Disengagement*. New York: Basic Books.

DePaulo, Bella. 2020. "Old and Alone: Even Professionals Do Not Understand This." *Psychology Today*.
https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/living-single/202011/old-and-alone-even-professionals-do-not-understand?fbclid=IwAR39wHEameR6gIvyqlJm8Fzj_SRp6XX8IlmV5cpTyricck21XF3JwcrkYC4.

Kislev, Elyakim. 2019. *Happy Singlehood: The Rising Acceptance and Celebration of Solo Living*. California: University of California Press.