

Perceived meaning of urban local parks and social well-being of elderly men: A qualitative study of Delhi and Kolkata

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Abstract

Parks and open green spaces within urban landscapes provide opportunities to elderly to promote social cohesion and community ties, engage in light physical activity, relax and sometimes escape. Such public spaces bring elderly men together in neighbourhood and provide meeting opportunities and raise the potential for developing social cohesion which are significant for their social well-being. Based on 47 in-depth interviews this study explores the different meanings that the parks as social spaces hold for these elderly men. This paper argues that being isolated and sometimes neglected by the society in general and by the family members in particular the elderly men involve in their daily activities in the parks with their fellow elderly and thus parks becomes an integral part in their everyday lives bringing about a feeling of well-being and thus having a positive affect on their overall well-being.

Key Words : *Local parks, elderly men, social well-being, social cohesion, urban spaces*

Introduction

Historically parks and green spaces have been considered as the places of recreation, enjoyment and experience nature. Cohen et al., (2007) explained the drives of parks, particularly in urban areas, as places where residents could experience the beauty of nature, breathe fresh air and places of recreation, along with sports and physical exercise. Now it is extensively acknowledged and well documented that there are intrinsic positive benefits of urban local green spaces for health and well-being. The literature (Bell and Morse, 2008; Croucher, Myers and Bretherton, 2007; McAllister, 2005; Morris, 2003; Ulrich et al., 1991;) mostly emphasised on the influence of natural environments on physical well-being through opportunities for physical activity; mental well-being through stress

lessening and alleviation; and social well-being through social interaction, social involvement and participation. However, a large number of studies (see Cohen et al., 2006, 2007; Gordon-Larsen, Nelson, Page and Popkin, 2006) established that even living in proximity to urban green spaces have potential to improved health and well-being.

Parks and open green spaces within urban landscapes provide opportunities to elderly to promote social cohesion and community ties, engage in light physical activity, relax and sometimes escape. Though the local parks and green spaces provide benefits all age groups and all section of people, only elderly men has been taken into consideration in this study. The rationale behind focusing on the elderly men, and not on women and children, is

that this age group is a vulnerable section in society in terms of their health (physical and mental) and social well-being. Elderly men are 'vulnerable' in a rapidly changing environment because of their limited physical mobility and social limitations. In addition to physical limitations, many elderly suffer from depression because of social isolation, neglect and alienation in the family as well as in the society. Social isolation and stress occurs among the elderly as a consequence of their poor health, retirement, and loss of spouse (Kang and Ridgway, 1996). However, as opposed to women of the same age group, elderly men are more likely to be able to access parks and open spaces. This is in keeping with the gender division of space in to private and public spaces with men of all ages being more active in the latter. Hence the focus of this exploratory study was on elderly men.

Later life or old age is associated with a host of social changes (e.g., change in social roles and relations, loss of spouses, issues of care-giving) that can often negatively impact one's health and well-being. In this situation urban local parks can indeed facilitate social cohesion in urban neighbourhoods. Ernstson (2013) argued that social and psychological well-being of elderly men is empirically linked to urban parks and green spaces. Similarly Sugiyama, Thompson and Alves (2009) specified that parks and green spaces are particularly important to maintain and enhance the quality of life and social well-being of elderly.

Social relationships and interactions in the open green spaces are important to individuals in all culture and especially important to elderly. Older persons with strong social interactions and community

ties have lower level of mortality, reduced suicide rates and better physical health. In addition, elderly with strong social connections have significantly higher levels of social well-being. Beckley (1994) argued that social cohesion is the extension to which a geographical place achieves 'community' in the sense of shared values, cooperation and interaction. Everyday interactions with the fellow elderly from different socio-economic background are one way of creating social cohesion that bonds the older people (Marshall and Stolle, 2004). Some other scholars argued that interactions in public spaces, such as parks and open spaces are too informal and too brief to drive social cohesion, whereas others maintained that such interactions positively influence social cohesion (Kleinhans, Priemus and Engbersen, 2007). Such interactions in local parks provide relief from daily routines and alleviate stress and isolation in a neighbourhood (Dines and Cattell, 2006).

Background

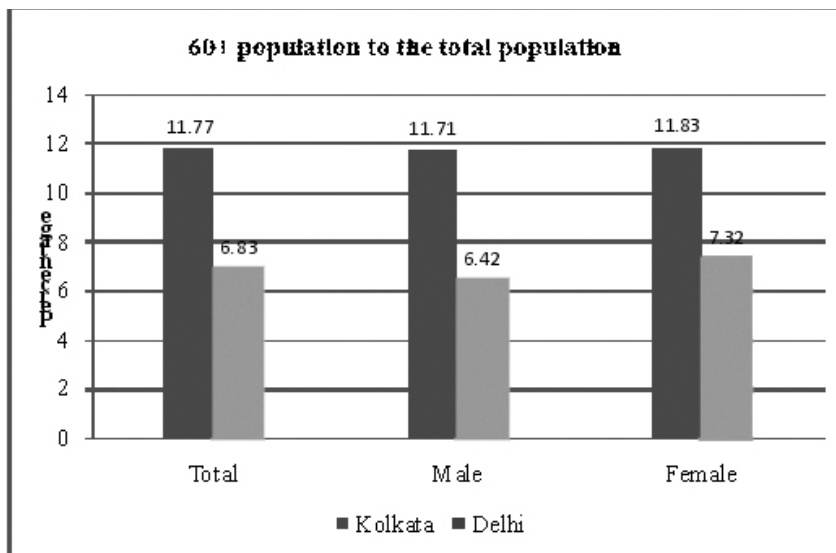
Given the increasing rate of aging that developing countries like India are experiencing, there is a need to focus on the emerging issues affecting the elderly population for improving their quality of life and social well-being. Due to changing family structure, the elderly are not getting adequate attention and emotional support by their family members (Jahangir, 2014). These changes lead to greater alienation and isolation of the elderly from their family members and from society (Siva Raju, 2011). Social isolation, alienation and loneliness have been shown to be of increasing in the changing family structure

and are of great concern for the social well-being of the elderly (Gironda and Lubben, 2003). These issues of growing elderly are associated with poorer health-related quality of life, levels of satisfaction, and community ties (Cantor and Sanderson 1999). In addition, there are associations between social isolation and mental illness, distress, dementia, suicide and premature death. In this background this qualitative exploratory study is intended to examine how parks are being used and perceived by the elderly men and also to explore the reasons why they choose to access the parks, what kind of activities they carry out in the park leading to their social and physical and psychological well-being.

Population and Settings

In 2011, Kolkata had population of 44,96,694 of which 23,56,766 were men and 21,39,928

were women. As per Census 2001, the number of older persons was 4,52,736 constituting about 9.9% of the total elderly. This has increased to 5,29,154 in 2011 constituting about 11.77% of the total elderly (Census of India, 2011). The interesting fact is that the elderly women outnumber the elderly men. In 2011 elderly men were 275996 constituting 11.71% and elderly women were 253158 constituting 11.83% of the total elderly people in Kolkata. It has been seen that the elderly have limited social support and face social and economic exclusion, sometimes they face physical abuse and difficulty in getting food/nutrition (HelpAge India Report, 2014). In 2011, New Delhi had older adult population of 1147445 of which 5,76,755 were men and 59,867 were women constituting 6.42% and 7.32% of the total elderly respectively (see fig. 1).



Source: Computed and prepared by author from Census of India data, 2011

Figure 1: Share of 60+ population in Delhi and Kolkata to the total population, 2011

Two metropolitan cities i.e. Kolkata and Delhi have been chosen for this study. Metropolitan cities have been selected because in small cities people are closely knitted and know each other. But in the metropolitan cities the situation is entirely different. Here the provision of social support and community ties of the elderly are of great concern and are emerging as serious issues in urban neighbourhoods. In addition, the issue of living arrangement of the elderly men is a predominant concern in metropolitan cities. Therefore large numbers of private institutional care centres are emerging out in these cities. Further, in these metropolitan cities the elderly are being isolated and sometimes neglected by the society in general and by the family members in particular. The elderly, therefore, engage with their daily activities in the parks with their fellow elderly and thus parks become an integral part in the everyday lives.

Methods

Interviews and observation

The study incorporated only those elderly men who were regular visitors to the local parks. From this group, through purposive sampling, participants who experienced alienation, isolation and neglect from family were selected for in-depth interviews. The in depth interview guide was used for the personal interview of the older men. Though the interview guide was prepared in English language but during interview it was translated into local (Bengali for Kolkata and Hindi for Delhi) language for the convenience of the participants. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. The participants were voluntarily recruited

and their names have been changed to conceal their identity. The interviews were conducted in the winter when the elderly used to visit parks and green spaces even at day times for sunlight.

Besides, much information was collected through observation as mere interview cannot reveal the attitudes and the behaviour changes of the elderly men in a particular setting. With the help of observation and visual method it has been possible to understand the inner stories of the elderly men. It also helped to cross check the information shared by the participants in their interviews on particular issues such as frequency of visiting parks, activities in the parks and social interactions with the fellow older adults.

Data analysis

This study is based on the personal interviews data that were digitally recorded and transcribed in Bengali and in Hindi. All the transcribed data were translated into English language. The data were analysed with the help of WeftQDA, a software package for qualitative data analysis. This software helped to develop codes, categories from the stories of the participants. Then each of the code family was described comparing different statements and quotes made by the participants. After that these descriptions were contextualised further with the observation data.

Result

Sample Characteristics

A total of 47 participants were incorporated in the study out of which 25 were from Kolkata and 22 were from Delhi. The parks and green

space areas in Delhi where the interviews were conducted are ridge area near Delhi University, local parks in Vijay Nagar, Civil Lines, Hudson Line and Rohini in North and North-East Delhi; Qutub Institutional area, Vasant Kunj, Tughlakabad in south Delhi; and Dwarka in south west Delhi. The areas in Kolkata where the in-depth interviews were conducted are Belgachhia, Chitpur, Maniktala in North Kolkata; Barackpore, Sodepur in northern outskirts; Salt Lake in East Kolkata; Alipur, Jadavpur, Tollygunge, Chetla in South Kolkata. Though the intersectionality of the participants was not taken into consideration for this study but it was evident from observation that the elderly men were from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Use and meaning of urban local parks

From the study it has been observed that leisure activities of elderly men in parks are divided into two different parts based on their usage. In the morning the elderly men use parks as space of physical activities (mainly walking slowly) whereas in the evening they use the same park as a space of sharing daily family events with the elderly who also use the park for same reason. In the morning they come and walk together for few minutes and then sit for few hours; spend about one hour and go back to own home. They again come back in the parks at 10 o'clock and meet together; they stay till 12 to 12:30 pm (in winter season only) and go back home for lunch and rest. After that they again come at 4 pm and sit on the benches and share their ideas and discuss every minute thing of their lives. They talk till it becomes dark; sometimes they continue till late evening when some important or

interesting issues are being discussed and it becomes important to convince the fellow elderly of their own opinions. This space of voicing opinion may infact be denied to them in their homes.

The elderly men perceive different meaning of the parks in their lives. From the in depth interview it has emerged that meaning of the parks depends on their friend circle, situation of the family members, relation with the children and other family members. Those who have peace in the family they come for relaxation and fresh air of the park. However, those who experience tension in the home come to the park to escape the home situation. Thus the elderly use the park space according to their own desire. The same park has different meaning to different group of people; even different meaning to people within a group. As noted by one of the participants expressed:

"I come here to relax only. If I find any good person like you to interact with I feel good to talk to them. I spent around 4 hours away from home peacefully, because I have no work at home" (Anil, 72, Delhi).

In this study too many of the elderly men revealed that they come to park to *escape* from the family dispute among the children; that they find park as the space of calm and tension free. Similarly scholars like Jordan et al. (2009) found that parks facilitate an escape from everyday life in three dimensions such as escape from reality, antithesis to daily life, and freedom. In this study some of the elderly deliberately delay going back to home in the evening in order to avoid spending a long time with their family members. As mentioned by the participants during interview:

“The old people have ‘many problems’. But they come to a lonely place like park and have a good time interacting with good fellows” (Amarendra, 69, Kolkata).

Scholars like Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) argued that natural park environments are important in promoting the well-being of senior citizens because they facilitate a ‘clearing of the mind’ and/or ‘clearing the head and re-energizing’ in a way that enable self-restoration. Godbey and Blazey (1983) conducted a study on older people who participated in light to moderate physical activity in urban parks and found that half of the participants were in better mood after visiting the parks since they ‘clear their minds’ in interactions with the fellow elderly. It is quite clear from the interview of one of the participants: In this study too it was noted that some of the elderly men use parks as spaces of sharing ideas with likeminded people. They form a small group of like-minded people and such groups differ from one another based on the theme of discussion. These usually range from economic hardships to family dispute. The elderly men sit on the benches in small groups and discuss their day to day activities. From the in-depth interviews it has been found that the group consisting of lower middle income people mostly come and sit on the grass and play cards with snack and tea; they come for ‘time pass’. While the educated retired elderly men discuss about the contemporary national to local issues and they have their own opinions regarding each issue. They distinguished their group as more knowledgeable and therefore their group is more ‘civilized’.

“So people of my age have similar problems so we share and interact with each other and clear our minds at the same time” (Piyush, 68, Delhi).

“This park is clean and well maintained. I like this place. Here I talked to my friends and discuss about day to day activities. I come here because people are somewhat of my nature and understand my situation” (Soumen, 74, Kolkata).

Discussion

The process of urbanization, with an ever growing population in the city, gulps large amount of green spaces and changes the internal green space pattern in a developing country like India. This situation calls for an attention to maintain and regenerate urban green spaces and residential parks. In addition, with citizens’ expectations, provision of urban local parks becomes an important agenda to ensure the quality and social well-being of urban life. Many researchers note that local parks can provide urban areas with vitality in terms of ecological, social, and economic benefits. It can serve as air pollution purifier, reduces social gap in the community, and ensures socio-environmental sustainability.

The findings of this study are corresponding with studies conducted by Jordan et al. (2009) who found that personal meanings of green parks are associated with beauty, escape and relaxation and facilitate *social togetherness*. Based on 75 essays conducted on ‘meaning of parks’ they found that parks have two broad grouped meanings of *personal* and *social*. Similarly the works of Shaw and Henderson (2005) and James and Bixler (2008) have explained how leisure

and relaxation in green park spaces provide meaning to different age groups from gendered and cultural perspective. Another finding is that visiting parks for leisure activities and interacting with the fellow elderly is a strategy to release the stress and promote social well-being. Scholars like Godbey and Blazey (1983); Hull and Michael (1995) also claimed that the urban local parks play a unique role in promoting health and alleviating stress. They argued that leisure experiences and social cohesion within parks can be effective stress coping strategy and positively associated with both perceived physical and mental health, as well as subjective well-being. Similar studies were also conducted by Hull and Michael (1995) who mentioned that local parks play a significant role in shaping people's moods. They interviewed 186 participants and found that the older people felt significantly less calm and more anxious at homes than at parks. However, the reported findings in this qualitative study are generally consistent and reinforced the current perceived meanings and findings that urban local green spaces and parks can facilitate physical activity and non-physical benefits such as impacts on social wellbeing and mental health, as well as social inclusion to visit these parks in these two metropolitan cities of India.

Conclusion

Since urban local parks are inclusive spaces, they can be seen as possibly favourable spaces for stimulating social cohesion and care. In this paper social well-being of the elderly men has been operationalised in terms of their social interaction in the urban local parks green spaces. Looking at the differences between the local parks and the

differences between the elderly groups it can be concluded that parks need to be designed to be inter-generational. Since the elderly men are being isolated and neglected at homes; they lack the emotional attachment with their children and grandchildren. They perceive that due to changes in the intergenerational family relations and rise of dual career (of sons and daughter-in-laws) they are not getting proper attention by the family members. Perceiving this changing family dynamics as lacking emotional care in home, the elderly men find local parks as alternative spaces for their social care and well-being besides physical activities and experiencing nature for leisure.

In addition, in light of increasing social isolation and alienation, and change in social structure, there is clear need for planning for urban health and social well-being of the elderly community (Ravetz, 2000). Therefore, seeing the perceived meaning and their influences on the social well-being, green spaces should be included in plans of economic, environmental and social regeneration (Swanwick, Dunnett and Woolley, 2003) and, consequently, made accessible to all urban residents and therefore, conserving urban local parks and green spaces in the city would be an important strategy to sustain social well-being of the elderly.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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