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The “Good Life”:

Third Age, Brand Modi and the cultural demise of old age in urban India

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Abstract

In this piece, I outline the possibility of understanding old age through the lens of cultural gerontology highlighting the intersecting logics of age with consumption, leisure and identity. I argue that with rising affluence and demographic aging, India is poised to experience an emergent cultural movement, the Third Age (Laslett, 1989), wherein access to cultural capital and an active participation in a leisure culture will offer social membership among upper middle class older adults. Using examples from luxury senior housing projects and travel/holiday packages, I reflect how this process of agentic consumerism with a focus on the ideals of youthfulness, choice, self-expression and pleasure is turning the decline narrative (typically associated with “natural” aging) on its head. The success of this market-driven cultural model, I argue, lies in the celebration of a project on the self where the responsibility to “age well” rests with the individual—a key political economy of the neoliberal regime—absolving the state of public provisions and social security. In conclusion, I show how age and political masculinity intersect to create, what I call, Brand Modi—a potent vision of active and age-ambiguous consumer citizenry. Through this construction, I argue, life-stage has been suitably marketed to match the aspirations of a greying cohort marking a new stage in the cultural constitution of age in urban India.

Keywords: Cultural Turn, Third Age, Brand Modi, consumerism, India

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Introduction

Indian gerontology is replete with the popular trope of an eroding joint family system as keepers and caretakers of older adults whose lives are defined by disease, frailty, burden and social detachment- a gradual yet meaningful decline in preparation of death¹. Contrary to this narrative of decline, post-reform India capitalizes on the growing demographic minority of older adults as active, emancipated participants of the consumer market. Significantly, one sees steady marketing efforts directed at older citizens through senior housing communities, vacations/holiday packages and dating sites that celebrate post-retirement lives as “young”, “joyful”, “active” and “fun”. Is this potentially uplifting agentic view of older adults enjoying leisure and independence ushering an era of “Third Age” (Laslett, 1989) where social membership to an ageless culture is guaranteed through consumption? I argue that this invitation to participate in the leisure culture has important sociological implications. First, this self-selecting retirement lifestyle seems to offer “permanent personhood” (Lamb, 2014; 2017) to all who can afford it thereby replacing the traditionally aspired purposeful dependence of old age with class-based conspicuous consumption.

Second, with its youth-oriented focus, this emerging market forces a chronological continuity and promises a fairy-tale narrative of eternal youth. Finally, this ushers a new project that enhances the “self” (e.g. self-consciousness, self-management and self-surveillance) among the urban elderly marking a significant shift from family care to the service market of property, investment, insurance, leisure and cosmeceutical industry. In the process I show that this consumer-led retirement lifestyle aligns neatly with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s public representation of capably reformulating the discourse around consumerist modernity. I contend that this complements the neoliberal ideals of an aspired individualist personhood absolving the state of public provisions and social security, typically expected of aging nations in the global south. Ultimately, this presents a gradual cultural change that refashions the process of growing old among the urban upper middle class with its emphasis on consumption (of leisure) marking class identification and distinction. Overall, in this piece I use gerontology as a cultural critique to highlight the intersecting logics of age with consumption, leisure and identity and demonstrate how post-retired lives can offer a new, culturally focused social gerontology in India.

The “Good Life”?: Third Age and the marketing of life-stage

Bauman (1988) famously noted that the good life is increasingly constructed out of consumer choice. If one pays close attention to upmarket housing advertisements or holiday packages in urban India, it is not uncommon to find how marketers see the “new-age elderly” as important participants of this inviting

market. For example, glossy advertisement brochures with housing projects carefully labelled as “Evergreen” (Adani Realty, Shantigram Project, Ahmedabad) with a marketing tagline that says “stay young, stay happy” or senior citizen tour packages such as the “Golden Age” (Heera Holidays) or “50 + voyagers” (marketing tagline: Life begins at 50: Connecting people, living adventure, celebrating life) offer the seductive promise of a retirement life where leisure and experience can be purchased without the loss of a productive and vital self. This stands in contrast to the traditional notion of growing old where interdependence and filiality within a familial setting is expected. Although this “new” process of growing old that lies at the nexus of consumption, leisure and choice cannot be applied to all elderly, however one can argue that it is ushering a “new age for old age” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007) for a select section of older adults in urban India. This sociological interrogation is relevant at a time when India is poised to experience a demographic bulge in its older population (60 & above)-projected to increase from 9 percent to 19 percent in 2050 encompassing 323 million people (Population Reference Bureau, 2012). This profound demographic shift is happening at a time when India’s rising affluence and growth story promise a loyal consumer base with the share of affluent and elite consumer households (those with annual gross household income more than \$15,400) projected to increase from 8 percent in 2016 to 16 percent in 2025 (Boson Consulting Group, 2017ⁱⁱ). Additionally, sociological analysis of horizontal divisions (e.g. generation and age group) receive less intellectual precedence over vertical divisions of caste and gender in social science scholarship in India. Significantly, insights from the discipline of social gerontology can offer explanations of processes that are rooted in diversity, differentiation and the politics of distinction.

In particular, I ask if this cultural shift is emblematic of a “Third Age” (Laslett, 1989)-a phase that is recognized as a key development in the transformation of later life where post-retired lives are healthy and free from responsibilities of work and childcare with an heightened participation in mass consumer society. Laslett in his seminal contribution, *A Fresh Map of Life*, envisioned this emergent cultural revolution in post-war Western society (namely, the decade after the 1950s) where he “integrated history and demography with individual development to define what he saw as a “new” personal and collective identity” (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007: 14). In this view, the extent and nature of household consumption as a defining characteristic of social life (Edwards, 2000) as well as a construction of a “lifestyle” based on consumer-driven distinctions (Slater, 1997) are salient markers of this new stage in life. Despite its criticism of a conceptual conflation of cohort with generation (see Gilleard & Higgs, 2007 for a discerning discussion on the cohort versus generational perspectives), the theory of third age has been fruitfully adapted by scholars to show the salience of generational location rather than social class membership on post-retirement consumerism in post-war Britain (Gilleard & colleagues, 2005) or the social significance of the baby boom cohorts in the United States (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007) or the political economy of the New Right in the context of the British healthcare system (Gilleard & Higgs, 1998).

Borrowing from these studies, I argue that life-stage is emerging as an increasingly significant source of market segmentation with the rise of upmarket housing communities, vacations, fashion, media and publishing houses- all targeted to the post-retired consumers (ages 60 and above) where “cognitive age” (that captures multidimensional aspects of feel-age, look-age and do-age, see Roscoe. et al, 1977) prevails over the chronological age. Business scholars (Schiffman & Sherman, 1991) have shown that this idea of marketers appreciating the elderly as a subculture who are particularly *experiential* in their value orientation (as opposed to accumulation of possessions) holds the key to the coming of an ageless market. The emphasis on youthful value-orientation where “feeling”, thinking” and “doing” younger things is central in the forms of “generational marketing” is epitomized in upmarket senior housing projects.

Although, not intended to be an exhaustive content-analysis of promotional brochures/catalogues, I provide an excerpt from the Adani Realty's senior housing project in Ahmedabad, "The Evergreen" that begins with a motivating, yet helpful questionⁱⁱⁱ:

How to stay evergreen?

As you grow older, life throws a lot of challenges at you. Health becomes a major concern. Your children become busy with their lives, leading to the feeling of isolation....This is where we want to make a difference. Because we look at old age a little differently. We see old age as the time to put your feet up, give up responsibilities and have the time of your life"

Later, a few pages into the glossy advertisement brochure, it asserts its (marketing) philosophy

"We believe the key to happiness is feeling young and alive...that's why when we built the Evergreen, we tried to stay true to our motto. Stay Young. Stay Happy".

The last two lines are repeated several times in the brochure as well in their promotional billboard. Meanwhile, the website of a popular senior citizen holiday/tourism and wellness operator, the 50+ voyagers, have images of active seniors infused with words such as "adventure" and "wild encounter". Another Mumbai-based tourism operator targeting senior citizens, Heera Holidays, uses the stereotypical trope of an "exotic India" where active adventures can be seamlessly combined with "medicinal spas and rejuvenation resorts".^{iv} Brochures and online catalogues of these leisure-based companies are replete with images of racially ambiguous, well-toned, able bodied older adults in heterosexual pairs, mildly balding (for men), yet emotively "young at heart" partaking in energetic activities against unidentified tropical backgrounds. Special needs such as health/emergency care are explained with images where happy seniors are engaged in physically demanding pursuits reinforcing the idea of youthfulness and energy as crucial markers of "successful" post-retirement lives. The images and language used in these promotional discourse communicate a bold new vision of aging among the urban and the affluent through the routes of individual agency, choice and consumerist aspirations. As tourism scholar, Dann (2008) puts it aptly in his examination of senior tourism in the UK "It is this accentuation of communication, as promotional devices, brochures have to sell holidays to potential customers via a language of motivation that matches the qualities of the destination (pull factors) with the needs of the client (push factors)" (p. 12). Clearly, the marketers in all these examples look at elderly as a niche consumer group with careful attention given to their special needs in terms of health, well-being and safety but at the same time privileging the cognitive age over the chronological age. Market analysts consider this balance between too much emphasis on health (can be interpreted as a loss of individual liberty and control) versus greater care and supervision, an important dimension in effective targeting (ibid). In effect, as Gilleard & Higgs assert, "the third age is purchased and consumed as other lifestyle choices" (p. 234) turning the decline and dependence narrative (typically associated with natural aging) on its head.

What does this cultural demise of old age hold for the urban upper middle class India? In other words, is there really a concern if the Third Age becomes a reality where a growing section of urban elderly in India become the motif of a new market marked by lifestyle, attitude, activity and choice? Borrowing from Lamb & colleagues (2017) important contribution to understand the notion of "successful aging"-an unavoidable cultural movement of our times- I invoke a cultural gerontological critique to argue that although Third Age promises positivity and inspiration, its implications are not benign. In what follows, I show how these new paradigms of lifestyle align neatly with both the making and the maintenance of "Brand Modi" as a

moral-cultural imperative in times of neoliberal consumerist modernity. I argue, in subsequent sections, how the intersection of age and political masculinity creates inequities of class, gender and relational personhood.

Consumerism as a cultural ideology: The promise of an ageless market?

There is perhaps little doubt that asserting identity through lifestyle choices can be achieved only through the vantage point of physical and material wellbeing. Cultural anthropologists Lamb and colleagues (2007) critique this consumer-driven ageless enterprise as one that overlooks social inequalities since it pays no attention to who and how such lifestyles are purchased. By supporting an active agentic consumer this cultural movement promotes a state of “permanent personhood” (Lamb, 2014) implying a sense of ageless, enduring permanence where declines, vulnerabilities and ephemerality are denied. In fact, Lamb and colleagues argue that this refashions growing old as a moral-cultural and biopolitical project where a “good biocitizen” (Greenhalgh, 2015) is the one who by pursuing healthy lifestyles (primarily acquired through the consumption pursuits of diet, exercises, activities) is fostering a healthy self as well as a productive society. In this perspective, Greenhalgh reflects (cited in Lamb. et al 2017) that those do not engage in productive pursuits or adapt the ethic of busy-ness to stay active are assumed to be burdensome for the state. By extension, a good citizen is the “one who reduces healthcare costs to the body politic by taking responsibility for his or her own health through lifestyle modifications” (Greenhalgh, 2015, 21). This polarisation of the consumer society between those who have access to bodily and material resources and those whose choices remain limited to bare essentials not only deepens social cleavages around class but also constructs a particular motif of aging where being a bad consumer or being ill/disabled are attributed to individual failings (Crawford, 2006; Greenhalgh, 2015). This emphasis on personal responsibility aligns well with the neoliberal ideologies of self-governance, self-surveillance along with a valorization of free market and consumer sovereignty. It absolves the State of social provisioning (through insurance, social security and healthcare) for old age and instead shifts the burden to the individual, family and business entities (Steger & Roy, 2010). Under this new “governmentality” (Foucault, 1988) the aging self is, ideally, an ageless self with an authority of consumption, a liberation from the embrace of dependency culture and an appropriate cultural capital to make effective use of leisure. Gilleard & Higgs (2007) sums up this tension associated with the Third Age astutely: “The underlying logic of the field [third age] is structured by consumption, a post-scarcity consumption that supports the search for distinction and that implicitly or explicitly rejects, denies or marginalizes “old age”. The practices that define this field are routines of individualized consumption, routines whose function can be defined by or which support what Foucault (1988) has referred to as “technologies of the self”” (25).

Overall, I have shown how the contemporary consumer culture assists the new-age older adults to remake their post-retirement identities through new modes of production and consumption in the leisure industry. I will further argue that Indian Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi’s, public representation typifies this process with a steady continuity of (consumerist) choices and consequently, a postponement or a denial of old age. This growing salience of personal identity and class over the traditional structures of age and gender is reified by the creation of what Srivastava (2015) calls the “Modi-masculinity”, whose “peculiar characteristic lies in its judicious presentation of Indian manhood as both deeply national as well as global. Subsequently, it offers a model of choice that is based around the notion of moral consumption” (p. 335). Building on this argument, one wonders if Mr Modi’s storied designer outfits^v and fitness regimes is facilitating a Third Age wave- a forceful image in consumerist modernity, showing middle aged Indians

how to appropriately participate in consumerist activities. Media's attention to Modi's clothes^{vi} in this new consumer-driven social space is of particular interest from a cultural gerontological perspective. Twigg (2007) in her penetrative review of clothing and age assert how clothing form a "vestimentary envelope that contains and makes manifest the body, offering a means whereby it is experienced, presented and given meaning in particular social contexts" (286). In fact, this is particularly perplexing since most discourses on dress and clothing have been around the female body (or feminine chastity) while men's preoccupation with dress can be condemned as effeminate. However, Twigg (2007) argues that in recent years this condemnation has given way to the emergence of new masculine subjectivities such as the 'metrosexual man'. Significantly, the image of a 'metrosexual man' is invariably a younger man suggesting that Modi's clothes, choice of color and style are rupturing the age-ordering (Lurie, 1992: cited in Twigg, 2007) in dress, giving way to new fluidities and plasticities, commonly associated with the Third Age (as an extension of mainstream consumer culture to the non-youth). Through the carefully crafted Brand Modi (and its attention to age-neutral clothes), life-stage has been suitably marketed to match the tastes and aspirations of a greying cohort marking a new stage in the cultural constitution of age in urban India. Finally, the remarkable silence on Modi's (chronological) age in media is equally noteworthy. Instead, media's enduring focus on Modi's predilection towards healthy diet, expensive clothes and admirable fitness regimes is ushering a new biomoral consumer identity (Khalikova, 2017)^{vii} where his "manly" style (both personal and political) is routinely recognized as 'efficient, dynamic, potent and capable of overcoming the "policy-paralysis" that had putatively afflicted the previous regime' (Srivastava, 2015, 334). Scholars have noted that this construction of "Brand Modi"-a prime agency that promises to bring good times to common man (Kaur, 2015)-is rooted in the political economies of neoliberalism where the self-regulating, individualized subject is encouraged to embrace the "ideologies of youthfulness-symbolised by the consumerist quartet of virtues-choice, autonomy, self-expression and pleasure" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007, 26) . In this view, Modi offers an idealized image of an (ageless) self, resonating with the broader cultural visions of an able, age-ambiguous consumer citizen of post-reform India.

Concluding reflections

At a time when consumption has come to dominate an increasing influence in shaping personal identities, a select section of urban upper middle class older Indians with adequate residual spending power and cultural capital, have opportunities to redefine later life in newer ways. Using instances from luxury senior housing projects and tourism, I have shown how the neoliberal market infuses hedonistic aspirations by allowing inspirational elements of choice, autonomy, vitality and self-expression among the greying cohort. Authors have argued that this culturally emergent phenomenon, epitomized by the term the "Third Age" is in essence a rallying cry to counterattack the negative stereotypes of ageism (Gilleard, 1996; Holstein & Minkler, 2003) and to assert the continuity of the life-stage through consumerist desires. Although a relatively recent phenomenon, this "Americanization" of later life (with its emphasis on the ideal of independence) resonates with the transatlantic cultural transformation that occurred in the post-war West. However, one of the most pressing criticisms of this emergent "movement" is that it is not only class-blind (as discussed earlier), but also ironically, ageist. The success of the movement lies in the belief that the idealized senior is the one who is able bodied, youthful, active or ageless –a denial of the fundamental transience of human condition. As Lamb and colleagues (2017) reflect in their cultural critique- 'In a way, both the binary "ill-derly" and "well-derly" models of aging are expressions of the same agesit culture, "arguably two sides of the same coin (Martinson & Berridge, 2015: cited in Lamb, 2017), signifying that it is not okay to be old' (13). In a society, where majority of older adults still live in

intergenerational households (Samanta, Chen, & Vanneman, 2014) and filiality is expected and carefully cultivated (Lamb, 2014), how does this shape the moral personhood in later life? With the political message of the new Right in valorizing the project on self through the language of Brand Modi, will there be a forceful emergence of a “senior market” in India? Might this cultural project produce new forms of vertical and horizontal social inequalities? Though in this paper I did not attempt to address these questions directly, I have utilized the Cultural Turn (Twigg & Martin, 2015) in the field of gerontology to provide a deeper engagement with the politics of age in contemporary India. And in doing so, I have showed that for the coming-of-age, Third Agers, the logic of consumption masks the traditional hierarchies of age and to some extent, family in upper middle class India. The implication on family is a significant one since research on India suggests that the morality of spending in leisure among the upper middle classes has reconfigured the notions of relatedness and kinship. For example, anthropologist Minna Saavala (2012) in her ethnographic study on the new middle class in the south Indian city of Hyderabad shows how the popular truism about the sharp dichotomy of the “selfish ‘Western’ nonchalance” with that of the “Indian commitment to the ethics of relational personhood” is navigated and lived. She finds that although the consumerist urban context has reshaped social relations (e.g. increasing primacy of friends), social relatedness among the middle class is still organized along hierarchies of kith and kin. What does this mean for the emergent wave of Third Age, with its individualistic aspirations of independence, autonomy and self-care? How does the paradox of a consumer-centric old age and the demands of kinship play out for the (upper) middle class Indians? Gilleard & Higgs (2007) penetrative commentary on a potential demise of old age in contemporary culture, offers a useful insight to this cultural dilemma. For Gilleard & Higgs, “as the signifier of material and symbolic bankruptcy, old age is simply not a choice” (26).

AMENITIES



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Source: Adapted from the promotional brochure of the "Evergreen" senior housing project, Adani Realty, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Available at: <https://www.shantigram.com/>

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NOTES

- ⁱ Noted anthropologist, Lawrence Cohen (2000) in his provocatively titled book *"No Aging in India: Alzheimer's, The Bad Family and Other Modern Things"* (University of California Press) addressed this question head-on. He observed that gerontological writing and practice in India is largely dominated by a "powerful and seldom challenged narrative of the decline of the joint family and the consequent emergence of old age as a time of difficulty" (p. 88). Significantly, the public imagination of old age was organized around an anxiety, which Cohen called the "problem of aging": more old people and less desire and ability to take care of them. Meanwhile in academia, demographic knowledge (e.g. cohort size, population projections) was appropriated to explain the impending grey tide where older Indians were ultimately reduced to "dependency ratios". This intellectual narrative, alarmist at best, motivated gerontological examinations of economic provisions, livelihood, living arrangements, ailments, care and support structures of older Indians for several decades since the 1980s. Even in a fairly recent review of gerontological scholarship on India, Ramamurti and colleagues (2015) highlight the "challenges" confronting the nation in terms of income security and changes in family structure (although empirically shown to be very gradual) among older adults. This resilience of the decline narrative despite significant progress been made in data collection efforts, gerontological education and social policy, is perplexing. Perhaps what is more baffling is a serious omission in the examination of age through the lens of social class at a time when new middle class identities, moralities and subjectivities are forged in neoliberal India.
- ⁱⁱ Complete report available on BCG website, *"The New India: The many facets of a changing consumer"* (March 20, 2017). <https://www.bcg.com/en-in/publications/2017/marketing-sales-globalization-new-indian-changing-consumer.aspx>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Brochure and promotional catalogues available: <https://www.shantigram.com/>
- ^{iv} Adapted from the website of Heera Holidays: <http://heeraholidays.com/speciality-tours-golden-age/>
- ^v Modi's public representation has been of interest to journalists and political analysts. As blogger Vrinda Gopinath (2014: cited in Srivastava, 2015) puts it: Modi's Empire Line is most flattering to himself- opulent turbans adorned with pearls and feather, *rath* chariots of gold and chrome, a machismo swagger with his self-proclaimed '*chappan chatti*' (56-inch chest),an intoxicating cocktail of hyper masculinity, virility and potency". Again, noted media commentator Shiv Vishwanathan (2013) reflects "...his PROs forged a more colourful Modi, a Brand Modi more cheerful in blue and peach, more ethnic in gorgeous red turbans...hair transplants and Ayurvedic advice served to grow his hair" (cited in Srivastava, 2015) Modi's enthusiasm in staying fit through yoga is now well-known. He convinced the United Nations to establish June 21 as the International Yoga Day and leads thousands of people in yoga demonstration every year. Recently, he has been known to launch a cartoon video (demonstrating himself) on his official YouTube page (*Yoga with Modi: Indian PM stars in cartoon video of poses*, The Guardian, March 29, 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/29/indian-pm-narendra-modi-releases-youtube-video-of-yoga-poses>)

^{vi} There is usually breathless reporting on Modi's wardrobe during international visits and summits. For example, during US President Barack Obama's visit to India in 2016, we had "*Narendra Modi's clothes have left behind everything else in this summit*", Huffington Post, July 15, 2016 (https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2015/01/26/modi-wear-obama-india_n_6544368.html) or during Modi's much celebrated trip to the US in 2015, we were presented with "*You are what you wear: Modi changes clothes four times in a day*" (Hindustan Times, Sept 28, 2015)

^{vii} See Khalikova, 2017 where the author explicates the nexus between biomoral consumerism and neo-liberal politics with the rhetoric of a popular Indian guru, Baba Ramdev. The author shows how the discourses of yoga and the expansion of the Ayurvedic market, although symbolically foregrounds a brand of 'homegrown' nationalism, but ultimately are political tokens of a neoliberal quest in consumerist desires.