Senior Citizens and The Rest:
Being Differently Old in Contemporary India

This paper is about old age and what that means in contemporary India. Its central concern is with constructions and experiences of personhood in an immensely diverse society, particularly at a time of significant socio-economic change. My essential contention is that efforts to classify old age on the part of the state, gerontologists and NGOs often construct a model of later life applicable primarily to an urban, middle class minority which excludes the vast majority of India's largely poor and rural older population. In doing so, I argue, an implicit division is delineated between those considered "senior citizens" and those not – "the rest" or the "majority old". Further, I contend that a senior citizen group is able to mobilise in accordance with a discourse of youth and productivity, presenting itself as an integral part of India's ongoing development project, in a way that the majority old cannot.

Partha Chatterjee's (2004) concept of "citizens" and "populations" serves as the theoretical inspiration for my analysis and argument. With this in mind I examine the hegemonic discourse that surrounds ageing in India – that which Lawrence Cohen (1998) has called "the narrative of the Fall". Ranging from the generally pessimistic to the outright apocalyptic, the narrative is founded on three main premises: 1) All Indian families were once multigenerational "joint families"; 2) in these households, old people had all their needs met, were listened to and respected; 3) the quality of old age has declined as families have begun breaking up and withdrawing support and respect under the influence of the four malign "-zations": Westernization, modernization, industrialization and urbanization (Cohen 1998: 88-89). I examine this narrative, troubling its assumptions, and argue that they obfuscate a much more complex reality of older people's lives in India; one dependent on local context and the political and socio-economic cross-cutting factors of caste, class and gender.

Drawing particularly on work by Penny Vera-Sanso (2007; 2006; 2004) I argue that a web of these socio-economic factors influence the lives of the majority old which neither fit the narrative of the Fall, nor reflect the experiences of higher castes and classes. The impact of long-term agricultural reorganisation of labour, rising consumption demands of younger generations and the malfunctioning of a woefully inadequate welfare system speaks to the need for committed political-economic analysis of life for the majority old.

In her work on middle class mothers in Calcutta, Henrike Donner suggests that, "the conflicts over the meaning of economic reform are not played out on the public stage of electoral politics alone, but also within families, between generations and in the embodied experiences of citizens." (2008: 180). She understands neoliberalism as "a set of institutions, ideologies and technologies that bring about specific discourses" (*ibid.*). It is these discourses, particularly their context-dependent relevance and application, that I intend to explore with reference to families and the elderly. Sarah Lamb contends that a transformation is taking place in India, "involving not only aging *per se*, but also core cultural and moral visions surrounding family, gender, personhood, and the very identity of India as a nation and culture." (2007: 82). My concern here is not to determine the empirical truth of this statement, but to acknowledge the processes it implies and to argue that the conversations taking place about what it means to age in today's India are oriented towards and driven by senior citizens at the expense of attention to the realities of India's majority old.

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The material informing the paper is largely gleaned from secondary sources. Mining the social scientific literature on ageing in India presents a rather patchy picture. It remains a neglected area of study and the work that has been done varies enormously in terms of both physical and socio-economic geography. This makes comparison of experience a challenge,

but it certainly confirms my argument for the heterogeneity of elderly experience in India; it also inspires in its invitation to further exploration.

My study is bolstered by two interviews, which took place in Mumbai in late December 2008 and early January 2009. The first, with Kamala Ganesh, Head of Sociology at the University of Mumbai (30 December 2008), yielded useful insight into her work on family and kinship throughout India and lends credence to my suggestions of the heterogeneous, context-dependent nature of ageing. The second, with Neha Shah, Managed of Social Support Services at Dignity Foundation (1 January 2009), was especially fruitful, allowing insight into the psychology of the NGO beyond that suggested by its literature. This interview clearly contributes to my analysis of Dignity's work and through that to my conclusions more broadly. I am conscious of the caution necessary when relying on a single case to support a general argument. For the purposes of this paper, my study of Dignity is used to support a pre-existing hunch regarding the differential experiences of senior citizens and the majority old. I remain vigilant against extrapolating my findings to all senior citizen groups and recognize the necessity of further fieldwork to the substantiation of my fledgling theory.

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The paper is structured in broad sections. I begin by acknowledging my debt to Partha Chatterjee's work on "the politics of the governed" (2004), the analytical framework for which informs the argument that follows.

The second section begins the study proper and entails a discussion of the pitfalls of defining and describing being "old". I critique gerontology's reliance on demographics at the expense of ethnographic enquiry and discuss Vera-Sanso's (2006) work on "generational" versus

“functional” ageing which has critical implications for understandings of what it is to be old in different contexts.

The third section focuses on “the Indian family” and the ideals, norms and practices associated with it. I pay close to attention to the constitutive elements of the seldom-challenged narrative of the Fall as mentioned above and argue that these refer to a mythical Golden Age against which the decline of filial support is contrasted in an indictment of modernity. I echo Cohen’s (1998) suggestion that rather than a static site of enduring culture, the family is instead a locus of ongoing contestation over meaning and identity and the manner of contestation reflective of socioeconomic context. Following this I examine Vera-Sanso’s analysis of resource flows within families and the perception of an increasing “needs gap” (2007) between younger and older generations as being at the root of increased elderly vulnerability among lower castes and classes.

The fourth section deals with gerontology. A relatively new discipline in India, I discuss Cohen’s analysis of the ambiguities of gerontology as it simultaneously represents the West as cause of and remedy for the purported ills of an Indian old age. Further, the use of the elderly peasant as icon contrasts with gerontology’s prescriptions and recommendations, which are generally oriented towards an urban senior citizenry.

This implicit gerontological binary leads to section five in which I expand my argument for the rhetorical and political division of India’s older people into senior citizens and the majority old. I argue that senior citizens are situated in the upper and middle classes and indicate the importance of the latter phenomenon to neoliberalism with reference to Donner (2008) and Fernandes (2006). I draw attention to issues facing this group, noting the differences from the concerns of lower castes and classes.

I then proceed to discuss the work and rhetoric of Dignity Foundation – a Mumbai-based NGO - and conclude that its explicit orientation towards the concerns of the upper-middle class elderly comes at the exclusion of the majority old who lack the organisation necessary to make moral claims upon the state with a united voice.

In the final section I discuss the Government of India's National Policy on Older Persons, published in 1999. I argue that its rhetoric is heavily influenced by the concerns of senior citizens and that the well-intentioned ambitious policies that do target the poor inevitably invite scepticism given the dearth of implementation strategy and financial commitment.

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The theoretical lens I apply to this paper is derived from Partha Chatterjee's (2004) work on "the politics of the governed". My intention is not to bolster Chatterjee's arguments, however, but rather to follow the train of thought his work provokes with reference to my own.

In *The Politics of the Governed* (2004), Chatterjee discusses the difference between concepts of "citizen" and that of "population":

> Unlike the concept of citizen, the concept of population is wholly descriptive and empirical; it does not carry a normative burden. Populations are identifiable, classifiable, and describable by empirical or behavioural criteria and are amenable to statistical techniques such as censuses and sample surveys. Unlike the concept of citizen, which carries the ethical connotation of participation in the sovereignty of the state, the concept of population makes available to government functionaries a set of rationally manipulable

> instruments for reaching large sections of the inhabitants of a country as the targets of their "policies"… (*ibid*.: 34)

In making this distinction, Chatterjee argues, a tension arises between the "classical idea of popular sovereignty" (*ibid*.: 36) entailing equal citizenship for a homogeneous nation and the reality of governmentality, which requires "multiple, cross-cutting and shifting classifications of the population as the targets of multiple policies" – or, "a necessarily heterogeneous construct of the social" (*ibid*.).

Chatterjee refers to these classifications as "demographic categories of governmentality" (*ibid*.: 59). The elderly, I contend, constitute such a category as the target of policies specific to their stage of life. The social heterogeneity mentioned above is clearly apparent within this group, as elderly experience depends on varied socio-economic context. I would argue further that the citizen/population division of broader society is also visible *within* the elderly target group, such that it constitutes a small group of middle-upper class and caste senior citizens and another, much larger, group of the majority old populated by lower classes and castes.

Chatterjee is concerned with how "the particular claims of marginal population groups, often grounded in violations of the law, [can] be made consistent with the pursuit of equal citizenship and civic virtue" (*ibid*.: 64). In order to do so, he argues that it is crucial "*to give to the empirical form of a population group the moral attributes of a community*." (*ibid*.: 57, original emphasis). I diverge from Chatterjee's thinking here, as my concern is not with the legal status of populations, but I employ his statement as a means to think about how the elderly as a diverse target group draws attention to and justifies its own claims.

Drawing on my argument that India's elderly are divided into senior citizens and the majority old, I suggest that it is the former group who have been successful in moulding themselves into "the morally constituted form of a community." (*ibid*.: 69). They have been able to do

this by mobilising themselves through organisations such as Dignity Foundation, which are able to make moral claims on government and public attention in two ways.

Firstly, by propagating an unchallenged narrative of the Fall senior citizens posit themselves as collective victims of family and societal neglect stemming from abstract forces of globalisation, Westernisation and modernisation. The more complex aspects of this discourse – including the consumption benefits of economic liberalisation – are subsumed under the broad narrative of the sanctity of Indian family life and the tragedy of its perceived decline. The responsibility for the modern ills of an Indian old age is placed upon the state, which is expected to intervene via policy. The mobility and influence of Dignity Foundation ensures that it is senior citizen interests which come to define the elderly Indian experience, with the result that legislation tends to echo these concerns at the expense of the majority old.

Secondly, senior citizens frame their moral claims on the state in terms of the contribution they have to offer the nation. Dignity adheres to the youth-oriented discourse that pervades a growth-obsessed India by adopting a rhetoric of productivity and age-defiance, presenting retirees as an untapped resource with a role to play in the country's development.

These two strategies are evidently contradictory. The first strand of argument blames modernisation for a decline in elderly life, while the second strand posits the use of retirees in furthering such processes. Nevertheless, it is an effective strategy that ensures the influence of senior citizens on state perceptions of and policy towards the old.

Within the majority old group, no such organisation exists. National NGOs such as HelpAge India focus on the poor elderly, but they are not a vehicle of the target group themselves, unlike at Dignity where members are active participants in the foundation's development. In the informal sector where there is no concept of retirement, let alone a pensioned one, "old" as a category is difficult to define and often includes low caste and class parents who must

continue to work and provide for themselves and their families for as long as possible. Thus, the majority old lack the social capital and the time necessary to form the kind of moral community that senior citizen groups have been able to create. Their needs are acknowledged in state policy, but couched in idealistic intentions whose implementation would require a complete overhaul of the welfare and health systems.

Hence, to return to Chatterjee, my contention that this single population group, this demographic category of governmentality (2004: 59) constituted by the Indian elderly, is divisible *again* into "citizens" and "populations". The former is a self-constructed, self-homogenising community of "culturally equipped" citizens (*ibid*.: 41) which claims to speak for the national experience of an Indian old age and is proactive and vocal in its moral claim upon the state. The latter, meanwhile, is a diverse social group that *does* in fact represent the experience of India's majority old, but which lacks the social capital to form a moral community and remains a population - a heterogeneous target of state policy.

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Description and Definition

Arguably, the central preoccupation of this paper is with the inevitable pitfalls of attempting to corral vast swathes of highly differentiated people beneath a single definitional heading. While I argue for the implicit division of old people in India into two broad groups differentiated by experience – senior citizens and the majority old – these groups are nevertheless united through their shared characteristic of having been externally defined as "ageing", "older", "old" or "elderly".

A significant feature of the heavy-handed manner in which Indian ageing is discussed is the reliance on demographic statistics at the expense of ethnographic exploration of subjective understanding (Cohen 1998: 90). Thus we are informed that, for statistical purposes, 60 is the gateway to Indian old age and then bombarded with alarmist demography (Cohen 1994: 143) regarding the growing population of old people in India, represented as absolute figures, proportion of overall population, and dependency ratios (Irudaya Rajan et al 2005; Ramamurti 2005; Bhat and Dhruvarajan 2001).

Age thresholds are, of course, necessary for state administration and for institutional funding purposes and ascertaining chronological age entails its own challenges, particularly among the poor and illiterate. But beyond this, through their treatment of "old" as a discrete category, chronological definitions omit attention to heterogeneous social and culturally-informed definitions of ageing. The ageing process is both multidimensional (Bhat and Dhruvarajan 2001: 624) and uneven, informed by socio-economic context (Vera-Sanso 2004: 80). Head of Sociology at the University of Mumbai, Kamala Ganesh pointed out during an interview (30th December 2008) that for many people – particularly the lower castes and classes who lack the luxury of retirement – a greater conceptual fluidity regarding the life course means that "old age" can't be assumed to constitute its own unique, isolatable chapter.

Taking a step back in order to interrogate the construction of this "thing" called "old age" is vital to an understanding of what ageing means to the people it affects. As Vera-Sanso contends, "the issue is not just one of deciding who should be categorised as 'elderly', but of identifying who is and who is not categorised as such, and in what contexts." (*ibid*.). To this end, she discusses the two registers of ageing she observed during work in south India: "generational ageing", whereby identities and relationships change as individuals progress through different life-stages (women, for example, are popularly considered to begin entering old age following the marriage of their eldest son (Vatuk 1990: 69)), and "functional ageing",

"whereby people become classed as old in relation to their inability to undertake activities deemed necessary to their class, caste and gender position" (2006: 460). I focus on functional ageing in greater detail here.

Central to the concept of functional ageing is that it is socially structured - a person's functional age is inevitably mediated through a mesh of socio-economic factors. A person's capacity, and through that their age, can't be assessed objectively or in isolation from local context. For example, the shift to low-input, large-scale farming means that the technical demands of associated jobs are very different to those placed on a manual agricultural labourer. Functional capacity depends on the nature of the job which in turn affects self-perception and experience of age – ergo agricultural labourers are said to age faster than farm managers (*ibid*.: 459). Similarly, in their study of disability among low caste villagers in rural Tamil Nadu, Susan Erb and Barbara Harriss-White found that old age was defined as a disability and judged by "the onset of incapacitating conditions rather than by years alone." (2004: 358). Hence 50 year-olds describing themselves as "old" from a functional perspective, given their inability to manage the manual labour expected of them (Erb and Harris-White 2002: 51).

For senior citizen groups such as Dignity, the discourse of functional ageing is deployed in reverse. While the bodies of agricultural labourers are considered older than their biological years, given a lifetime of physical toil, those of wealthy retirees are often in better shape than anticipated. Thus functional ageing among the middle-upper classes becomes a discourse of age-defiance, of the pursuit of a "healthy lifestyle" and of proving the productive worth, in spite of his or her chronological age, of an individual to a growth-driven society. Hence the plethora of articles in *Dignity Dialogue*, Dignity's magazine, along the lines of "Defy Your Age: Think, Act and Stay Young" (Sharma 2009) and "Work It Out!" (Bhat 2009) – an

exhortation to develop a second career post-retirement as a means of health maintenance and continued productivity. This is one way in which functional age is deployed as a class-contingent "strategic discourse" and not just an objective condition (Vera-Sanso 2006: 467).

Before I proceed, then, it is worth clarifying that for the purposes of this paper I echo Vera-Sanso's use of "elderly" as short-hand for "ageing and elderly people" which refers in turn to "people, irrespective of chronological age, who are – or who are considered by themselves or by others to be – ageing or aged." (2004: 81). In his critique of geroanthropology, Cohen warns against attempts to normalise old age by isolating it from other generations and life stages (1994: 142). I remain conscious of this as I turn my attention to the family as an arena through which to explore the multiple meanings and experiences of an Indian old age.

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The Family

Sarah Lamb asserts that, "people's reflections about contemporary aging and families take place firmly against the backbone of comparisons with a 'traditional' Indian past." (2007: 83). What is immediately interesting, therefore, is less an accurate determination of this "traditional" past, than the way in which, deployed as a trope in the discourse of socio-economic change, the family becomes "a barometer of modernity" (*ibid*.). Speaking of gerontology, Cohen asserts that:

> Throughout the genre, the "traditional" family is conceived in idealized terms as an indivisible unit free from conflict and existing outside of the contingencies of time and space. A Golden Age is uncritically assumed. (1998: 93)

Research into the constitutive elements of this Golden Age of the Indian family suggests an idealised recollection of mutually supportive joint-families who pooled resources to ensure the well-being of all; a commitment to the reciprocal obligation of children for the sacrifice of parents through the practise of *seva*, or service; and, in the Hindu tradition, an observation of the four *asramas* or stages that define the life course (Cohen 1998; Lamb 2000, 2007; Vatuk 1972, 1990; Vera-Sanso 2004; Wadley 2002).

The ethnographers cited adopt a necessarily critical orientation towards this past and they shed light on the socio-economic flux that has been an ongoing facet of Indian life and not solely an occurrence of the last twenty years. Reflecting on her fieldwork in the 1960s through to the 1980s, Sylvia Vatuk writes of the influence of industrialisation on rural families, of adapting kinship systems and, with regard to life stages, of the flexibility of standards of behaviour which she found were dependent upon "the composite social personhood of the individual concerned." (1990: 70; 1972). Cohen points out the erasure from the collective consciousness of Hindu and Buddhist textual traditions that describe the pain and conflict inherent in old age, as well as noting a new understanding of the fourth stage of life – renunciation – as entailing not the leave-taking of relatives in the search for higher truths, but rather a return to the bosom of the family as "the very content of soteriology" (1998: 115). He challenges the hegemonic notion of a stable Indian family located in a traditional past, suggesting that:

> …family is less a static quality of culture or self, than a site of anxiety and conflict, of the simultaneous maneuvers of loss and recovery in the construction of personhood and community within the space of an urban India modernity. (1998: 105)

Kamala Ganesh echoed this sentiment, arguing that while certain changes *are* taking place, they constitute an ongoing "evolution of family norms and practices" (interview, 30th December 2008). She added that, in contrast to the narrative of the Fall, there is no outright *rejection* of existing family structures underway, but rather a process of negotiation about modern intergenerational responsibilities.

Cohen's intimation that the narrative of the traditional family and its equation with an essential Indian self is largely a discourse of the urban middle class finds resonance with Sarah Lamb. She found during her work with elderly Bengalis that the blame on the West - or "foreign winds" – and modernity for a worsening old age was much more common amongst the middle and upper castes and classes. Informants from lower strata tended to blame discomfort on the much older phenomena of caste, poverty and family friction (2000: 90).

It is crucial to recognize that conceptions of traditional Indian kinship structures are dependent on socio-economic context. Contrary to popular discourse, it has tended to be mainly among wealthy land- or business-owners that the joint-family has prevailed as a tradition. Far from an exclusive preoccupation with filial support, such family structures entail concerns regarding the protection of land and resources, as well as the seclusion of women. The nuclear family meanwhile, viewed as a malign symptom of Westernisation and a blight on Indian cultural tradition by the urban elite, has long been the norm for many poor, low caste families who have no resources to safe-guard and whose women have always been expected to work outside the home (Still, personal communication, 2nd June 2009; Mines and Lamb 2002: 7; Wadley 2002). This heterogeneous, context-dependent reality supports my argument that the hegemonic construction of Indian old age entails an implicit division between a wealthy few and the majority old.

This is not to suggest, however, that the narrative of the Fall holds empirically true for the urban middle-upper classes either. The greatest interest lies in the ways the discourse is deployed as a means of legitimating particular understandings of, and anxieties about, old age. In Penny Vera-Sanso's (2004) view, a more accurate understanding of inter-generational family dynamics across socio-economic contexts can be gained by interrogating the slippage between the norms and practice of filial support and the nature of resource flows within families.

The Indian norm that sons support elderly parents persists despite evidence showing that filial support is often intermittent or lacking altogether (Vera-Sanso 2004: 77) and narratives bemoaning the increasing neglect of the old. Vera-Sanso questions why practice hasn't unseated this norm and suggests a reason lies in the multiple ambiguities that exist around ideas of what constitutes oldness, need, support and the ability to provide it (*ibid*.: 77-79). Further, there is a crucial "sub-clause" to the family norm: "sons should support parents in old age *but only when parents need support*." (*ibid*.: 91, emphasis added). Thus the timing and extent of provision is at the son's discretion and rests on "concepts of need relating to age and gender as mediated by economic location." (*ibid*.).

Equally important is that in spite of the norm situating elderly parents at the heart of the Indian family, in practice it is actually a son's *conjugal* family that constitutes his primary responsibility in terms of resource distribution (*ibid*.: 97). Vera-Sanso defines as a fundamental error the lack of attention paid to the competing responsibilities of men to their natal and conjugal families (2007: 230). Easy assumptions that shared residence correlates with equal resource division are mistaken. Resource flows are dependent on context-specific understandings of diverse needs. As a son is expected to prioritise his conjugal family, parents are expected to remain self-sufficient for as long as possible, particularly in lower castes and classes. What frequently gets missed are the *downward* resource flows which stem

from a son and his conjugal family living with, and being subsidized by, his parents (Vera-Sanso 2004: 81).

There is a manifest tension here. On one hand, the normative discourse of life stages and diminishing needs of the elderly and on the other, the development discourse of growth and increasing consumption demands of the conjugal family. Together they produce the perception of a widened "needs gap" between generations with profound implications for resource-flows within families (Vera-Sanso 2007). This needs gap manifests across socio-economic contexts but inevitably has its greatest impact on the poor.

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<u>Rural Realities for the Majority Old</u>

Based on her work with Dalits in two Tamil Nadu villages, Penny Vera-Sanso argues that while the Golden Age of filial support is a fiction, it *is* apparent that a changing rural economy is placing greater strain on family resources, making filial support for the elderly more difficult (2007). While some of these changes stem from the liberalization of the Indian economy post-1991, others reflect longer-term transitions.

Thus, in Tamil Nadu we see the impact of pre-existing changes in agricultural practice *coupled with* more recent increases in consumption demand following the lowering of import tariffs, which formed a central plank of India's liberalization policy (Dasgupta 2005). Profound transformations of the agricultural system have forced orientation towards a highly competitive liberalized marketplace, with farmers demanding mass labour at specific times to ensure the highest possible returns and an increase in profit margins (Vera-Sanso 2007: 242). In this context a discourse of functional ageing is deployed as a strategy to restrict elderly

access to fair wages or to deny them work altogether. One means of doing so is through piece-rate payment to work gangs. This ensures that the labour pool becomes self-regulating – young, fit workers refuse to take elderly labourers to the fields as they risk slowing the pace of work and thus reducing the final payment (*ibid*.: 243). State-subsidised transitions to more technical, low-input farming (of trees, or chicks, in place of cereals and vegetables) means that demand for agricultural labour decreases across the board, reducing the ability of a son to support parents and of parents to remain self-sufficient (Vera-Sanso 2007: 225; see, for example, Mohanakumar 2008 for a discussion of similar processes taking place in Kerala).

Filial support amongst these rural Dalits, then, is intermittent and dependent upon a fluctuating labour market. Parents are expected to be self-sufficient, or when possible are circulated through the homes of several sons – a situation elderly people say makes them "feel like beggars" (Vera-Sanso 2007: 235). Being forced to ask for food is demeaning and experienced as a refusal of filial obligation. Parents acknowledge the difficulty of providing support, but claim that sons are "flouting the norm of filial support" in their alternative use of money (*ibid*.). This conflict over needs assessment goes to the heart of the dynamics of family resource flows.

Vera-Sanso asserts that "the link between personhood and the perception of needs is fundamental to the determination of intergenerational resource flows." (2007: 231). The "needs gap" widens as the needs of younger generations are perceived to increase while those of the elderly remain static (*ibid*.). One might argue that, in accordance with popular understandings of the *asramas*, material needs of the elderly might be expected to *decrease*. Indeed this often appears to be the case; work by Gillespie and McNeill (1992) found the nutritional status of the old to be worse than that of the young in Tamil Nadu villages as elderly family members were fed less in accordance with perceptions of their reduced needs. Definitions of need are mediated through class, caste and gender – the idea of equal resource

distribution amongst members of co-residential families is false, as Papanek found (1990). It is thus necessary to investigate not only the degree of support, but "the terms under which it is given" relating to status within households (Vera-Sanso 2004: 82; Nillesen and Harris-White 2004). Personhood and need are "ranked", with the needs – and the work – of elderly women appreciated least of all family members (Vera-Sanso 2007: 234).

An established narrative of declining elderly need is deployed in justification of an emerging discourse of increased, and increasingly conspicuous, consumption. Children become more "expensive" as the income from their labour is replaced by education costs. The post-1991 drop in import tariffs fuels consumption, as multinational companies target poorer rural consumers through the packaging of individual, affordable, sachets of branded shampoo or washing powder. These new consumption patterns correspond with discourses of caste mobilization and displays of status which place a massive burden on the most financially insecure households (*ibid*.: 236-237).

Certain development programmes contribute to the conceptual divide between old and young needs by either explicitly targeting youth, or restricting access by the old. Vera-Sanso cites the case of one elderly woman who was denied the subsidized toilet promised to every household, because she had neither the need for such "luxury" nor any children to inherit it (*ibid*.: 235). The needs bias, Vera-Sanso argues, is systemic:

> It is the rhetoric surrounding the policies, and not simply their implementation, that impinges on intergenerational relations; it does this by creating, or amplifying, the needs of the younger generations. (*ibid*.)

Such rhetoric infiltrates subjective experiences of personhood as well as consumption patterns; Vera-Sanso cites young Tamils describing themselves as "*nagariham* (civilised, modern, developed)" (*ibid*.: 238). Expressed through the purchase of marketed products, I

contend that this newly modern mode of being also serves to enhance a growing generation gap which in itself entrenches ideas about differential needs.

This complements my previous assertion – that the pervasive youth-oriented discourse projected by the Indian state, the media and business elites is instrumental in the marginalization of India's majority elderly. This growth-obsessed discourse is rhetorical fuel for India's development. The Times of India's "Lead India" campaign run in conjunction with the 2009 general election explicitly targets urban, middle class youth in its search for a new generation of "Lead Indians" (www.lead.timesofindia.com). Pepsi's "Youngistaan" adverts court the same audience, casting them as the drivers of a new, modern India while satisfying the multiple, complementary, consumption urges of wealthy teenagers in its tie-ups with MTV and Pizza Hut (www.pepsizone.yahoo.co.in). *Imagining India*, meanwhile, the aggressively marketed book by Infosys Chairman Nandan Nilekani, states that India's economic strength is in its human capital: "India is coming into its dividend as an unusually young country in an unusually ageing market – a young, fresh-faced nation in a greying world." (2009: 22). There is no room for the old in this vision of India.

While a senior citizen group such as Dignity Foundation is able to mobilize and attract attention through its co-option of this discourse – as a powerful consumer group, as grandparents supporting working couples and as a labour resource themselves – the majority old are at risk of even greater vulnerability. Increasing pressures on household resources ensure the continued prioritization of expanding conjugal family needs, while those of elderly parents are considered static or decreased, jeopardizing their access to filial support.

Even this relatively brief glance at the changing political economy of rural Tamil Nadu should convince us of the need for more committed interrogation of the hegemonic discourse deployed as an authoritative representation of the lives of elderly Indians. I turn now to

analyse the role of gerontology – a discipline from which we might expect a critical orientation towards the narrative of the Fall, yet which largely fails to deliver.

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Gerontology

Cohen accuses Indian gerontology of "the ongoing production of the taken-for-granted" (1998: 87) through the propagation of a narrative that assumes a decline in elderly quality of life via family breakdown and alienation for which it blames abstract forces of modernity and Westernisation. This discourse is marshalled as a trope of outrage expressed by the purveyors of a discipline which presents itself as defender of the old. Yet even in more nuanced analyses of elderly experience which acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of the group and their rural preponderance, there is little critical interrogation of the influences at work. Thus, Bhat and Dhruvarajan (2001) are able to highlight the differential needs of the elderly, focusing particularly on the rural poor, as well as the psycho-social difficulties inherent in the transition to the category of "old", while asserting the following:

> Indian society is undergoing rapid transformation under the impact of industrialisation, urbanisation, technical change, education and globalisation. Consequently, the traditional values and institutions are in the process of erosion and adaptation, resulting in the weakening of intergenerational ties that were the hallmark of the traditional family. (Bhat and Dhruvarajan 2001: 626)

A similar claim is made by Irudaya Rajan et al:

> The deteriorating conditions for the elderly are a result of the fast-eroding traditional family system in the wake of rapid modernization, migration, and urbanization. (2005: 12)

These sweeping statements, supported by little ethnographic insight, are found throughout the gerontological literature and are characteristic of the discipline's stance. While the examples cited above are at least sympathetic, if mal-informed, in their attention to the lives of India's rural elderly, there are other cases in which the trope of a morally superior Indian culture – embedded in the idea of the traditional Hindu family – dominates. For example, *Discourses on Aging and Dying* (2008), a volume edited by three Indian Institute of Technology professors, transpires as a bizarre amalgam of Hindu sermon and derivative, statistic-driven exposition of elderly life. The introduction provides perhaps the most explicit warning against the perils of Westernisation:

> In Western countries, many aged parents are neglected by their children and are placed in old age homes under the care of the government or low level health workers. Residents of these homes are either depressed or simply waiting to die, having no hope in life and nothing to provide them inspiration. This is because they have no training in spiritual culture, and therefore have no understanding about the purpose of life. (Chatterjee et al 2008: 22)

The strain of gerontology that reifies an urban-progressive/rural-backward dichotomy is clear as Shovana Narayana tells Sarah Lamb that, "the self-sufficiency of the elderly is a very healthy trend…The problem lies in the rural mindset where people consider their children as a support system for their old age." (2007: 94)

This lack of nuance is further demonstrated by the scant attention paid to the impact of gender, class and caste on experiences of old age. These suggestions of "alternative readings of history" (Cohen 1998: 118) are, according to Cohen, "erased within the grand narrative of modernization and Westernization." (*ibid*.). Gerontology undermines its good intentions by shrinking from detailed analysis of forces at work and their context-dependent effects. It

chooses instead to rally behind an uncontested stock discourse that is preoccupied with ongoing representations of modernity's degradation of the Indian family.

There are two ambiguities inherent in the grounds of Indian gerontology. Firstly, a discipline that began to flourish in the 1980s, it continues to draw heavily on gerontological knowledge imported from the West. Thus, an internationally-oriented gerontology construes the West as both cause of and remedy for the ills of an Indian old age. Or, as Cohen puts it, hope is delivered in "a Pandora's box of gerontophobic demons" (1998: 98). He goes on to argue, however, that as the Western origin of the gerontological remedies for old age becomes clear, the role of villain is newly occupied by the state given its failure to implement such solutions (*ibid*.: 91).

The apparent alienation of these solutions from any political-economic context can be understood, I would argue, as another symptom of gerontology's reluctance to interrogate the premises on which it operates. Cohen discusses detailed and well-intentioned gerontological studies that nevertheless approach the absurd in the plethora of remedies they set forth – day centres, universal pensions, meals-on-wheels ("in the context of endemic undernutrition and limited access to potable water across generations" (*ibid*.)) with no corresponding discussion of welfare priorities, budgets, or "the politics of state assistance." (*ibid*.). Cohen argues for a two-fold consequence of this approach.

The failure of the state to implement gerontology's idealistic recommendations ensures its role as the new villain of the piece, there to be blamed for the neglect of India's elderly despite the plethora of remedies on offer. However, the idealistic orientation of gerontology and its solutions to "the problem" of old age are so far removed from India's political-economic reality as to be utopian. The impossibility of achieving such a utopian outcome, Cohen argues, "legitimates the silence of the state" (*ibid*.) and largely precludes discussion

given the impracticable nature of many suggestions. I would argue that this stance is evident in the National Policy for Older Persons which proposes plans so sweeping in their ambition (i.e. the provision of a pension to all those of age below the poverty line) as to demand infinite patience regarding their implementation, if not outright scepticism.

The second ambiguity inherent in Indian gerontology relates to the group of people the discipline purports to serve. Cohen recalls a discussion he had in 1989 with N. L. Kumar, the founder of the NGO Age-Care India. Kumar described how, following his retirement, he found that “there was no aging in India” (Cohen 1998: 87), neither as a category nor as a field of knowledge. In light of this, Cohen argues that the primary task of the new Indian gerontology of the 1980s was “not to study aging but, notably, to create it” (*ibid*.: 88). In the construction of the field then, the old person is “created” both as an object of analysis and as “the implicit beneficiary of an applied social science.” (*ibid*.). In the process, a dissonance becomes apparent between the figure presented and the one served – it is this ambiguity that reflects my contention regarding the implicit division of elderly Indians into senior citizens and the majority old.

The “disciplinary icon”, as Cohen puts it (1994: 139), of Indian gerontology, is the poor, wizened, elderly peasant or slum-dweller, while in most cases the constituency discussed and served by gerontology – and the institutions and NGOs informed by gerontological knowledge – is that of an urban elite (*ibid*.: 87). Cohen argues that this purported object of gerontological concern is erased by the state when:

> [D]espite a plethora of state-sponsored studies suggesting that many old people fall between the cracks of self, family, and government assistance, the only significant form of state support remains a pension for a minority of relatively privileged elderly. (*ibid*.: 88)

And by gerontology, Cohen argues, “when the structure of the scientific discourse of aging limits social analysis to the needs of urban elite elders and their families.” (*ibid*.).

Again, the point here is not one of the empirical truth or otherwise of different discourses, but rather of understanding the means and motivations for their deployment. For gerontologists to write about the problems of the rural poor using a pre-determined analytical framework derived from a predominantly male, urban, upper-middle class perspective is to suggest a universal gerontological object, in the process of whose construction the neediest – the majority old – are obfuscated by the dominant concerns of senior citizens who come to represent India’s elderly as a whole.

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<u>The Middle Class</u>

The risk inherent in my analytical treatment of India’s elderly as divided into senior citizens and the majority old is that I appear dismissive of the concerns of the former group. While my intention throughout this paper is to argue for an implicit bias towards the concerns of urban middle and upper classes in the discourse about Indian old age, this should not be interpreted as a suggestion that those concerns do not warrant attention altogether.

In her recent work on changing experiences of and discourses around motherhood in Calcutta, Henrike Donner argues that there is an academic bias towards the poor in India. In the process, she contends, “middle-class ideologies and practices…being less directly governed by official policies, are constituted as natural, unproblematic and apolitical sites of privilege.” (2008: 34). I would suggest that only the laziest scholarship allows for the constitution of any Indian ideology or practice as apolitical and that doing so calls the calibre

of the work into question regardless of its intent. Nevertheless, I take Donner's point as a necessary one and reflective of my own concerns. It is undoubtedly a risk that in focusing on the concerns of the poor, the more fortunate members of society are homogenised into an abstract site of privilege less deserving of close attention.

In an effort to better acquaint ourselves with this group, it is worth delineating just who is meant by the middle class. Leela Fernandes provides a succinct yet comprehensive summary:

> The rise of the new Indian middle class represents the political construction of a social group that operates as a proponent of economic liberalization. This middle class is not 'new' in terms of its structural or social basis. In other words its 'newness' does not refer to upwardly mobile segments of the population entering the middle class. Rather, its newness refers to a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization. (Fernandes 2006: xviii)

The ways in which socio-economic changes are being dealt with by middle class families is a matter receiving increasing scholarly attention and it lends weight to my ongoing argument for the heterogeneity of India's elderly and the ways in which experiences of old age differ across class and caste.

Donner's (2008) work is especially insightful with regard to the historical continuity of socio-economic change in West Bengal in the context of the upper-middle class family and the ways in which contemporary changes are affecting intergenerational relations. One telling difference between the lives of senior citizens and the majority old centres on women in the labour force. In lower castes and classes, such as the Dalits who Vera-Sanso worked with in Tamil Nadu, women have always been expected to work outside the home in order to contribute to household income. As we have discussed, intergenerational tensions are

increasing as changing agricultural labour practices push the elderly out of work leaving them dependent on inconsistent filial support. For the upper and middle classes however, increased female participation in the workforce is a relatively recent phenomenon (stemming from the higher education of girls, the expansion of skilled jobs and the desire to maintain standards of living in the face of inflation) and one which has notable ramifications for intergenerational relationships and experiences of old age.

As women have less time for elderly care-giving, these responsibilities are increasingly "parcelled out" to other relatives and outside service-providers, leaving some elderly parents insecure with regard to their place in the family (Ganesh, interview, 30 December 2008). Another consequence of female employment outside the home which receives attention in the literature is the increased child-care responsibility placed on grandparents. While some older family members enjoy being needed, most, according to Donner, "are critical of this 'modern' version of grandparenthood and feel exploited. In their view, the pattern violates the expected reciprocity between the generations." (2008: 138). There are policy implications of this new child-care role. Gopal argues that the non-market contributions of the elderly – such as child-care by middle class grandparents – are largely ignored (2006: 4480). With both parents working and participating in the grand project of Indian growth, however, grandparents become a vital national resource. From this perspective, it is in the state's interest to ensure a healthy senior citizenry that is confident in its existence as a moral community contributing to India's development, whose interests are responded to by the government.

Changing ageing practices and patterns of care have been looked at by Sarah Lamb (2007, 2008) who, since her ethnography of ageing in a West Bengal village (2000), has focused on wealthier urban families. Themes include the increasing number of upscale old age homes and the pressures on intergenerational relationships engendered by the desires of newly-weds

for the privacy of their own homes and the international migration of children (2008). This latter topic has also been studied by Fuller and Narasimhan (2007) in the context of the "new-rich middle class" and IT professionals in Chennai.

It is with the interests of both this constituency and that of the majority old in mind that I turn now to an analysis of the work of Dignity Foundation and, latterly, of state discourse and policy regarding the elderly in India.

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Dignity Foundation

Founded by social worker Sheilu Sreenivasan in Mumbai in 1995, Dignity Foundation is an NGO providing "senior citizen life enrichment services" (www.dignityfoundation.com). These include a helpline and companionship scheme for Dignity's target demographic of urban, middle-upper class individuals of 50 years and older (Shah, interview, 1st January 2009).

During an interview, Neha Shah, Dignity's Manager of Social Support Services, told me that "no one thought seniors would face abuse and loneliness", invoking the now familiar narrative of the moral integrity of the traditional Indian family thwarted by the corrosive forces of modernisation. The apparent increase in cases of elder abuse and neglect was attributed to "changing trends" including an increase of nuclear families and the ongoing international migration of children. At no point was it suggested that through its outreach work Dignity was able to encourage older people to report abuse, or to discuss situations of emotional difficulty, which may have existed long prior to there being a secure, supportive outlet for their expression.

The pride with which Dignity announced its recent associate membership of the AARP (formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons) Global Network demonstrates its internationalist orientation, similar to that of gerontology as discussed above. This perspective is further reinforced by Dignity's mission statement which includes the assurance that "the foundation is premised upon scientific developments in the fields of Geriatrics and Gerontology (*sic*)" (www.dignityfoundation.com). Curiously, the AARP press release announcing the affiliation with Dignity asserts that:

> The key insight that goes into the making of the Foundation is the recognition of the vital heterogeneity of the population numbering 195 million. The offer of 24 varieties of services addresses this sociological reality. (Spinweber 2009)

In fact, the "vital heterogeneity" explored throughout this paper is exactly what Dignity doesn't address, hence my contention that it exists to serve only a minority of India's elderly. This is evidenced most clearly by the fact that while Dignity has outposts in six cities, it has no rural presence and, more crucially, disavows the need for one.

Neha Shah's understanding of rural Indian life is an example of the middle-upper class reification of the rural/urban divide and yet is replete with contradiction. On one hand, she maintained that unlike in urban areas, for rural-dwellers, "the closeness of a family is still there" (interview, 1st January 2009)**.** But then she acknowledges that elder abuse certainly exists in rural India, but that stigma prevents its discussion and reporting[1]. When I asked whether Dignity might not have an educational role to play in this regard, Shah responded that

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[1] This reluctance by elderly people to report abuse or neglect by relatives for fear of the shame it will bring on the whole family is confirmed in the work of Sarah Lamb (2000) and Sylvia Vatuk (1990). These findings have discouraging implications for the potential of legislation such as the recent Maintenance of Parents and Senior Citizens Bill 2007 to make much impact, as it excuses the government from proactive responsibility, relying instead on elderly victims of neglect and/or abuse to register an official complaint with a local tribunal.

a lack of rural infrastructure prevented the holding of workshops, that no one would come forward for them and that anyway, “things get solved at the panchayat level”. At the same time as arguing for its inapplicability in rural contexts, Shah explained that unlike NGOs such as HelpAge India which focus more on structural issues of health and poverty, Dignity is more oriented toward “emotional support” and considers itself a “grassroots organisation”.

In a further defence of Dignity’s minority demographic, Shah asserted that this group suffers difficulties with financial and property issues “more than the poor”. The astounding lack of appreciation for the difference between what constitutes “financial difficulty” for the rich as opposed to the poor only confirms that the concerns of India’s majority old lie far beyond Dignity’s remit.

Dignity Foundation offers two residential options for the over 50s. One, aimed at less wealthy members (referred to as “the destitute” by Shah) is an over-subscribed communal old age home in Thane, a suburb of Mumbai. The second, to which much greater attention is drawn in the Dignity literature, is “Dignity Lifestyle” tellingly sold as “A hassle-free retirement township. Not an old age home.” (www.dignitylifestyle.org).

The project immediately taps into the youth-oriented discourse of age-defiance with its description as “the ultimate unretirement plan” and an “active living retreat for seniors” (www.dignitylifestyle.org). The township is located on a 25-acre site in the Matheran foothills in Neral, 90km south of Mumbai. All 62 of the cottages – many still to be built – have been sold. A 500 square foot cottage designed for two people costs 13 lakh rupees, of which 9 lakhs is a refundable deposit. On top of the down payment comes a monthly maintenance fee of 6000 rupees per person, or 10,000 rupees per couple (*ibid*.).

That these figures are beyond the comprehension of the vast majority of India’s elderly is

obvious. For the wealthy, however, with assets and retirement savings, Dignity Lifestyle is a very affordable option. Its insistence on not being called an old age home is important and reflects sociology professor Kamala Ganesh's description of such services as akin to Western understandings of sheltered accommodation (interview, 30th December 2008). Keen to ensure residents "feel worthwhile again, making an active contribution to society" (www.dignitylifestyle.org), Dignity Lifestyle offers the opportunity to volunteer on development projects in local villages. Again, this reflects the discourse that presents these senior citizens as members of a moral community contributing to India's progress. Finally, Dignity's adherence to an internationalist model of ageing is further evidenced by the township's own social worker, "trained by a reputed institute in Australia", who, together with a psychologist, facilitates "the mapping of successful ageing processes of every resident who joins." (*ibid*.).

At the organisation's heart is *Dignity Dialogue*, the monthly magazine which began the initial project. The circulation of printed material serves, as Anderson (1991) has reflected, to bind a community in the imaginations of its members, who in this case reflect a literate, English-speaking elite. The magazine's content is particularly informative with regard to my argument, stemming from Chatterjee, that Dignity is able to mould itself into a community endowed with a moral claim on the state. It does this by adopting a rhetoric of age-defiance that taps into a pervasive youth-oriented discourse of productivity and by presenting senior citizens as a development resource for modern India. The focus is on preserving, or enhancing, functional capacity. As Dignity's mission statement declares, the Foundation "offers structural opportunities to exercise the choice of how to live young in chronologically advancing years." (www.dignityfoundation.com).

The January 2009 edition of *Dignity Dialogue* includes articles such as 'Defy Your Age: Think, Act and Stay Young' which in the internationalist spirit refers to a Harvard study of adult development and concludes with the following:

> It's within your power to live a healthy and blissful life. The choice is yours. Cherish your health. If it's good, preserve it. If it's unstable, improve it. If it's beyond what you can improve, get help. Defy your age, feel young and stay young while you are in your twilight years. (Sharma 2009)

Along similar lines, a news excerpt describes the recent introduction of a certificate course on "empowered ageing" by the University of Pune Interdisciplinary School of Health Sciences and the International Longevity Centre (Dignity Dialogue 2009a). A three month programme includes social, health and economics modules, covering policy awareness, pre-retirement planning and investing among other topics, all tailored to the experience of an elite minority of older Indians.

The same issue of the magazine contains a summary of an AARP Global Network roundtable that took place in Mumbai to discuss the impacts of the global financial crisis on older Indians (Dignity Dialogue 2009b). Reflecting the AARP's praise for Dignity's apparent focus on the "vital heterogeneity" of India's older people we are told that participants came "from all walks of life, be it advertising, pharmaceuticals, investment banking, Railways (*sic*) and even the Airforce (*sic*)". Issues attended to included tax policy and provident and mutual fund deposit strategies.

The meeting also included an indignant discussion of pension provision. A railways retiree reports receiving a combined state and central government pension of 400 rupees a month, inviting the response: "How can a person to survive on that (*sic*)? Isn't it a mockery?" This

legitimate objection to a measly pension nevertheless serves to further illustrate the chasm between the reality of senior citizens and that of the majority old.

Under the National Social Assistance Programme, an old age pension of 75 rupees per month is payable to all those over 65 who are destitute, "having little or no regular means of subsistence from his / her own sources of income or through financial support from family members or other sources." (Government of India 2009b). Those with relatives bound to support them – usually understood as any surviving son (Vera-Sanso 2004: 79) – are immediately ineligible, "regardless of the actual availability, extent and regularity of such support, or however meagre their own earnings." (Harriss-White 2004: 442).

Even for those who do qualify, receipt of a pension is far from guaranteed. In practice, as Harriss-White and Janakarajan found during fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, the poor and elderly are often systematically excluded from the patronage networks necessary to gain access to state resources (2004: 307). Chatterjee concurs that "benefits that are meant to be available in general are effectively cornered by those who have greater knowledge of and influence over the system." (2004: 66). Thus, while senior citizens legitimately bemoan a 400 rupee monthly pension, that they possess the social capital necessary to claim it in the first place is indicative of the divide between them and the majority old.

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<u>The National Policy on Older Persons</u>

A comprehensive expression of state orientations towards India's elderly is found in the 1999 National Policy on Older Persons (NPOP).

The preamble to the NPOP states that: "Demographic ageing, a global phenomenon, has hit Indian shores as well." (Government of India 1999: 2). This rather bizarre phrasing presents

ageing as a global pandemic from which India cannot be shielded, the consequences of which demand action. The "demographic transition" is viewed with a degree of ambivalence: on one hand, more older people are financially stable, are staying healthy and living longer. On the other, many older people are considered increasingly vulnerable, "due to the operation of several forces" (*ibid*.: 3) with which we are by now familiar: "Industrialisation, urbanisation, education and exposure to life styles in developed countries." (*ibid*.). A more nuanced understanding is suggested, however, by the note that the costs of raising children are increasing – taking into account rising consumption demands – which affects family resource flows, impacting support for elderly parents particularly amongst the poor, as discussed above in the work of Vera-Sanso (2007). However, having acknowledged that three-quarters of India's elderly people live in rural areas, the NPOP contains no discussion of the specific factors, such as agricultural transformation, that influence their lives.

While admirable in its ambition, the NPOP remains vague in its tangible content, as suggested up by its desire to promote a "humane age integrated society" (Government of India 1999: 5). It is vocal in its promotion of tax and savings policies and the development of lifelong education programmes - all valid, though relevant to a small minority of India's older people - yet lacking specificity. In the case of the majority old, intentions are sweeping in their vision and utterly unsupported by discussion of implementation strategies or financial and infrastructural implications. These grand objectives include the provision of a pension to all those of age below the poverty line (*ibid*.: 7); the strengthening of the public health system including specialist training in geriatric medicine for doctors and an increase in subsidies for the poor; the training of architects and town planners in older people's needs; and at the more absurd end of the spectrum, the strict enforcement of norms regarding noise pollution (*ibid*.: 10-11).

Sujaya argues that the NPOP is largely biased towards an urban/middle class/formal sector constituency and is responsive to the concerns of a "vocal, visible and powerful" group of senior citizens (1999: 73). To my mind, this bias is implicit less in the policies themselves, many of which do target the poor, than in the rhetoric that accompanies them. Gopal argues, in response to the policy, that an "obsession with productivity and growth" creates a perception of the dependent elderly as a burden (2006: 4480). The NPOP is peppered with phrases such as "a focus on the active and productive involvement of older persons" (*ibid*: 6), the desire to foster "contribution and productivity" (*ibid.*) and "the creative use of leisure" (*ibid*.: 12). A sub-section entitled "Releasing the Potential" describes the 60+ population as "a huge untapped resource" and the intention is stated to make facilities available so that "this potential is realised." (*ibid*.: 15).

It is in this rhetoric of productivity and age-defiance that the NPOP's implicit orientation towards middle-upper class retirees is apparent. As I have discussed, a senior citizen group such as Dignity is able to mobilise in accordance with this rhetoric, highlighting its social contributions and making a moral claim on the state for attention to its concerns. The majority old, on the other hand, lack the social capital, the time, and the objective definitional category of "retiree" necessary to organise themselves into such a community. This ensures that while the majority old constitute by far the largest number of elderly Indians, it is not to them, nor for them, that the state, or Dignity Foundation, speaks.

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My intention throughout this paper has been to demonstrate that the lives of India's elderly are more heterogeneous than the hegemonic discourse representing them suggests. Further, I have argued that an implicit division exists between senior citizens and the majority old in the discourse pertaining to India's older population. My argument sprang from Chatterjee's concept of "citizens" and "populations" which I adapted to suggest that "the elderly" as a target group of governmentality can be understood as divided again into those same two categories.

I challenged the existing "narrative of the Fall" which blames Westernisation and modernity for a perceived decline in elderly life. While acknowledging that changes *are* taking place within families, I argued for an understanding of these experiences as dependent on differential socio-economic factors couched in caste and class. While demonstrating these different realities I also endeavoured to show the ways in which an NGO – Dignity Foundation – and the state are biased towards a construction of India's elderly as that of retired senior citizen.

I argued simultaneously that a youth-oriented discourse of growth and productivity pervades modern India. By adopting this discourse together with a rhetoric of age-defiance, I suggested, following Chatterjee, that Dignity is able to constitute itself as a community with a moral claim upon the state. It does this by presenting itself as an untapped resource to be used in India's development and mobilising as a vocal group in a way that the majority old have neither the social capital, nor the time, to do.

In essence this paper has been about personhood, diversity and socio-economic change. I

have, for theoretical purposes, imagined India's elderly into two rough groups – a vocal minority and a largely unheard majority. But I hope to have shown that not being heard does not imply that no one is speaking. As Sarah Lamb has noted, in the negotiation and contestation that surrounds being a person in contemporary India, we on the sidelines are witness to "the highly ambivalent, multivocal project of working out a meaningful modernity." (2007: 94).

(9794 words)

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