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GERONTOLOGY IN INDIA: THE STATE OF THE ART

Book Review Essay


Tilak, Shrinivas 1989 Religion and Aging in the Indian Tradition. Albany: State University of New York Press. xviii + 226 pp. $49.50 (hardback) or $16.95 (paper).

Until the late 1970s there was little indication in the scholarly literature that the elderly were recognized by Indian social scientists as a category worthy of particular attention, although in the late 1960s the Indian Gerontological Association had been established and the Indian Journal of Gerontology began publication in 1969. When in the early 1970s I began to prepare a proposal for anthropological field research on the social and cultural context of aging in northern India only a handful of scattered books and articles could be cited that bore directly on the issue, although Harlan in an early (1963) article had cast some doubt upon the widely held belief that the Indian social and family system protected the elderly against the kinds of difficulties that beset old people in industrialized countries. A dearth of material was still evident even in the mid 1970s when I began to publish some of the results of my investigations (see Vatuk 1975).

Interestingly, the first book-length work on the subject of aging in India had been based on an anthropological field study of a south Indian village – focusing

upon its elderly residents, but examining their lives within the entire multigenera-
tional context of family, caste, and community (Marulasiddaiah 1969). In
contrast, other research published in India during this period took the form of
rather broadly conceived sample surveys of older persons, utilizing roughly
similar sets of standardized questions on such matters as respondents' living
arrangements, economic situation, health, daily activities, and social and
psychological satisfaction. During the early 1970s two large sample surveys of
rural and urban elderly were undertaken by the Madras and Delhi Schools of
Social Work respectively, with funding from the Social and Rehabilitation
Although their findings were eventually reported in mimeographed monographs,
these were distributed on a very limited basis, and neither study resulted in a
publication. Two other sociological surveys of urban older people – one
focusing on retired male civil servants, the other on a wider sample – were
published in book form in 1975 (Desai and Naik 1975; Soodan 1975). The
authors of these and other studies in this period came out of a social work
background and tended to be primarily interested in the social welfare policy
implications of gerontological research, rather than in testing hypotheses or
developing new theoretical models or methodological approaches for the study
of aging and the aged.

Building upon this foundation of gerontological research there has been in the
past decade, and particularly in the past five years, a veritable spate of books and
articles by Indian scholars on aging issues. There have also been a number of
articles published in American journals and edited volumes that either focus
directly upon the elderly in India and the adjoining countries of South Asia, or
deal with adult life course development in the Indian cultural context, for which
a consideration of the psychological and social concomitants of the aging
process is a central issue (see Beall and Goldstein 1982; Cain 1986; Goldstein
and Beall 1981, 1982; Goldstein, Schuler, and Ross 1983; Hiebert 1981; Kakar

By and large, the current Indian gerontological literature remains within the
general mold that I have described above, in its social work/policy orientation
and sample survey methodology. This is generally true even for the volume
recently issued by the Indian Anthropological Society (Biswas 1987), the
publication of which provided the initial impetus for preparing this review
article on the aged in India. There does, however, appear to be some evidence of
increasing interest in gerontological problems among Indian social scientists
outside of the sociology/social work community. For example one finds in the
books under review a number of articles by demographers, analyzing past and
present patterns in the aging of the Indian population, with attempts to project
future numbers and proportions of the elderly and to explore the social and
economic implications of these trends. There is also evidence of increasing
concern with health and medical issues that were given little attention in the
earlier Indian gerontological literature. Psychologists have also begun to use