

## **“NOBODY COMES TO VISIT ANYMORE”: EXPERIENCES OF OLDER INDIVIDUALS IN GOA, INDIA**

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Aging is a global phenomenon facing both the “developing” and the “developed” world at an increasing rate. About 7% of the population of India is over the age of 60, representing a large number of people in absolute terms. This number is expected to rise at a rapid pace (Jamuna, 2000). Commonly held beliefs in North America, perpetuated by the media, are that the elderly in the developing world experience greater social integration compared to their peers in the developed world. Would the lived experience of individuals in India, articulated by their personal narratives, support such an assertion?

Current gerontological discourse is silent about the concerns of older persons in India, including answers to the following questions. How is aging experienced by older persons in India? Is it just a specific life stage along the human development cycle? What is the socio-cultural construction of aging? How is leisure conceptualized at this life stage? It must be noted that how aging is experienced is closely related to individual mental frameworks, developed over a life span. These mental frameworks are a result of varied socio-cultural factors, including individual, societal traditions, and cultural norms and expectations. Hence, it was important to allow older individuals in India to narrate their experiences with the aging process. Knowledge acquired as a result of this process would facilitate better understanding of the experience of older persons in India, within a socio-cultural context.

Finally, given that a large number of Indians are employed in the technology sector in the United States, coupled with their older parents emigrating to be with their adult children, this area of research may provide professionals with valuable insights about providing culturally and personally meaningful services to this group of new immigrants.

### **Purpose and Methods**

The purpose of this study was to understand how aging was experienced by older adults in Goa, India. Given the uniquely personal and complex nature of aging, a highly structured research design was not appropriate. Hence a naturalistic design was implemented.

During 2003 and 2004, I spent a total of 17 weeks in Goa, India. During my visit to Goa, I was able to recruit, using a snowball technique 12 individuals (8 women and 4 men) ranging in age of 65-95. The first person contacted to be in the study was Mrs. da Gama, my mother, who in turn helped to recruit the other 11 individuals. She was 73 years old. All individuals who participated in the study belonged to the same social circle as my mother. The criterion for inclusion was that each individual was over the age of 65.

Interviews (ranging from two to three hours each) and informal conversations (about 10- 15 hours), participant observations, and field notes provided the data for study. Multiple data collecting techniques, multiple sources of data, and member checks were used in order to increase the credibility of the data via triangulation (Patton, 2002). The interviews and conversations were conducted both in Portuguese and English. They were transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes and essences using a constant comparison method. Being fluent in English and conversational Portuguese, I translated the

interviews and conversations in Portuguese into English for ease and consistency of analysis. Technically, I was a participant observer with my social role being that of a son of Mrs. da Gama. This allowed me to be a concerned and interested younger adult. In this role, I was allowed to ask personal questions and probe, allowing the individuals in the study to let down barriers and permitting me to enter as an insider who would be informed of their personal and very private lived experiences. In addition, my mother's relationship with the 11 individuals of being a good sister, a caring friend who showed concern, and reaching out to meet their needs, gave her seniority in the group and thus social power. It was this social power, which allowed the participants in the study to share with me their personal narratives of their individual aging experiences.

## **Results**

Stories told by the participants revealed three aspects of aging as experienced by the participants. Aging to the individuals was a time where they experienced family and societal marginalization; aging was also associated with experiencing physical infirmities; and aging was a time to focus on spirituality and a commitment to God.

### **Family and Societal Marginalization**

All of the older individuals expressed feeling unvalued in society. As one of the older adults put it, "Now that we are not working, nobody cares what we think. It appears that we have nothing to contribute even though we have all of this experience but nobody seems to want to hear what we have to say." Another older adult remarked, "What is the point of sharing what I think, nobody seems to care to listen. It would be nice if people took a moment to listen to what I have to say. I have resigned to the fact that days of my influence have passed." Marginalization was reflected in feelings of loneliness and abandonment by the family. The following quote aptly captures the above sentiment. "Nobody comes to visit me anymore. Now that I am older, nobody wants to know about me and find out how I am doing. Everybody seems busy. When I was younger, I always made it a point to go and visit all of my older relatives. People nowadays do not have time and do not care about older people." One individual remarked, "I was hoping that I would be staying with my son and his family. I was looking so forward to having company when I got older but it did not turn out that way. I am here by myself and all of my children are enjoying themselves and do not seem to care about their older mother." "I have worked so hard all of my life to provide for my family. I have provided good education for my kids and this has at times come with great sacrifice. I was hoping that when I got older, my kids would be there to take care of me and be there for me but that did not happen. When I think about it, I feel quite sad and depressed." Though the older adults did have friends and social connections, their world-view on aging was laced with expressions of loneliness and negativity.

### **Physical Infirmities**

All of the individuals readily acknowledged that older adulthood was a time where they experienced physical infirmities. In regular conversations aging was equated to physical infirmity. Words like sickness and illness were constantly used to describe the phenomenon of aging. The following quote aptly captures that sentiment. "Now that I am older, I am sick and I cannot do anything. I wish I could do all the things that I used to do

when I was younger. But now that I am old, I cannot do anything.” “I have been sick since I retired.”

### **Spirituality and a Commitment to God**

Aging was indicated as a time that one needed to focus on spirituality and God. Large chunks of time were spent reading spiritual books and daily attendance at Church (Catholic) and temple (Hindu) activities. Death loomed large on their minds and desire to experience a peaceful death and reward in heaven was articulated as paramount. “All I pray for now is that God grants me a serene and peaceful death and that I get to go heaven. To this end, I spend most of the time praying and reading the bible.” “I have only one more journey left to complete and that is from here to the grave. So I better be ready to face my God. So I spend a lot of time focusing on God and preparing myself for death. I am ready to die and am ready to meet all of my family members who have gone before me.” It must be noted that none of the individuals were particularly religious in their younger years.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study sheds some beginning insights on ways in which aging is experienced by a selected group of older persons in Goa, India. Aging as a time to focus on spirituality and God was a distinct finding of the study. Upon further probing, individuals were focusing on their impending death. Death was not characterized by fear or anxiety, rather a natural passage. Joy derived from engaging in spiritual activities was articulated as being akin to flow experienced during leisure. All activities were characterized by intrinsic motivation, perceived freedom, and enjoyment, qualities essential for a leisure experience. Though the stories told by the participants about the aging process may be construed as negative, it must be noted that all the individuals despite many of the challenges were strong and displayed will and determination in how they lived their lives. The study provides insights to leisure professionals about the cultural orientations of older adults of Indian (Goan) descent. Armed with this information, it is hoped that they will be better prepared to provide culturally relevant and meaningful services to them, allowing for a successful aging experience.

### **References**

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