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Of Public Spaces and Later-life Amity in Urban India: Gerontological Musings in Pandemic Times

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Introduction

One of the common sights of early mornings in urban India is groups of elderly persons, mostly men, engaged in unhurried walking with non-kin peers. This walk is then followed by an outdoor congregation in community parks, neighbourhood benches and public gardens. These informal meeting sites offer spaces where greetings are exchanged and public opinions on politics and society are vociferously debated. In this piece, I imagine the gerontological possibilities of how this process – popularly referred to as ‘morning walks’ – while being quintessentially age-coded, can produce shared solidarities and nostalgia against the backdrop of an ongoing pandemic. As such, friendships that are forged through ‘routinization’ (e.g., daily walks and unfocussed interactions) have received sparse attention in the gerontological scholarship in India. Specifically, I use Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of “habitus” to approach the practice of *adda*¹ (casual conversations among men, often perceived as a compulsory hallmark trait of bourgeois conviviality) in understanding how COVID-19 unwittingly disrupts as well as reconfigures practices that are routinized. Considering the enduring qualities of *adda* allows for theorizing aging bodies during COVID-19 beyond ‘case counts,’ and for (re)focusing our gaze on the everyday practices, that are seemingly inconsequential (e.g., morning walks) but nevertheless carry the promise of reconfigured possibilities of how communities can make sense of the uncertain phenomenologies of pandemic living. Overall, I offer, albeit speculatively, an intellectual invitation to study the sociology of age in (and after) pandemic times through the entanglements of older adult friendships (forged as practices of everyday life) and public spaces.

To be sure, sociology of friendship (Allan and Adams 2006) reminds that non-kin peer networks are patterned not only by individual characteristics but by structural circumstances of social class, gender, age and debility. That is, both the personal as well as the social ecology interact to create a socio-economic canvas against which the practices of “doing friendship” are forged. As COVID-19 continues to rage relentlessly with high rates of fatality among older adults and this socio-economic canvas is shifting, the early mornings in India look different. This respacing and rescaling of older adults in Indian community life raises several questions for the future. For instance, how is this intimate peer sociality now achieved or how are peer walks reconfigured when older bodies are suspect? Given that the pandemic has rendered conviviality and other consummately cultural gestures (e.g., handshakes, hugs) potentially dangerous, will it reify the neoliberal rhetoric of individualization through self-care and self-governance (see Cardona 2020), by emphasizing personal responsibility (e.g., hand-washing, physical distancing) – as opposed to governmental responsibility – as the *only* assured way to successfully combat the spread? Also, since the elderly are often keepers of spatial memories which they

share through conversation and storytelling, what is the (possible) impact of this ‘deroutinization’ of older persons’ presence in public life for the community’s understanding of public places and its own sense of history? And finally, will the pandemic permanently alter the ways in which older persons consume and produce space?

Drawing from a rich but neglected body of work on friendships and later-life entanglements with public spaces, this piece examines the quotidian ties of non-kin friendships against the backdrop of a shrinking community life. In doing so, I argue that it shifts our gaze to two rather understudied dimensions on aging in India: first, on how bourgeois conviviality (or *adda*) is symbolic for youthfulness, and second, on the general neglect of the interplay of older adult amity and spaces, with ‘spaces’ understood as physical, built urban spaces as well as the “spaces between buildings in which everyday public life happens” (Holland 2015). In what follows, I offer the intellectual and social possibilities of forging later life friendships (homosocial and romantic) in the times of the pandemic and then move on to describe how a resignification of the processual nature of “habitus” allows the discipline of gerontology to imagine ways in which the elderly might interact with public spaces post-pandemic. I conclude by reflecting on how focusing on the intersection of late life amity with the embodied and processual notion of “habitus” can serve as an epistemological vehicle to go beyond the instrumental understandings (e.g., design, material and technologies) of public spaces.

Later-life friendships in pandemic times

To be sure, as sociologist Graham Allan (2010) notes, gerontology has a longer intellectual liaison with friendship than other social science disciplines. Early pioneering studies (Hess 1972; Litwak 1989; Townsend 1957) have paved the way for a formal investigation of the role of friendships in older peoples’ lives, particularly during life-course transitions such as widowhood, retirement, affliction and debility. This body of scholarship has thoroughly exposed the limits of the then influential “disengagement theory,” that states that disengagement from social life of people as they grow older is a natural and universal phenomenon (Cumming and Henry 1961). Arguing against this theory, research has consistently demonstrated that although the nature of friendship or the size of a social network may alter with age, the value of companionship through sociality, carries force. For example, Antonucci and Akiyama’s (1987) notion of social “convoy” (519) beautifully illustrates the enduring significance of relationships for sociability. These convoys also act as an affective anchor for practicing intimacy and self-revelation. Research on personal networks among older Indians is limited, probably because the joint family is still idealized as the prime site of elderly care. Hence, it is no surprise that later life (non-kin or intimate) relationships that are founded on ideals of selfhood and choice have received scant attention in this line of inquiry (exceptions include Samanta and Varghese 2019; Samanta 2020). Curiously, the pandemic has allowed our post-pandemic futures to be imagined differently, in a more socially permissive way, that acknowledges differing notions of living well. While companionship (or more generally, friendship) is a powerful trope that has been deployed to understand the critical role of this social resource in the face of crises in other national and regional contexts (Regt 2015), this depiction is rather new in the family-centric culture of India.

A recent television commercial epitomises the incipient habituation of this new sentiment. When India plunged into a nation-wide pandemic-led lockdown, Colgate subtly opened up a conversation around new forms of companionship among older Indians (see Figure 1). These 35 seconds of advertisement offer an appealingly sanguine imaginary, where masks and social distancing are no longer the norm. Featuring two older adults that grin from ear to ear, they present a future where new, unconventional beginnings can be actualized. The commercial begins with a visibly upper-middle class urban elderly woman, who is waiting in an upscale restaurant for her family to arrive. Soon, she is lovingly greeted

by her adult children, their partners and her grandchildren. The camera swiftly moves to introduce the family (and the audience) to an elderly gentleman who casts his softly romantic gaze on his new companion – the family’s mother and grandmother – while the elderly woman shows them a new ring on her finger. The ad ends with a voiceover (in Hindi) that calls to celebrate new post-pandemic freedoms that “begin again with a smile.” Given the contemporary urban dystopia of desolation, anxiety and a severe contraction of community life, this ad is both personally and socially uplifting. It utilizes a clever visual-cultural metaphor of a mask-free future, to index the unmasking of social anxieties around older adult intimate companionships. Although the tagline of “begin again with a smile” seems laboured, it makes sense from a marketing perspective of a multinational company specializing in the production and distribution of household provisions and personal care products (including toothpaste). Moreover, stoking the Third Age-led consumerist turn (Laslett 1987), the ad offers an optimistic portrayal of older adult companionships that thrive on the leisure economy (here, fine dining) while celebrating ideals of self-expression and free choice.



Figure 1: Colgate (India) ad

This television commercial is significant in two critical ways in shaping our understanding of amity in pandemic times. First, it goes beyond kinship ties and offers refreshing ways to think about mature age by recognizing a fluid network of intimates as friends and lovers. Second, it invites us to ask: why can’t post-pandemic friendships be forged, maintained and nurtured in the face of contingencies, losses and old age? This is particularly important because researchers have shown later life friendships to be less instrumental (not goal-driven) and more resilient; an everyday resource that is capable of weathering both the mundane and the exceptional (Allan and Adams 2007; Ha 2008). Recognizing this is crucial, as I show in the next section, for understanding how practices of walking, *adda* and gathering in public places by middle class elderly is constitutive of social relations, practices and processes. The intersection of amity with “place-making” (Massey 2005) offers a conceptual possibility of everyday urbanism that is captured by Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus.” I use this concept to understand how COVID-19 unwittingly disrupts as well as reconfigures practices and social identities that are regularized, thereby generating creative responses to transformed circumstances. Finally, it is worth noting that given the definitional quandaries of who and what may constitute a ‘friend’² (e.g., degree of commitment and closeness, duration, etc.), my use of this term is fluid and dynamic: I am concerned with the everyday *practice* of amity rather than with particular constructions of friendship (Allan 2010).

Friendship as habituation: Rethinking habitus in pandemic times

Hitherto, (environmental) gerontology has been preoccupied with practices and experiences of place-attachment, especially through memory (Rowles 1978), with the multiple meanings of home and belonging (Peace 2015), and of neighbourhood and community (Peace, Holland, and Kellaher 2006). Habitus, Bourdieu (1990, 77) notes:

. . . as a system of dispositions to a certain practice, is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviour, and thus for the regularity of modes of practice, and if practices can be predicted. . . . This is because the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances.

Clearly, in Bourdieu's sense, habituation and routinization connect persons to places in the present. In this way, the quotidian practice of "morning walks" is more than an accumulated experience; rather, it is a complex social process in which the interlocking of the individual and the collective (re)produces practices that justify individuals' perspectives, values and social positions. The lens of habitus is fruitful in understanding not only the material geographies of space but also how public life occurs through the social relations forged during everyday practices (e.g., walks). Certainly the gerontological scholarship on aging and place has significantly enhanced our understanding of *aging in place*, but has largely neglected *places of aging* (Gardner 2011). While the former, Gardner (2011) notes, is concerned with the cultural significance of older adults wanting to remain in their homes as they age, the latter illuminates the social context of aging, including the experiences and practices of sociality that make up 'place.'

It is indicative of the focus on "aging in place" that walking as a form of middle class sociality and intergenerational communication, has received surprisingly little attention in gerontological studies. Rejeski *et al.* (2009) note that walking is understood as one of the "successful/active" aging-inspired lifestyle behaviors of modern societies, part of a goal-driven, bio-moral project on the self. Consciously breaking away from this lifestyle based post-traditional individualism, cultural anthropologist Sarah Lamb (2020) has ethnographically documented how everyday practices, such as domestic gathering with junior kin or attending neighbourhood laughing clubs (where the older adults meet each morning just to laugh) are also cultural spaces where middle class sociality happens in urban India, quite indifferent to the modern project of the self. Similarly, unstructured morning walks in local neighbourhoods can be appreciated as an embodied process in which social relations and identities are forged. As noted earlier, these routine walks are often interspersed with shared greetings, collective reminiscing, lamenting about the futures of urban youth or unexpected meetings with a younger jogger. It is these *in-betweens* that make up both the social meaning of this everyday practice as well as of places where aging happens. This dynamic and spatial understanding of everyday walks is theoretically akin to Bourdieu's notion of *becoming* habitus: an embodied process that entails a practice in which the "social is inscribed in the body of the biological individual" (Bourdieu 1985, 113), but that also involves "something historical, it is linked to individual history" (Bourdieu 1990, 86). Recognizing the *process* of habituation as central to the habitus allows for a more dynamic concept of habitus, as a continuously acquired disposition, that is hence prone to transformation.

Given that physical distancing will probably become a desired norm in the near future, will the pandemic offer newer ways of understanding the older Indian's habitus? Again, the *processual* nature of habitus allows us to imagine ways in which the elderly might interact with public spaces in post-pandemic times. By privileging the range of conceivable possibilities through which adaptations to a changed situation are realized, gerontology's engagement with the sociological concept of habitus moves beyond, as Reay (2004) asserts "the habitual use of habitus" (431). Taken together, Bourdieu's

understanding of habitus as this complex mix of the embodied, processual and instinctual is a useful reminder to inform post-pandemic gerontological scholarship. He emphatically asserts: “. . . one cannot grasp the most profound logic of the social world unless one becomes immersed in the specificity of an empirical reality” (Bourdieu 1993, 271). While “morning walks” may today be perceived as routes of contagion by public health experts, the partially sedimented social and physical attachment with places and people will most likely be re-lived through memories, conversations and story-telling, even from privatized spaces (balconies, lawns and gardens of residences) and solo-walks. Rowles and Ohta (1983) describe this as “insideness”: the sense of identification that comes along with long habitation in the same place (as cited in Holland 2015). Seen this way, the pandemic-led shrinking of community life need not inevitably usher a sense of loss, regret and alienation, but can rather allow post-pandemic futures a possibility of place-making that is cohesive, participatory and democratic.

It is important to note that Bourdieu is acutely aware that, while habitus is both agentic and collective, it reproduces social hierarchies of class and gender. The heterogeneity in social class positions that may lead to differential experiences (e.g., “morning walks” are a purely urban, middle class phenomenon) is captured in his examination of class habitus: “. . . Interpersonal relations are never, except in appearance, individual-to-individual relationships and the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction” (Bourdieu 1990, 81). That shared adversities might not necessarily generate *similar* opportunities of self-actualization and experience is evident in his contention that individuals are embedded in their social structures. This has implications for older adults’ democratic participation in public or private spaces. With old age poverty (Srivastava and Mohanty 2012) and homelessness among the elderly on the rise, these imaginations around *privatelindoor* place-making (when the *public* is deemed risky) is after all also a middle class phenomenon. Although habituses, as I have argued, are permeable and responsive to changes around them, they are not immediately able to jettison the normative constraints of gender and social class distinctions.

In the concluding section I reflect on how our understanding of habitus can help in (re)imagining post-pandemic sociality in India. I contend that the embodied process of habitus, as an urban place-making project, will reify middle class identity and performativity. In the process, by returning to Chakrabarty’s (1999) idea of *adda*, I offer a critique of the youthful tenor of this social activity where passing (surplus) time (or “timepass”) is a legitimate form of middle class sociality.

***Adda*, social class and gerontology: what does the post-pandemic future hold?**

Although the link between *adda* (traditionally understood as unstructured form of public conviviality) and place-making is not immediately unequivocal, the notion of *adda* affords sociological reflections on gender, age and social class-dimensions of place that make habitus both embodied and processual. Mapping the social history of *adda* in 19th century Bengal, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (1999) shows how *adda* offered a discursive site for self-presentation and identity formation in the face of British imperialism. Significantly, *adda* holds an ambivalent history, where it is simultaneously celebrated (for birthing a democratic public sphere, an unavoidable cultural facet of Bengali modernity) and socially condemned (as ‘useless talk’ achieved through dereliction of domestic duties). In this historical mapping, Chakrabarty notes, *adda* is not just a distinct speech genre practiced by the middle class Bengalis, but is also strongly associated with particular places (1999). Notably, *adda*, as Chakrabarty and others writing on friendship in Indian public life would argue (e.g., Jeffery 2010), was often performed by middle class *young* men in *rawks* (an architectural feature of a raised veranda in traditional Bengali households) in urban neighbourhoods, of erstwhile Calcutta. Seen this way, *adda* becomes a middle class male prerogative to homosociality. It resonates with contemporary understandings of ‘passing time’ among young urban male cultures. Jeffery’s (2010) anthropological work on educated yet

unemployed youngsters doing “timepass” in a provincial city of Uttar Pradesh (India), exposes the socio-temporal anxieties around middle-class masculinities, often attracting public disapproval of young male idleness. Jeffery, like Chakrabarty (1999) is acutely aware of how these urban cultures of debate and disappointment are deeply gendered. Chakrabarty, for example, while commenting on the mid-twentieth century *adda* culture notes how the middle-class ideas about respectability barred women to participate in these practices of orality (1999). In fact, Chakrabarty goes on to show how *adda* was popularly perceived to be predicated on (an imagined) wifely hostility that reinforced the tension between men’s “wordly responsibilities” and non-instrumental camaraderie or leisure (1999). Similarly, Jeffery (2010) notes the hypermasculine bravado in these oral cultures of sociality that appropriately domesticates young women through gendered ideals of obedience, safety and respectability.

Notwithstanding the important contribution of this line of research, what is missed is a general acknowledgment that ongoing demographic transitions are rapidly changing the social geographies of public spaces. Older people are increasingly (re)claiming public spaces and are often creating and resisting age identities through their use of space and place. The plebeian practice of walking among the elderly allows us to think of age *relationally* (Hopkins and Pain 2007), thereby disrupting fixed-age geographies of urban spaces. Hence, purposeless discussions that accompany the morning wanderings, can be appreciated for their capacity to reclaim urban sociality from its quintessentially youthful trappings and to refashion “new sentiments of intimacy” (Chakrabarty 1999, 195) among older men. In this regard, Hopkins and Pain (2007) note how the scholarship on older people’s engagement with space rarely moves beyond mapping ill health and service provisions, thus ignoring the more situated, fluid and participatory dimensions of aging. I have argued earlier, that unless environmental gerontology actively attempts to broaden its focus to include the everyday – routinized and shifting – practices of social life, the pandemic-led scholarship runs the risk of reifying the triad of age-class-gender hierarchies. This unremarked practice (of walking and informal social talk) holds rich and often neglected modern oral histories of everyday social life that an instrumental focus on chronological age will lose out on. Can *adda* and its constitutive dimensions of self-expression and identity form and reform the multiple meanings of ‘doing’ friendships in the post-COVID era? Will a return to more privatized spaces of *adda* (e.g., inside own homes) disrupt the gendered order of orality? Or one may ask: how do serendipitous opportunities that quotidian walks entail, such as bumping into an old acquaintance or learning the news of a death in the neighbourhood, change in the new normal where the public basis of intimate conviviality is a recognized health hazard? How can older people reclaim public spaces in a “crisis” context that has put to test our fundamental understandings of the relation between people, communities and spaces?

One of the ways in which the discipline of gerontology can meaningfully engage with these questions is to privilege the embodied, processual and agentic notion of “habitus” that goes beyond the instrumental understandings of public spaces. Instead, as argued throughout this piece, the focus can be on the socio-spatial dimensions where public life happens. This is particularly relevant for a post-pandemic gerontology since popular culture is rife with an alarmist narrative portraying older persons as being helpless victims of the pandemic. While there is no denying that older adults run higher risks of contraction and mortality, an attention to the entanglements of public spaces and non-kin amity can offer age-sensitive and realist visions of aging in the post-COVID era. Finally, by focusing on the everyday non-materiality of unfocussed interactions through senior walks, I open the possibility to appreciate the cultural practices of non-western societies in the making of multiple, contradictory modernities³ (of leisure versus labor, discipline versus laziness, shared solidarity versus self-care, and gendered segregation of spheres). This is significant since gerontology has often been critiqued for its arguably post-imperialist analysis (Twigg and Martin 2015). Seen this way, older adult friendships

forged through social talk and routinized walks can proffer not only discussions on 'adjusting' to the new normal, but also further a culturally sensitive sociology of old age.

Notes

1. In his incisive historical critique of capitalism in late modernity, Chakrabarty (1999) describes the homosocial practice of *adda* (a bangla noun) where friends get together for "long, informal and unrigorous conversations." This form of social practice, as Chakrabarty argues, is predominantly male and youthful; a marker of urban upper-caste, middle class identity.
2. See Allan 2010, for a detailed discussion on the conceptual and measurement dilemmas of friendship.
3. See Dube (2011): *Modern Makeovers: Handbook of Modernity in South Asia* (Oxford University Press) for a series of persuasive essays on the cultural expressions of modernity and its experiences, conditions and limitations in the Indian subcontinent.

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