

ABSTRACT

The research study wishes to explore 'ageing' by studying the social changes that govern and shape individual perceptions about ageing. In doing so the work aspires to propose an argument on the dominant discourse of ageing and getting old within the larger rubric of late capitalism and consumerism among Indian middle-class elderly. The dominant views of ageing are itself a construction of the state and the operating power structure which can be problematized by questioning the naturalness of the entire argument. The study entails exploration into the dominant discourses of ageing and old age from sociological and gerontological view-points that focus on the construction of age which is an outcome of the decay in socio-economic and physical aspects associated with an individual.

The thesis critically presents the formation of each perspective of ageing in an advanced capitalist society and questions the formulation of retirement policies for older people that is based on the governing power structure of the state. Moreover, the dominant perspectives of ageing and old age can be problematized by evaluating the mechanism of governing individual minds through exercise of power by the state. The thesis has taken the Indian Middle classes as the subject for study. In this context, the research wishes to pose arguments on the role of the state, its power structure in governing citizens and the mechanism of emphasizing one thought of understanding ageing by subverting some other.

The dominant discourses of ageing includes Biomedical perspectives of ageing, Chronological Perspectives of ageing and the disengagement theories of ageing among others. In the Biomedical perceptions of growing old, the ageing body is regarded to be the "bottom line," subjecting us to continuous "betrayals" through physical deterioration (Turner, 1995) and parallel processes of maintenance of the body. What comes naturally to the understanding of the processes of ageing is the chronological variety of ageing where growing old is equated with the increasing number of years; establishing the importance of temporality in the study of ageing which is associated with the Industrial Age. In the disengagement perspective of ageing, an individual after reaching old age is supposed to disengage from all activities and wait for the final 'end' which is 'death'. The dominant discourses of ageing in a late capitalist society have emerged from Social Gerontological studies where focus has been given on 'problems of ageing' or 'the ill-effects of retirement'. The thesis first explores the existing literature on

ageing and old age and then pose an inquiry into the study by questioning the dominant perspectives.

The thesis focuses on two studies: one, a subjective wellbeing study on older adults to explore the relationship existing between various dimensions of living and one's sense of subjective or emotional wellbeing in old age. The second study focuses on, explorations into perceptions of ageing and old age by studying the discourse of ageing through individuals narratives that are based on one's experiences throughout life. The research studies use both quantitative and qualitative techniques of analysis to understand perceptions of ageing, process of ageing among older adults from primary data. The sampling frame entails the three subcategories of old age such as young- olds (60 to 70 yrs), middle-olds (70 to 75 yrs) and old- olds (75years and above). The sampling area would be the southern part of the city of Kolkata and the respondents are to be studied based on snow-ball sampling method.

The research study focusing on understanding perceptions of ageing among elderly middle class in Kolkata has been conducted by using both quantitative and qualitative tools of analysis. First, the thesis has used a survey method where 98 older adults from southern parts of Kolkata were interviewed using closed and open-ended questionnaires. This is a study on subjective wellbeing of older adults in their later life which has been analysed using the quantitative tools of analysis. Later on the thesis has also taken in-depth narratives of ten older adults from the Bengali middle class background staying in the southern parts of Kolkata to explore existing discourses of ageing, to further counter them and then ultimately propose alternative discourses if any. These narratives have been taken throughout a span of three years and have been finally presented in this thesis using qualitative tool of analysis such as the Critical Discourse Analysis method. Both the studies aim at understanding perceptions of ageing among older adults in their later life and this would help the researcher to question the dominant perspectives of ageing and propose other perspectives of understanding the process.

In the quantitative approach to the study on understanding perception of ageing among middle class elderly, the index of elderly wellbeing has been taken into account. Wellbeing as a multidimensional concept is understood from two dimensions: objective and subjective. In the objective dimension, wellbeing of individuals is understood from the perspective of economy and material progress. In the objective dimension, wellbeing is measured cardinally by taking into note the economic, social and environmental statistics. Wellbeing from its subjective

dimension assesses an individual's feeling of happiness, satisfaction and takes into consideration his/her life experiences.

Studying Bengali middle class elderly of more than 60 years puts us to explore the history of Bengali middle class at a period when India was under the British rule. Narrative research entails exploration into the experiences and situations of the subject in order to write a report on shaping up of an individual's perception. The Bengali middle class at the time of colonisation were termed as the "Bhadraloks" meaning the educated middle class gentlemen. The formation of this middle class was based on colonial set of ideas, yet this class was not fully able to assimilate with the colonial scheme of affairs (especially with the concept of chakri or service) (Howaldar, 2015).

The second study on perceptions of ageing is a narrative inquiry using Critical Discourse method of analysis. Stories and human actions in research is described using narrative enquiry and a subset of qualitative research designs. Qualitative researchers have associated a variety of meanings to narratives. In the context of narrative inquiry, 'story' or 'plot' becomes important where events and happenings that are bound by context and temporality, creates a kind of discourse. It is then the role of Narrative inquiry to accumulate the unorganised data and then analyse using narrative analytic procedures and finally create explanatory stories (Polkinghorne, 1995). The thesis takes account of five elderly by understanding their life-course, their perspectives on the ageing process and various societal changes they have witnessed. This would allow the research to understand the perception of ageing and growing old, which is an individual phenomenon.

The methods which were adopted to conduct these two studies were both quantitative and qualitative. To study the subjective wellbeing of 98 elderly, I used survey research method using open ended and close-ended questionnaire.

In the second study of exploring perceptions of ageing through experiences of growing old among ten elderly, the research study has used critical narrative discourse method of analysis; amalgamating biographical or life history approach in critical discourse analysis.

The sample used for studies is the Bengali middle class elderly (above the age of 60 years) residing in Southern parts of Kolkata.

CHAPTERISATION OF THE THESIS

The introduction chapter has aimed at contextualising and proposing the ‘logic’ behind choosing the topic and presenting the Inquiry in the form of the thesis. The thesis attempts to explore the dominant perspectives of the concept and process of ageing by looking at Gerontological theories, Modernisation and post modernisation theories and situating within consumerist, late capitalist and post-industrial society. The perspectives of ageing have been further problematized by emphasizing on the operationalization of power by the state to achieve its objective of repressing the mass. Rest of the thesis aims at continuing these arguments to further complicate the perceptions of ageing and growing old by elderly middle class in the city of Kolkata.

The thesis can be divided into the following chapters such as the following:

Chapter 2: Methodology

This is an exploratory study aiming towards exploring and questioning the dominant perspectives of ageing in today’s world. Supported by literature, a study on subjective wellbeing of older adults has been conducted. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques of analysis have been used to understand the perceptions of Bengali middle class elderly regarding their later life and about the definition and perspectives of ageing in later life. A quantitative study has been conducted where 98 older adults have been interviewed regarding their perceptions of ageing and wellbeing in later life. This particular study has been analysed using statistical tools of analysis. A qualitative study on perceptions of ageing has again been conducted focusing only on five older adults. Using Biographical Narrative Technique and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), detailed accounts of the ten older adults have been conducted. These narratives reflect their perceptions of growing old in today’s world. This chapter thus focuses on the design of the research study, techniques of data analysis, sampling techniques of the study and operationalisation of each theoretical concepts.

Chapter 3: Ageing in a Consumerist and Late capitalist society

In this chapter, the thesis introduces Late Capitalism, Consumerism and Post modernity while explaining “Today’s world”. Through this chapter the thesis would explore dimensions of a consumerist society, consumerism and its impact on life, especially on older adults in their old age. This chapter aims at understanding mechanisms of formation of old age identity, role of older adults in consumer capitalism, construction of age in the late capitalist society and the

idea of retirement. Through the theories of Hyper-reality, simulacra, the chapter seeks to understand depiction of old age in media, market and state.

Chapter 4: Perceptions of Ageing

This chapter further explores the consumerist society, but from perspectives of older adults themselves. Concepts such as ‘ageism’, ‘subjective wellbeing’ have been introduced. By way of questioning the dominant perspectives of ageing, this chapter focuses on a quantitative study of subjective wellbeing in old age. The study seeks to understand individual perceptions of wellbeing in old age.

Chapter 5: Growing old in a Bengali Middle class society

This chapter focuses on a qualitative study where ten biographical narratives have been taken to understand the varied perspectives of ageing in late life. This chapter begins by explaining Bengali middle classes, formation of the class and individual perceptions of ageing in old age. Through the individual narratives, the chapter aims to understand both formation of each discourse and mechanisms by which the discourses can be questioned. Each of these narratives have been presented in the backdrop of a Consumerist and Late Capitalist Society.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The final chapter seeks to understand the process of ageing in an Information Age where technology plays a crucial role. In explaining impact of digital technologies on lives, the conclusion chapter focuses on a social experiment that was conducted by the Social Informatics Research Group, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. Fifteen educated older adults from the Bengali middle class was involved in this experiment who used to interact with underserved children using digital technologies. This experiment tried to understand the need to be productively active in the new age of Information society. This chapter summarises the thesis by focusing on the need to question the formation of each perspective of ageing in the backdrop of the changing nature of society.

Following Critical Discourse Method of Analysis (CDA), the thesis has throughout explored the question of ‘power’ and ‘agency’ among elderly individuals after they reach the period of retirement, after they confront changes in their lives. The thesis, thus through critical discourse

analysis continuously propose the absence of structure, continuum in the lives of today's Bengali middle class elderly in the backdrop of late capitalist or consumerist society.

Narratives are moments of subscription to dominant discourse, wherein discourses are often altered, making sure that the discourses are not ossified. The thesis has presented multiple discourses, alternate discourse which often informs narratives on one hand, and also poses a counter argument to the present discourses.

The central argument of the entire thesis is the question of 'ageing', what posits our understanding of ageing, how our individual and collective perceptions are shaped as a result of the changing social structure, within the framework of the consumerist and late capitalist society characterised by possession of consumer goods, signs, signifiers, exchange and control.