Long-lived sociality : a cultural analysis of middle-class older persons' social lives in Kerala, India

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SENIOR CITIZENS ASSOCIATED

INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the persons that together form the selected research population. It touches upon the different definitions of 'older persons' and the difficulties that arise in categorising them. The selection of this research population was made on the basis of several other characteristics besides age, such as income levels and fluency in English. These selection criteria will all be discussed.

As a guiding thread to this chapter figures the Senior Citizens' Association of Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala, India. In 2003, 2005 and 2008 I attended several meetings of the SCA and got acquainted with many of its members. Since it was through this association that I was introduced to many older persons the association offers a good starting point to present the research population. Also, since this association profiles itself to cater specifically for 'senior' or 'older persons' it gives an immediate insight in the research and its complexities.

These complexities include first and foremost the difficulties in defining persons as 'old'. Interview fragments and observations at the Senior Citizens' Association meeting indicate that there are many ways to define older persons and that their own (emic) definitions may be different from the academic and societal (etic) ones.

Another issue that receives the necessary consideration is the socio-economic position of the older persons that I chose to study. The SCA members were representative of the English speaking, highly educated middle and upper (middle) class older persons of this study. However, there were also other associations with a large proportion of members that fell into that same category: the YMCA and the YWCA; the Inner wheel and Rotary, different Pensioners organisations, the Women Muslim Association, the Nair Service Society and many others. Then again, there were also persons who were not active in any of these organisations and whom I met through other contacts.

To really understand and situate the selected research population they need to be positioned as opposed to other older persons. In this chapter I will try to sketch what makes the population under study different from others and in what senses they did or did not constitute a group or category. Also, I will introduce the ways in which other older persons do figure in this thesis through their contacts with the research population.
Finally, the locality of this study: the city of Thiruvananthapuram will be briefly introduced. This will give the reader an idea of the socio-geographical situation in which the older persons of this study found themselves.

A FOCUS ON OLDER PERSONS

> The first Senior Citizens' Association meeting I attend is in October 2003. About 30 minutes before the meeting starts persons enter the hall. In the back of the room there is coffee and tea and a little snack. Those who've come early convene and start their conversations. A couple that has missed some of the previous meetings because of travels abroad is enthusiastically welcomed by some friends. When persons sit down they need no words to follow the same pattern: women to the right and men to the left.
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> Even if I would want to, it is impossible for me to remain unnoticed. Not only am I the only 'white foreigner' in the hall, I am also by far the youngest person present. Beforehand, I have telephoned the wife of one of the board members of the Senior Citizens' Association to ask permission to attend the meeting. She is now the one to introduce me to the women around her. They are interested to hear that their age group forms the research population of my study and some give me suggestions on how to go about. (rewritten observation first SCA meeting).

Older age is a relatively new topic of research or criteria to select a research population in Anthropology. Nevertheless, before older age became a separate study object within the discipline, there had already been studies that addressed the process of growing older or the experience of being old. Ageing in these studies was described next to other societal and individual processes. Old age was then just one subjective identity marker amongst many.[1]

In the middle of the twentieth century, notwithstanding occasional exceptions, scholars from various disciplines signalled a lack of interest in older persons. Several sciences were critiqued for their overemphasis on middle-aged persons and for leaving out the younger and the older (Cohen, 1994: 65). Subdisciplines were consequently created within Medicine and several Social Sciences. Gerontology, Geriatrics and the Anthropology of Ageing came into being. The emergence of these new subdisciplines coincided with growing numbers of older persons and an intensification of policy interest.

Subdisciplines often carry an inherent dilemma. Many times, they sprout as a critique to the mainstream discipline for overlooking a specific topic and demand attention for gaps in knowledge. While their principal aim may be to incorporate the topic into the mainstream, their constitution may accomplish the opposite. This contradiction is also present in studies on ageing. On the one hand these studies will mostly stress the normality of older persons, yet on the other hand their mere existence emphasises age-identity and the unique position of older persons. Subdisciplines focusing on ageing thus unintentionally contribute to the

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[1] A famous anthropological study in which older persons play an explicit role is for example James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1935). In this classic study one of the principal topics is the tension between subsequent generations.

creation of boundaries between different age categories (Estes, 1979). These boundaries that first are constructed in science can later settle in the minds of non-academic peoples .

There are several other factors too that make the category of older persons problematic. By focusing on age alone, one runs the risk to stress and formalise one identity marker and make it more important than others (such as class, gender, caste etc). This overemphasis on age does not relate to most persons' experiences. Also, age is subjective and whether someone feels old is of course dependent on far more characteristics than chronological age alone (Baars & Visser, 2007: 1-7) Thereby, studying ageing and the ideas that persons have regarding growing older automatically assumes that old age holds meaning which may not necessarily be the case (Kaufman, 1986: 7).

Figure: An older couple I spoke with who do not figure prominently in the text

Helen Small, philosopher and author of *The Long Life* puts the complexities of defining what old is eloquently into words: "And yet, old age is also not simply a necessity. Not everyone lives to be old, and not everyone who does so experiences the physical or social effects of ageing in the same ways or to the same degree. In that sense, we may view old age as a contingency, though of a rather impure sort. It is not just a matter of circumstances coming to the agent from outside him or herself; nor is it just a matter of subjectivity, psychology, and feelings. It involves both, but is, strictly, neither" (Small, 2007: 4).

Despite all these definitional complications, research on older persons is booming and attracts great policy interest. The latter since more persons are living longer worldwide in both absolute and relative terms. Because of all these studies, writings and policy measures the category of older persons has become more 'real' than ever before. Societies, India included, by means of general attitudes, media depictions and policy measures—such as forced retirement and transport reductions—are now seeing older persons as an important category.

In quantitative research, statistical and comparative purposes often make the use of numerical age categories equally indispensable. Those that have been used to signify the 'old' in India vary from 45 and older to 60 and more.[2] Yet, because of the obvious arbitrariness of a numerical definition of this sort, some researchers have chosen to use emic

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[2] See for example Irudaya Rajan & Mishra, 1997; Irudaya Rajan, 1989; Vatuk, 1980.

definitions instead: categorising those persons as 'old' who are described as such by themselves and others in their surroundings (Lamb, 2000; Vatuk, 1980).[3] The use of emic definitions entails an acknowledgement of the fact that older persons themselves too have different opinions about whether they are a separate group and whether they should be called 'old', 'senior' or nothing at all. Because I wanted to be careful in simply copying existing scholarly and political definitions, I paid close attention to what the research population had to say about this category and their own position in it.

Nevertheless, in academics as with a game of chess, one cannot ignore the earlier moves of other players. If one desires to describe the heterogeneity of the older population or wants to question the boundaries of the category this can only be done from within. A research that focuses on 'older persons' is thus the only means to a possibly critical evaluation of this particular research category. As background information, therefore the following statics are of interest:

- In the 2001 census, the proportion of persons older than 60 in India was 7,5% in Kerala around 10%.
- In 2004, the percentage of persons older than 60 in Kerala was 13,5% (Government of India Planning Commission, 2008: 348).
- In 1999 Thiruvananthapuram total population included a 10,9 percentage of 60+; in 2004 the percentage was 13,77 (13,62% of male & 13,92% of females) (Government of India Planning Commission, 2008: 348)
- Among older persons in Kerala, close to 56% were between 60 and 70, 31% were between 70 and 80 and 13% were above 80 (*ibid.*).
- For those above 85, the sex ratio is 647 (males per 1000 females).
- Kerala has a fertility rate below replacement level (1,8 as compared to 3,0 nationally) (Government of India Planning Commission, 2008: 75).
- Kerala's mortality rate is the lowest of India.
- The population of Kerala has the best access to health care and the highest proportion of private as well as public utilization of health facilities (NSSO, 2006).
- The average life expectancy in Kerala is 73,6 years for women and 70 for men (Government of India Planning Commission, 2008: 74).

"IT IS MY KNEE THAT MAKES ME OLD"

During the minutes that are left before the meeting starts I sit next to a lady who looks younger than most others. It turns out that she is indeed one of the youngest members and is 53 years of age. The associations' members themselves or their partners need to be over 55 years old and her husband is 63. I ask her whether she

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[3] For more on the definitions of 'emic' and 'etic' see Barnard (1996: 180).

feels 'old' or 'senior' herself. She answers: "Yes, I am a senior. I feel senior. My children are all married, I have three grandchildren and I have retired from work". (Rewritten observation first SCA meeting).

Although this lady of 53 would not have been included in most research on older persons she identified with the older age group and liked to call herself 'senior' and 'old'. At a later point when I interviewed her more elaborately she explained what it meant to be old. Apart from having married children with grandchildren it also had to do with a responsibility for others, she said. In her neighbourhood others come to her and her husband for advice. She attributed this to their "mature posture" and "decent ways" and explained that if they would not take pride in being older, persons would not come to them for advice. She concluded by saying that age did not matter that much and that experience and behaviour were much more important.

Although the members present at the SCA meeting did not believe that old age started right after one's 55th birthday, the limit for membership had been placed at this age. It represented retirement age for those who had held positions in the civil and military services.

Those who accepted the definition of 'old' and applied it to themselves interestingly did so for different reasons. Often mentioned were for instance the marriages of sons or daughters and the birth of grandchildren (Lamb, 2000:43-45; Vatuk, 1980:138-140). A 62 year old grandmother of two later explained that "When grandchildren come, you feel you've become old".

Apart from the birth of grandchildren or the marriage of children, retirement was also indicated as an important event indicating seniority. One retired male government officer was negative about the existence of an obligatory retirement and felt he had been "declared aged" on the day he stopped working. Lata auntie, a female retired auditor had also experienced her retirement as a defining moment but saw it in a much more positive light. She simply stated that she had felt 'senior' ever since that day. Apart from her retirement, she also saw 'experience' in general as something that made persons 'aged' and 'senior'. With a sense of pride she told me how she liked saying she is senior: "It is because of all the experience. I brought up my children very well and 69 is a good age. At this age there are so many things that we have seen and difficulties that we have had".

There were also persons who made a distinction between several different aspects of growing old. Like the 68-year-old male secretary of the SCA, who told me: "[…] I am not senior either. By age and by mental stature I am old, but physically I am fit to do any normal work, including housework and driving the car […]". To these persons becoming 'old' was defined as a full package of ageing mentally, physically and in years. Since these processes

of ageing did not always carry on at the same speed, they conclusively only considered 'old', those persons who had aged in all areas mentioned.

Yet others explained that their physical situation had made them 'old', whether or not they were happy with the term. Mrs. Annie of 69 used this definition most literally:

"It is not so much age that is a problem. It is my knee that makes me old. That really is a problem; the rheumatics in my knee make it very difficult to walk. It makes me slow. I have to ask for help for many things I would like to do by myself".

Annie said she didn't think much had changed for her with getting older. Still, the only thing that really interfered with the way she wanted to lead her life was that knee she referred to. Her rheumatic knee not only made walking difficult but also caused her a lot of pain and made her much more dependent on her co-habiting offspring than she wanted to be.

Finally there were persons who were not happy about one or more of the labels used. First there was my informant Elisabeth who was explicit in her rejection of the term 'elderly':

"'Elderly' is not such a good classification. I may be over sixty, but I'm not helpless and manage very well. It is better to use the word 'senior' if you want to use a word. Upper class Indians don't see themselves as old because they don't need any help. You should use the word 'senior citizen'. You see, I'm very busy and always occupied so I'm not 'old' as such."

Mrs. Elisabeth was not the only one who discarded the term and those who did all made the same link to their high levels of activity. 'I'm not old because I'm active' seemed to be their adagio. Nevertheless, Mrs. Elisabeth was the only one who made such a clear differentiation between two words that were used to describe those who are older. While she discarded the term 'elderly', she apparently had no problem with the term 'senior'. Mrs. Elisabeth's distinction corresponds to Cohen's point that the term 'senior' in India is almost exclusively used for the middle and upper class older persons (1998: 92).

As many have pointed out before, age rarely figured in these emic descriptions of older or senior persons (Kaufman, 1986; Vatuk, 1980; Lamb, 2000; Baars & Visser, 2007).[4] Nevertheless, I was struck by the great heterogeneity of characteristics that persons did associate with being old. Vatuk argues that transitions related to the developmental cycle of the family are much more defining than physical signs of ageing (1995:293). Yet among the persons I spoke with this was not always the case. At one occasion a couple told me about

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[4] Cohen on the other hand writes about a neighbourhood in Varanasi (India) where chronological age is deemed important: "Unlike the many women in their forties in Nagwa basti who were frequently called old, in Nandanagar colony chronological age mattered and persons in their forties were simply not old" (1998: 207). However, even mentions this observation in relation to an exception to the rule: a widow in her late forties who is called old by the other women. Upon questioning, Cohen learns that the woman is called old because of her bad behaviour and family (1998: 207).

the hair colouring products they used. They did not like to look old and felt much younger when their hair was coloured black. Another lady too told me of the hair dye she used. She explained that she felt weak and sick if she had her hair uncoloured. The man of the hair dyeing couple added that he also felt old when taking in his medicines. Others explained they did not like walking with a walker or a stick because it made them look old.

Not only were these definitions of 'being old' quite varied, the values given to them ranged from positive to negative. The relation between health and feeling old for instance is negative. Other definitions used—such as experience, mature posture, having grandchildren or married children—on the other hand entailed a positive relationship.

AGING SELVES

An interesting array of questions that derives from the above, concerns notions of self. For instance: is the notion of self related to time or is it time-less? In other words: is there a self that is directly influenced by age and bodily changes or is the self independent of such exterior forces. Related to that question are even broader issues on the influence of cultural and biological notions of self. If the passing of time does indeed influence a notion of self, is this because of the impact of certain biological changes in the body? How about the role cultural ideas about identity and age play and their influence on the concept of self?

Many views on these matters exist, some related to specific (cultural) situations, some more theoretical. This discrepancy further complicates the matter in the sense that while some of these theories discuss personal and context-specific concepts of self, others contain a more theoretical stance and claim universality. As an example of the latter, several philosophers, for instance Plato and Parfit, have stated how not only the physical body, but also the traits, habits, opinions, desires and fears of an individual are constantly changing (Small, 2007: 11, 31, 156).

According to these theories time directly affects the body and soul and therewith the

Figure: "Coming-of-Age"

notion of self. While these theories hold an undeniable truth, they say nothing about empirical research on older persons' self-identity. In this abstract sense the notion of self is impossible to research among individuals. Therefore, it seems more sensible to distinguish as clearly as possible between abstract (psychological and philosophical) theories of self and empirically researched reflections on individual selves. Therewith, my own theoretical stance towards the self comes close to Tim Ingold's description when he writes that "Like organisms, selves become, and they do so within a matrix of relations with others. The unfolding of these relations in the process of social life is also their enfolding

within the selves that are constituted within this process, in their specific structures of awareness and response—structures which are, at the same time, embodiments of personal identity" (Ingold, 1991: 367).

In empirical research it is only possible to observe indirect indications of an ageless or a changing self. Sharon Kaufman's findings among older persons the US for instance indicated a continuity of self-identity and the irrelevance of chronological age. In her view, persons had a sense of self that was ageless. Older persons said they still felt the same as when they were twenty or thirty, indicating a rather static concept of self (Kaufman, 1986:6). Cohen analyses that "Kaufman's informants seem to structure self against if not through old age: as the Other to selfhood here, old age remains critical to a phenomenology of the body and self in time, ever more the negative space as one ages, against which a continuity of lived experience asserts itself" (Cohen, 1998: 183). These ageless concepts of self had to be related to their specific American cultural context: one that cultivated strong negative stereotypes of aging (Kaufman, 1986:164).

In my own research, notions of the self were only studied indirectly through ideas about what growing older meant and how one could do it properly. In Thiruvananthapuram, as said above, I found that growing older was associated with negative as well as positive characteristics. Although certain (cultural) patterns could be distinguished, there was great individual diversity in what persons associated older age with and how they identified with their age. Older persons recorded chronological age, but did not consider it very important. Only certain birthdays were judged special; amongst Nair Hindus for instance the 84th birthday was celebrated more elaborately because it meant having seen more than a 1000 full moons. Relative age -or the experience of age in relation to others—on the other hand seemed to be quite meaningful always. Most older persons agreed with the label 'old' or 'senior' and many took pride in their seniority. Perhaps this had to do with the positive characteristics that were associated with being older. It seems obvious that such cultural attitudes towards ageing can be of great influence to the way individuals see their ageing self.

Hinduism—more than Christianity and Islam—seemed to offer the most elaborate and explicit set of ideas about a change in attitude, desires and focus associated with older age, as will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. Many of these ideas were also incorporated in a 'secularised' mainstream philosophy in articles in newspapers or popular literature. These works focussed on the specific roles older persons were to perform in society and family. However, there were also articles that advocated the complete opposite, saying that one was only as old as one wanted to be. Help-Age together with the YWCA for example organised a workshop called "Staying younger while living longer". An article (in a SCA newsletter notably) in this vein underlined the importance of not taking oneself to seriously: "People who live on the sunny and beautiful side of life, who cultivate serenity, do not age so rapidly as those who live on the shady, the dark side" it said. These views

represented the many ideas individuals had about the effects of age on their notion of self. Accompanying an article called "Coming-of-age" in *The Hindu* newspaper was an illustration depicting an older woman who sees her younger self reflected in the mirror.[5] In the article the author, K.T. Rajagopalan, wrote how some older persons would do anything to look younger, while others—the truly brave according to the author—did not resort to such cosmetic aids. A meeting between a dentist and a patient is narrated. Both of them initially think they are much younger than the other, but in turns out that they were classmates once. The article reflects my research findings. On the one hand there was a dominant discourse that stressed the importance of adapting one's identity to one's age, in the article reflected by the author's view. On the other hand however there existed great individual variety in how persons saw their own ageing process and whether they acknowledged these changes as part of a changed identity or downplayed their importance and underlined their continuity of self. In the coming chapters this interplay between cultural values and individual variation will further be explored.

Through my initial contacts at the Senior Citizens Association, through asking for persons who considered themselves—or were considered—senior and through asking every person I spoke with whether they considered themselves 'old' or 'senior' I used both emic and etic definitions. Apart from the 53 year old lady at the initial SCA meeting I attended, all others I interviewed were older than 60. Although they themselves mostly used the words 'old', 'elderly' or 'senior' I prefer using the term 'older person'. 'Older' stresses the relativity of age and the fact that even though we may, for practical reasons, use chronological age boundaries in research or membership there is really no external or objective truth about who is old and who is not.

SENIOR CITIZENS' ASSOCIATION

"The Senior Citizens' Association Trivandrum took birth on the 31st of Dec. in the year 1980 as a service activity project of Rotary International. It was sponsored by Rotary Club Trivandrum, North under the name "Senior Citizens' Welfare Association" with the late Smt. Omana Kunjamma as its first President. The bye-laws of the association were framed and adopted in Feb 1981. In 1982, the name of the association was changed to Senior Citizens' Association, Trivandrum. The first meeting was held at Mascot Hotel.[...]

From a nucleus of 15 members, the association stands tall and proud today with a membership of 540. The association is a representation of retired professionals, diplomats, bureaucrats, bankers, advocates, journalists and corporate executives—all achievers in their chosen field of work.

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[5] See http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mp/2002/09/23/stories/2002092300980200.htm

The association has diverse activities for the senior citizen, which include, picnics, health awareness programmes, social service activities, contact programmes and celebrations. Over and above all this the monthly meetings are occasions for the senior citizens to meet, mingle, share time and their thoughts with others like them" (Excerpts from 'Milestones' written by Col. P.S.K. Nair in the SCA members book in 2008.)

Figure: Women at the SCA meeting in 2003

As said before, the SCA members did not represent all older persons in Thiruvananthapuram. As the above excerpts from an article in the SCA members book—a directory with the names and contact details of all members—indicates, the members liked to see themselves as "achievers in their chosen field of work". P.K.B. Nayar, a gerontologist in Thiruvananthapuram and author of a chapter called 'Senior Grassroots Organizations in India' that discussed the Senior Citizens' Associations and the Pensioner's Associations in India wrote about the SCA that the: "[...] senior citizens' associations in India are almost entirely elitist bodies with members drawn mainly from the middle- and upper-income groups"(Nayar, 2003, 200).

Indeed, even at that first meeting, the association straightaway came across as elitist and exclusive. It was easy to see from the way the members dressed, talked and composed themselves. The materials from the sari's women wore looked thick and immaculately ironed. Some women wore expensive looking jewellery although others were without, which as I later came to understand was for ideological and religious reasons. Men wore simple shirts and plain looking pants, but their clothes too seemed of a good quality. I saw many wearing hearing aids and using sticks but no one came across as vulnerable or insecure. Instead there was a certain confidence and calm to the organised way in which the members got their tea, went to their seats and spoke during the meeting that I did not recognise from other public spaces in Thiruvananthapuram. But what was it then, that made these members so visibly different from other older persons that I had seen in the streets?

With a literacy rate of over 90 % in Kerala, these were not the only older persons in the State who were educated and knew how to read and write. Contrary to those from lower economic classes the SCA-members' education however had been exclusively at English-

medium schools. Not only had they finished higher school but they had often continued studying into university. The members of the SCA were therefore nearly all extremely fluent and comfortable in English. The SCA meetings too were conducted bilingually. The more official parts were conducted in English, at other times the speakers switched to Malayalam –the local language in Kerala.

The membership fees of societies like the SCA made it impossible for poorer persons to join. Although, the segregation of richer and poorer older persons in Thiruvananthapuram also remained when free activities were organised and promoted in the local newspapers. Nayar argues that it is because of most SCA's formation out of local Rotary clubs that the associations nationwide primarily cater for middle and upper class senior citizens (Nayar, 2003: 200).

It is interesting to ponder over the name of the association. Why, one can wonder, did the founders of this organisation chose the words 'senior' and 'citizen'? Aren't all inhabitants citizens of India? And what is the difference between 'senior' and 'older'? The latter question has been briefly touched upon above. It seems as if 'senior' has come to be a term used by the middle and upper class to indicate the wealthier older persons. 'Old' on the other hand seems to be used more often in association with poorer persons (Cohen, 1998:92; Nayar, 2003: 199). Why this is the case and how this relates to other places (in India) would be interesting questions for further research. The use of the word 'citizen' is equally remarkable. With the term the members seemed to want to accentuate their position in society. Perhaps this can be linked with the aim of the association to be involved in charity projects, as is discussed later on. "Service to others is an ideal for action that fits well the highly personalized nature of Indian communities within which, paradoxically, men and women are honored as individuals in proportion to their altruism" (Mines, 1994: 171). Although the association was not named by its current members, the choice for 'citizen' seemed to resonate with the current members' stress on their rights and duties towards other persons. It underscored their privileged status in society and accentuated their wish to emanate a certain distinguished, organised, confident, disciplined and responsible way of living.

The Senior Citizens' Association formed a strong community of older persons. Both officially and unofficially, members helped each other in times of need. Officially, through house calls and practical aid by board members and unofficially because through the SCA social relations were fortified and created and information and moments were shared. The togetherness and sense of belonging that the SCA (further) developed, often resulted in members helping each other in times of need. There were active ways in which the SCA tried to further strengthen these forms of interactions. For example, through an intricate telephone scheme through which all members received the telephone numbers of a SCA coordinator in their neighbourhood and of several of the board members. In this way even

members of the SCA who had a smaller personal network of helpful friends or relatives, could call on others in cases of emergency. Another example formed the many activities that were organised and to which members were asked to contribute. These smaller scale activities, such as the performance of a Christmas play or a picnic outing, formed a way in which members could more informally interact. They also functioned to include members who did not openly participate in the larger more formal organisation or the discussions within the SCA. This division between formal activities and more informal activities was to a large degree gendered. During discussions and general meetings men were more openly vocal than women, but during Christmas plays or picnics women were often more actively involved. Women often chose specifically these more informal moments to voice their equally critical comments to the larger ongoing debates within the SCA, whereas the larger assemblies were dominated by certain authoritative male speakers.

Other associations and clubs, such as for instance the Inner Wheel, the Women Muslim Association, the Rotary, the YWCA and the YMCA formed similar close knit communities of predominantly older persons. These communities had been constituted around a particular social purpose or for charity and were not exclusive or specific to older persons. Nevertheless, even though most of these associations' activities were geared towards different purposes, they functioned in the meantime as ways for the older members to keep busy, to be involved, to forget personal worries, to fulfil their duties and to enlarge and intensify their social network. The latter was often explicitly valued as providing security for possible future moments of need.

THE FORTUNATE FEW ARE WITH MANY

Knowledge of English had been the original criterion for selection but this automatically led to a focus on the economically more well-off. Not that the older persons in this study had no financial worries. Some were economically dependent on other members of their family or had little liberty in the way they spent their money. Others worried how they could save enough money to provide a serious dowry for their (grand) daughters. However, all had a proper house to live in and no worries about food or other poverty-related issues. All owned a television, most had a car; all could afford to pay for domestic help or necessary medical expenses and a large majority was at liberty to pay for expensive clothing and airplane tickets as they desired.

It is no coincidence that so many highly educated persons were attracted to the State's capital city. Thiruvananthapuram has since before British colonial times been one of the administrative and power centres in South India (Government of India Planning Commission, 2008: 51). During colonisation Travancore, the state that included Thiruvananthapuram and later joined into Kerala, remained under princely rule as a tribute-paying state (ibid.).The city was known as a centre of intellectual and artistic activities and

subsequent Maharaja's are said to have further contributed to Thiruvananthapuram's centrality. In 1834 the first English school opened and in 1836 an observatory and a charity hospital were established followed by a several more English, Malayalam and Tamil schools as well as an Arts College, the University College (1873) and the Legislative council (1888). Thiruvananthapuram's position as an administrative, educational, artistic and power hub did not belong to the distant past. Ernakulam (formerly known as Cochin), Kerala's other big city, was in popular parlance said to be more entrepreneurial but Thiruvananthapuram still held most of the state's administrative and political institutions. Furthermore the city hosted many cultural, dance, music and film festivals that clearly appealed to those from the educated (upper-) middle classes. It should therefore come as no great surprise that Thiruvananthapuram was inhabited by many with higher education and had among its older inhabitants a large group of retired civil servants.

This study thus has a limited focus on a small and in some ways fortunate portion of India's older overall population. The lives of inhabitants of a state's capital city may appear as far more metropolitan, mobile and impressionable than those of more distant and isolated villages. For long, anthropologists studying India have had a predominant focus on the remote villages and the classical texts of India (Béteille, 1996: 175). Béteille linked this preference to their emphasis on the eternal and unchanging and search for 'the real India' and urged for a counterbalance (ibid.). He wrote that certain social changes in this particular population group are sometimes said to be "confined to a handful of urban, or educated, or Westernised individuals who are in any case not truly representative of Indian society and culture. I [Béteille] wish to emphasise that the class or stratum that I am talking about, whether conceived broadly or narrowly, does not comprise a mere handful of individuals, and that socially, if not demographically, it is a very important part of contemporary India" (1996: 152).

Although it is not an easy task to come to an all-fitting definition of who exactly were included in this study, the selection of participants showed how much of a defined category this group of persons—as opposed to other older persons—did form. The SCA formed a practical starting point to find English speaking older persons, but when I later wanted to broaden the scope it remained relatively easy to find non SCA-members to include in the study. Within the population there was a strong understanding of who belonged and who didn't. Estimates on how many of these educated English speaking older persons in total inhabited the city were difficult to come about. Based on pensioner data[6] and the number of members to the SCA and diverse other organisations and clubs for older persons and pensioners, their number comes to between 8'000 and 12'000 in the city.

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[6] The total population of the corporation itself is around 524,006 (Government of Kerala, 2001) and the percentage of older persons to the total population is around eight % (Irudaya Rajan, 2000). The number of pensioners per 10'000 older persons amounts to 1736,1 males and 394,8 females (Irudaya Rajan, 2000)

Terms that have been coined by other researchers to describe similar populations in other parts of India are 'urban middle class(es)', 'intelligentsia', 'professionals' and 'service class' (Béteille, 1996: 151). The population included retired civil servants, managers and higher professionals but also clerks and other white-collar workers. The term middle-class is in India often used as a category that is both self-referential and a denominator for a cultural project (Donner, 2008: 54). It is not taken literally as a class that is numerically in the middle. To the contrary, whereas India's upper class is extremely small, those belonging to the lower and lower middle classes form the bulk of the country's population. In Thiruvananthapuram, a relatively small population belonged to the highest social classes and exhibited true 'elite' features (Shore & Nugent, 2002: 4-8). They came from distinguished aristocratic or industrialist families that usually had links with the former Maharaja's family. Although they may have had exclusive social gatherings as well they frequently mingled with persons from the (upper-)middle classes. About a handful of older persons in this study belonged to this elite, the rest formed part of an (upper-) middle class.

In a few ways the population under study had a distinguishable and separate cultural identity (Shore & Nugent, 2002). They belonged to relatively affluent families and had enjoyed higher education. Most had held influential positions during their working lives. Also, their networks were a great source of power and there was a sense of interconnectedness. Marriage partners (for children and grandchildren) were sought from within this milieu, as were friends, fellow club members and close colleagues. Through dress, manners, speech and morals they positioned themselves as disciplined citizens as opposed to the 'undisciplined' poorer masses.

Among the older persons in this study age and socio-economic status often seemed to enforce each other, positively as well as negatively. When their socio-economic position made them vulnerable or fearsome, this was increased by their age. Many from the middle classes for instance expressed a fear for the poorer masses in the public sphere. These fears were based on real and narrated experiences of thefts, burglaries and violence. They resulted in an avoidance of certain places at certain times (e.g. the city centre during strikes, the streets in the evenings) and in taking various precautions (e.g. bars before windows or suspicion towards poorer employees). Older persons felt additionally vulnerable in all such circumstances. Perhaps because of failing physical strength, perhaps because of over concerned warnings from children and friends or perhaps because of an accumulation of fearful experiences. But whatever the real or imagined reasons—and perhaps more and larger-scale research could enlighten us further on this issue—it seemed as if their age further enforced their socio-economic position.

When on the other hand their socio-economic position made them respected and powerful, their age seemed to multiply this confidence. The social status that was in such situations attached to their visible markers of wealth and success was further enhanced by

their seniority. In functions and rituals (weddings, funerals but also at society meetings or in restaurants) the older persons of this study were often the first served and the first listened to. Their voices and opinions were in particular situations additionally powerful, because of their respected age as well as their respected social standing. A possible downside to this doubly respected position was for some that they could not go to such occasions unnoticed. For those who disliked the fuss or wanted to be left alone this made certain outings less attractive. However, for most persons I came to know, this was one of the benefits of growing older they felt they deserved. However, it shows how the relations between this research population and the larger society were both multi-faceted and ambiguous. At times highly respected and appreciated, at other times vulnerable and afraid.

INTENSIVE FIELDWORK

In the type of intensive fieldwork that I conducted in Trivandrum, interviews and interviewees are difficult to count. There were the more formal and arranged interviews but there were also short chats and everything in between. There were persons I spoke with only once and there were persons I saw nearly every week during all three research periods. There were interviews with couples during which partners were talking to me intermittingly and there were meetings at which I spoke with many persons at the same time. Finally, there were really frail persons that I could talk to for a few minutes only and there were persons who understood the nature of my research and allowed me to ask almost any question. In short, there was an enormous difference in quality, time, frequency and depth of interviews which a simple statement about the number of respondents does not do justice to.

Any generalisations in this thesis should therefore not be subjected to rigorous statistical analysis and I have made no attempt to do so. What follows are some summary indicators of the scope of my fieldwork, conducted over three separate visits to Trivandrum:

- Over the years I went to 6 SCA meetings, including one picnic. During those meetings I would generally speak to about 5 to 15 persons. These talks ranged from short chats to longer conversations or serious catching up.
- Another organisation I visited regularly was the Women Muslim Association. I visited their premises during several pension distributions and joined the members on house calls in slums. During all these activities I had long and short talks with 3 to 7 members of the association.
- The Inner Wheel (division of the Rotary) was another association who welcomed me at their activities (cooking classes at a school, 2 of their annual fairs, 2 of their board meetings). There were usually 4 to 6 members that I would talk with quite intensively at each of these meetings.

- At other meetings of the All India Pensioners' Organisation, of the Rotary Club, during church and at temples around the city I would also speak to a handful of persons each time, some of whom I would later visit at their homes.
- The longest observations/interviews were two trips to native places. One with an older couple to Alappuzha en one with an older lady to Pathanamthitta.
- There was one couple with whom I stayed for a few days or a few weeks during all three of the fieldwork periods.
- The longest interview was in 2008 with an older lady who was herself a social scientist. She allowed me to stay at her house for three days and two nights and ask her questions continuously.
- Interviews were mostly held at private homes, but also during visits in hospitals, during evening walks, during cooking, in a restaurant, at the (amongst many older ladies popular) artisan fairs, in cars and during many meetings.
- Of the 20 couples and individuals I interviewed elaborately in 2003, I interviewed 13 elaborately in 2005 and 11 in 2008.
- Next to these persons, I interviewed another 17 couples and individuals in 2005 and 13 couples and individuals in 2008.
- When I interviewed a couple it was not always very clear who I would talk to and for how long. Husband and wife would often walk in and out of the interview, sometimes talk to me together and sometimes separately. Some partners of persons whom I got to know and interviewed individually in 2003, became prime interviewees in 2005 or in 2008. As for instance happened with the couple I called Mary aunty and Joseph uncle and who are elaborately discussed in the chapter that bears their names.
- Over the years I interviewed 10 experts more formally and spoke informally with many more.
- The shortest interview that I had formally arranged took no more than 7 minutes and was with a man who was very ill.
- During the three fieldwork periods there was one couple whom I saw or spoke every week. In 2005 there was another couple and two ladies with whom I met up nearly every week. In 2008 I had near weekly contacts with both the couples and one of the ladies. There were about ten other couples and individuals with whom I had regular contact over the phone and in person. Together these were all the persons I called aunty or uncle.
- During my first fieldwork in 2003 only one person I had interviewed passed away. In 2005 I heard of two more deaths of interviewees. In 2008 I heard of 4 more deaths and since I have left Thiruvananthapuram at least three more persons I have interviewed are no longer alive.

MR. AND MRS. NAIR

Economic status, social class and educational level for the most part went hand in hand with caste divisions. Especially in this older population exceptions were scarce. While the selection was based on levels of education, most Hindus largely belonged to two related (sub)castes of Nair (or Nayar) and Menon.

There have been many writings on the ambiguous relation between science, colonialism and caste (f.e. Appadurai, 1993: 326; Srinivas,1996:xxii, Fuller, 2003; Ganguly, 2005). The colonial administration has been described as an aggravator of caste boundaries in the sense that pre-colonial mobility and flexibilities in caste relations were rigidified through administrative measures as censuses and power measures as 'divide and rule'. In colonial times, the common belief amongst scientists was that caste, unlike class, was totally rigid and impervious to change (Srinivas,1996: xxii). In an effort to make the colonised society understandable the colonial administration desired schemes, rules and hierarchies. Nuances, changes, inconsistencies or different meanings to different peoples were complexities that neither the colonial rule nor the first foreign researchers to study this phenomena would stress. Instead the colonially installed censuses that started in 1871 recorded the caste of every citizen and placed them in a definite rank order (Fuller, 2003). This rank order was based on very specific Brahmanic ideas on caste that were taken to be general and objective. The debate among South Asia specialists has centred on the question of how this caste system was given shape during colonialism. The most common understanding nowadays is that "British rule did not create the hierarchical caste system and the Brahmanical ideology that legitimated it, but it did give the system a centrality and inflexibility which it had not had before" (Fuller, 2003: 5). The danger then of knowing about caste before experiencing it lies in taking over implicit or explicit notions of hierarchy, pollution and boundaries that may interfere with an open approach to people's social relationships. The danger of a too open approach to relationships without wanting to acknowledge caste on the other hand may lie in failing to understand the possible power of the collective and importing notions of individualism or egalitarianism to situations where they do not primarily apply.

Since this study was concerned with sociality and processes of meaning giving it was important to leave a lot of room for 'emic', that is the older persons' own, interpretations of caste. When starting an interview with a few background questions to situate persons' experiences I did not ask about caste. Later when an interview was on its way and we were talking about social relationships I would try to get to the topic of caste. This was not always easy since there is a great degree of ambivalence when caste is addressed. Taking this lesson to heart, I was therefore deliberately reticent in bringing up the topic of caste in interviews and left a lot of room for personal interpretations of caste. When asked directly about the importance of caste most would explain that it did not exist anymore, whereas when the

subject came up indirectly the importance of caste in daily life was evident (Béteille, 1996: 153). André Béteille described this ambivalence as "easy to recognise and not difficult to describe, but it has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. It can lead the same individual to deny any significance to caste at one time and to give it exaggerated importance at another" (Béteille, 1996: 153). It was therefore mainly through indirect questions and through observations that I experienced what caste could mean.

Caste was indeed relevant among the research population, as was evident from the fact that when selection was based on level of education only, most Hindus largely belonged to only two related (sub)castes of Nair and Menon. These were originally matrilineal warrior castes that were highly placed in the caste hierarchy in Kerala. This was in accordance with what a number of surveys and studies have ascertained, namely that upper-caste Hindus are still grossly overrepresented in India's upper and middle classes (f.e. Mendelsohn & Vicziany, 1998: 125). It is therefore important to stress, that when writing about caste only a very particular idea and sociality are represented. Caste does not mean the same thing or has the same legitimacy to all the individual members of such a large and diverse population as that of India or even Kerala (Béteille, 1996: 152). To those in the 'higher' regions of the hierarchy the logic of caste may look very different than to those looking up.

Many persons used their caste name as a surname, making them easily identifiable. Among the Hindus in this research the majority by far were called Menon or Nair. This phenomenon of using caste names gave additional force to caste boundaries. Some younger persons I knew tried to evade caste categorising by adopting different surnames or by taking on no surname at all. Still, even for those who did not appreciate talking about caste, questions about family members, descent or one's native place provided answers that were revealing enough in themselves as becomes clear in the later discussed introductions.

Even though caste was attributed to Hindus, several of the values behind it were found among Christians and Muslims in Kerala as well (Fuller, 1976: 67; Bhatty, 1996: 245; Tharamangalam, 1996: 263). Muslims and Christians also practiced endogamy as their marriage practices too were influenced by strict ideas of hierarchy. Even the positive networking that could occur between persons from one caste was not alien to Christians or Muslims. Among Christians for instance the divisions such as those between Marthomites, Jacobites, Syrians and Catholics importantly influenced social life.

According to Béteille, the influence of caste among urban upper and middle class Indians has strongly diminished. Caste figures centrally in certain domains as marriage and politics but has lost considerable influence as an active agent for the reproduction of inequalities. Instead, Béteille argues the focus should be on the role of the family since "caste as an institution is in decline, whereas the family remains one of the strongest institutions of the Indian society" (1992: 14; 1993: 435). Although there is great value in Béteille's call to focus on the family, I agree with Kathinka Frøystad's important

commentaries and additions to his argument. Frøystad argues that Béteille has overlooked another social field in which caste still holds remarkable significance for upper and middle class Indians, namely in everyday domestic life. This omission, she holds, seems rooted in his treatment of caste and the family as neatly separable entities. A separation caused by Béteille's view of caste as a social institution: an arrangement 'whose members acknowledge its moral claims over them'(Béteille, 1992: 18). "But caste is more than this. Above all, it includes the complex and often contradictory notions that make some people consider themselves superior by birth and that regulate their interaction with others accordingly. Once we take caste to include such notions, the distinction between caste and the family gets blurred by the fact that it is primarily in the families that such notions are learned and transmitted" (Frøystad, 2003: 74).

In Thiruvananthapuram, caste related occurrences decennia ago still formed a part of individual life histories and continued to influence next generations. The most extreme case of repression based on caste identity among those from the mostly higher castes that I researched, concerned one lady's recently deceased father. His tragedy had taken place long ago but was still vividly inscribed in his daughter's memory. The man had belonged to the Namboothiri caste and was excommunicated in 1918 from this Brahmanic caste. This had happened to him when he was a young boy because his father had been accused of a serious misdemeanour. The excommunication had separated him from his mother and her family. In 2000 at the age of 90 he had published a book called 'The Laste Caste Inquisition' in which he had related this extreme event. His daughter gave me the book to read in 2008 and told me about the impact her growing up without a proper family/ caste membership had had. This personal history demonstrated how even though social relations may be prone to change, memories of older persons go back a long time. Political willingness to reform may therefore not be enough to really erase a certain caste consciousness.

OTHER OLDER PERSONS

An increase in the older population may lead to an increase in diversity (Biggs & Daatland, 2004:1-5). "That there are more older adults around than at any other time in history is now well known. It is less well understood that, as the population ages, it becomes more diverse. In part, this is because individuals have had time to develop a more integrated and particular sense of self; in other words, who they believe themselves to be. [...]Diversity is also a consequence, however, of cumulative inequalities that have been accrued across a lifetime and now accentuate difference in later life" (Biggs & Daatland, 2004: 1). These cumulated inequalities had in Thiruvananthapuram resulted in great differences in wealth, chances and overall wellbeing between the richest and the poorest older persons. The stark segregation of the most poor and most affluent resulted in two entirely different parallel societies that only scarcely met and in very specific settings. It was because of this visible segregation that I

decided to focus on one of these socio-economic classes of persons only. The social lives of rich and poor were too distinct and too separate to study as one group of older persons. In quantitative analysis these diversities may get lost in the larger picture, as "the macro-picture is inevitably made up of many sub-populations, with their own characteristics and problems not adequately represented when submerged in the whole" (Kreager & Schröder-Butterfill, 2004:2). However, as my aim was to come to an as precise as possible description and analysis of shared cultural ideas on sociality, focussing on older persons with at least some major commonalities seemed most advantageous.

In terms of per capita income, Kerala has seen great poverty alleviation (Kannan, 1995: 702). The state has received fame for some very remarkable demographic and social accomplishments and Kerala's population was well advanced with regards to literacy and education. Rigorous implementation of land reform, public-work programmes, expansion of agricultural labour unions, institution of the labour welfare fund and pension schemes have all contributed to a more equitable distribution of income (Zachariah, 1997:96-98). That said, many in Kerala still faced problems of poverty. Fishermen, rural and *Adivasi* communities as well as and including those from scheduled castes and tribes being extra vulnerable (Government of India Planning Commission, 2008:44, 367). Also there was a clear segregation between those from different economic classes as seen in separate housing and social spaces.

Shortly after I attended the above described first SCA meeting, I decided to focus on the relatively highly educated older persons in particular. I had come to Kerala with no clear expectations of which older persons I was going to focus on. After several weeks in the field however, I realised how strongly I felt about being able to talk directly to persons without an interpreter. Not only were the interviews often so personal and intimate that I thought an additional person present would be seriously disruptive, I also really appreciated the depth and nuances that were possible in English interviews and that I was not going to achieve in Malayalam within the time constraints. The visits that I did undertake to poorer older persons over the years further strengthened the decision to focus primarily on their wealthier peers. In anthropology perhaps more than in other disciplines I believe the researcher has to know his or her strong and weak qualities in order to capitalise on the stronger points and therewith excel in research. My background and character made it possible for me to behave in a way that was noticeably appreciated among the highly educated older persons. They seemed to like their interactions with a young 'girl' from the Netherlands who was interested in their stories and wanted to write them down in a PhD. They didn't mind the fact that I had nothing or little to offer through practical help and did not need any financial assistance from my part. I managed –with a little effort- to speak with deference, dress neatly and behave respectfully in what were considered appropriate and decent ways for someone of my age, gender and background. These same advantages in my interactions with

highly educated older persons quickly seemed to turn into disadvantages when I talked to poorer older persons.

It is true that because of my decision to focus on the financially relatively well-off, I ignored the substantial problems that a majority of the older persons in India face. Since this thesis hopes to make a strong argument against a problematising approach to older persons, one could even add that I probably would not have been so critical of these problematising approaches had I studied poorer older persons myself. This is however where I would like to object. It is very easy to accept that poorer older persons have more problems than richer older persons. However, that observation is at the same time an indication that these problems are more related to poverty than to ageing itself. In poverty, (the fear of) loosing physical capabilities entails many more vulnerabilities and struggles. Growing older may then increase one's dependency or susceptibility to additional hazards. The two attributes, older and poor, may then enforce each other in creating even more problematic situations. However, it is important to remember that of these two characteristics, poverty is problematic in itself whereas ageing is not.

To conclude I decided not to include poorer older persons other then when they came up in the lives and stories of the richer persons studied: this was foremost the case as domestic workers and as recipients of charity works. Henceforth when I speak of older persons, unless I explicitly note that I am speaking of all older persons in the city, I actually mean the research population of highly educated English speaking middle and upper class older persons.

The domestic workers in Thiruvananthapuram, as all over India, were commonly called 'servants' or 'maidservants' as opposed to 'paid domestic worker' or any other term that might be indicative of a more equalised and formalised contractual relationship (Ray & Qayum, 2009: 4). Because of its popular usage as well as the real sense of power disparities that the term 'servant' seems to contain, I have used it—albeit somewhat hesitatingly— throughout this thesis. The relationships between servants and their older employers was crucial to the livelihoods, overall wellbeing and domestic possibilities of the latter. Servants thus formed a constant and much talked about presence in the older persons' everyday lives.

COMING AND GOING

As the president starts to speak, the chattering slowly fades away and audience members start to listen. The president now formally opens the meeting and the secretary is asked to make several announcements. Two members have passed away this month. Their names are called and there is a moment of silence so that members can pray for them in their own ways. Also, several new members have joined the association and are called forward to be publicly introduced. The new members receive a flower and a certificate as welcome. They bring the flower to their head

and say 'Namaskaran' to the audience before they return to their seats. (Rewritten observation of first SCA meeting).

At all meetings I attended similar notifications were given to the members. Another way through which members were informed about the different events in other member's lives was through the SCA's monthly newsletter. The SCA was not unique in this regard. When persons moved, partners died, members had an important birthday or were staying in hospital this was communicated through associations.

Persons who were new to the association were often known by most long-standing members. In fact, it often seemed as if all highly educated older citizens of Thiruvananthapuram could, through their connections, place each other. The SCA, as well as many other associations, acted as a platform where persons could further strengthen or renew their contacts with relatives, old school friends and former colleagues. The SCA provided thereby in many ways a formalisation of existing social relations and informal networks. This common history of many of the SCA members led to an 'embeddedness' that involved even more persons in these relationships (Milardo, 1988).

Spatial mobility played an enormous role in the lives of older persons in Thiruvananthapuram. There were links between persons' great mobility and the popularity of social associations. The SCA for instance functioned as a social portal to many who had lived outside of the state. Most older persons had spent parts of their lives living in other places, whether it was in other states or other countries. When they came (back) to Thiruvananthapuram the SCA and other societies enabled them to quickly re-establish contact with older acquaintances and friends. Instead of having to visit old acquaintances individually through house calls they could first socialise with a larger group. This offered opportunities also for those who were still very mobile and moved between different homes. In addition, it increased the number of social contacts for those who did not have the time, energy or means of transportation to make too many house calls. The other way in which the link between mobility and associations was strengthened was because of the absence of many children. Just as their senior parents, the adult children were very mobile. A majority of the older persons had children far away. When children were gone, other social relations became even more important. Friends, other relatives, neighbours and fellow association members made up the largest part of most older persons' social lives. The great mobility of the members and their children made the older persons in Thiruvananthapuram a dynamic population group for whom associations formed a stable social platform.

CONSTRUCTING THE FUTURE

In November 2003 the Senior Citizens Association holds its annual general body meeting. This is the second meeting I attend and will become the most memorable

one. After the silent prayer with which the meeting is opened and the secretary's announcements there is a debate and vote on the construction of a proper SCA building. Since the SCA holds its meetings in a rented hall with few facilities plans have been devised to construct a building that would offer more possibilities.

After the building plans have quickly been introduced, the members are asked to react. In total seven men and one lady go to the microphone upfront and express their views. The discussion that follows is emotional and impressive.[7] The first man to speak is against the project. "We are all of an age that we should reduce the burden that we take upon ourselves" he explains. When persons grow older they should retire and retreat from taking on new responsibilities and new plans. "It is up to the younger persons to take on such challenges and be fully involved in all aspects of life". He warns of the many problems that can accompany the process of building and managing a property. The man believes that the members of the association will not be fit and strong enough to take good care of the project and cautions that there will be a constant need for money and care even once the building is raised.

Few persons seem to agree with the first speaker. The audience becomes restless and some persons shake their heads in disapproval. A next participant to the discussion starts with a story. "I know of a doctor whose wife has passed away and who does not get along well with his children. This doctor has bought himself a coffin and a cemetery spot right next to his wife's. His purpose is not to bring any discomfort to anybody once he dies. In fact, he even keeps the coffin close by in his office. I once asked him: So, what do you plan to do when you feel unwell? Are you going to lay down in the coffin?"
The assembly reacts with laughter, the speaker is charismatic and his story is told with a wink. After the joke the man continues on a more serious note and says: "Any project that you start will bring along many problems. In fact, all the great accomplishments in the world brought along problems. But this does not mean that we should not start any project for fear of the issues that might come along. Problems are to be overcome. Or else nothing great would have ever been achieved."

The members applaud and the women I sit next to nod and chat in agreement. This

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[7] Incidentally it is a showcase of the famous yet outdated Gerontological debate in academics on activity or disengagement. The 'disengagement theory' was originally put forward as a universal development for all aging men and women by Cumming and Heming in 1961. In time, modifications have been made to allow for more variation, depending on the social or cultural milieu (Vatuk, 1980; Tilak, 1989). Shortly put, the two theories prescribed two paths of ageing: one in active involvement and one in social, mental and at times physical disengagement. The two theories have been rightly criticised for being far too simplistic and offering little individual and cultural variations in reactions to ageing.

approach clearly corresponds more closely to their own feelings and ideas on the matter.

The last person to speak is the association's president. He begins to say that the association has about half a dozen retired engineers among its members, along with ex-planners, architects and economists. On top of that many members are in a position to donate land or money to the cause. He then asks: "If a society with so much talent and experience is not capable of constructing a building than which society is?". Again, persons around me nod in agreement as he continues: "It may not come up within my life-time and most of us may no longer be around at the completion of the building but this is not something we are doing for ourselves. We are doing this for the association and the association will be around. […] There are many difficult decisions in life that have to be taken. When I was 30 I was hesitant about marriage, thinking how will I ever be able to raise a family and get married to a woman. Now, after so many years of marriage I am happy I decided to marry, even though it was a difficult decision at that time. If we join together anything is possible".

I am not the only person who is left with goose bumps at the end of his speech. The optimism and willingness that the president expresses visibly affects many members. After this last speech the matter is voted upon. Of the nearly hundred persons present, five vote against the proposition. All others are in favour and finally the project is in principal taken on.

The above described discussion at the SCA meeting centred on the different roles older persons should take on. Should they develop ambitious plans and be actively involved in all aspects of social life? Or should they be more aware of the finiteness of their current lives and therefore abstain from taking on new responsibilities and activities? Interestingly, these two standpoints show some convergence with two theories that have long divided Gerontological thinking: activity theory and disengagement theory.

Nowadays, researchers on the topic of ageing and older persons agree that these two stereotypical notions are no way near enough to describe the complex and different attitudes and approaches of cultural groups and the individuals in them. With respect to India, several scholars agree that the religious scriptures of Hinduism in particular do seem to promote a way of ageing that has some significant parallels with the original 'disengagement theory' (i.e. Tilak, 1989:3; Lamb, 2000: 142; Cohen, 1998: 21; Tharu, 1999). They refer to the Hindu interpretation of life as a series of stages; a cultural construction that attempts to overcome the extreme opposition between the this-worldly life and renunciation by

incorporating the positive features of both (Tilak, 1989).[8] But even then the realities of the social structure within which older persons live make disengagement impossible as well as undesirable (Vatuk, 1980: 148).

At the SCA discussion both extremes and many viewpoints in between were represented. Although the women I sat next to had clear opinions on the matter and voiced these through nodding in agreement or through mumbling in disagreement, the men were more actively participating in the formal discussion behind the microphone. Interestingly, all speakers referred to their role, position and possibilities as older persons. No practical or financial issues were mentioned as primordial in the decision making process, instead the most important question to both those in favour and those in opposition was: is this something we—as older persons—should do. In later chapters we will see how this discussion fitted well in older persons' stress on the importance of duties.

TALK OF OLD

During the other SCA meetings I attended in 2003 and 2005 many different topics were discussed. Every once in a while a high-profile political figure was invited who then spoke to the members about policy measures for older persons. I attended several meetings during which specialist doctors explained a specific health disorder that was current among older persons. Talks were organised by doctors on asthma and Alzheimer's disease. Also, more general experts were asked to talk about the topic of older persons in general. All talks included a lot of data and information about the growing numbers of older persons in the world, India and particularly in Kerala.

In August 2005 I sat in on a more commercially oriented meeting. A few days before the meeting, a sponsored SCA walk had taken place that was organised by a large bank. The director of the bank now thanked the association and all those involved for their enthusiasm. He urged the members to come by the bank to open a savings account and added that they also sold insurance products. He was followed by an employee of yet another bank who started his speech by saying that he did not find the audience old at all. He encouraged the members to stay young through activities and interaction. He urged them to have this interaction at his bank also through opening a savings account or starting some small business. In all these talks much more time and attention was devoted to 'the old' in general than to specific experiences of specific older persons. The old were seen as one category of persons with either problems—as with the health talks—or potential—as with the commercial talks. The information on the rising numbers of older persons was thereby taken to be a guiding principle.

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[8] The four stages consist of 1) studentship, 2) married life, 3) withdrawal of family relations, move to the forest and the practice of chastity and 4) complete renunciation proper. The last phase is usually postponed to future lives (Tilak, 1989).

This particular focus was paralleled and maybe even strengthened by the generalising focus in many current policies and researches on ageing. When the topic of ageing is discussed it is often taken to mean population ageing instead of individual ageing. The first is not only determined by the number of persons within the society who have reached a certain age. As a relative concept it is also influenced by the number of children and middle-aged persons in that society (Irudaya Rajan & Mishra, 1997:222). Even studies that express an intention to discuss individual ageing processes will mostly refer to population ageing for legitimisation. Information on the growing number of older persons in a particular society are accompanied with a list of the possible problems or challenges that this demographic change can throw up. To underline the impact this population ageing may have, words as 'an agequake'[9] or a 'grey tsunami'[10] are at times employed. Forecasts on the impact of growing numbers of older persons receive more academic, societal and political attention than the personal realities of ageing (Kreager, 2004: 1).

The great problem with this one-sided focus on population ageing is that it can result in an uncritical stance towards stereotypical ideas on older persons. If persons are studied primarily on the basis of their group-identity, there is no pressure to seriously evaluate the assertions made about the common behaviour, attitudes and experiences of the individuals belonging to that group. Both negative and positive stereotypical descriptions of older persons lead to 'ageism', a bias towards older persons (Butler, 1969; Tornstam, 2006). A more wide-spread academic and popular interest in the experiences of individuals would help to correct this imbalance.

A SILENT PRAYER

Associations like the SCA, but also the All India Pensioners Organisation or the Rotary Club, did not cater for one religious group only. Muslims, Christians and Hindus were all welcome. Although the Senior Citizens Association did seem to attract persons from the latter two religious backgrounds primarily. This was also the case because there were fewer highly educated older Muslims in Thiruvananthapuram than there were highly educated Christians and Hindus. Many members of the SCA were also actively involved in creed-based associations but it was in places like the SCA that the inter-religious relationships were further developed.

Because of its geographical position close to the sea, Kerala has for very long been exposed to other cultures, both from within and outside of India (Zachariah, 1997:95). The state's population is far from homogeneous. In the state and according to the District Census Handbook of 2001 Hindus form the majority (57,3%) but there are large groups of Christians (23,3%) and Muslims (19,3%) (Registrar General of India, 2001). For the

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[9] HelpAge International, 2000: 3-5.

[10] 233 hits in Google's internet search machine in April 2008, 9.630 hits in May 2010 and 31.000 hits in January 2011.

Thiruvananthapuram district these percentages are: 69.9%, 12.8% and 17.3% (Registrar General of India, 2001:510-511). This relatively diverse religious and caste composition has been mentioned as a reason for several successful public policies (Zachariah, 1997: 96).

It was not only in politics but also in associations like the SCA that persons had found means to a productive co-existence. Thereby religious celebrations were not banned but rather utilised as moments of encounter. At the Christmas celebration of the SCA for instance members of different creed joined together in a play or in singing. And when meetings were opened it was either with a silent prayer, with a spoken meditation or with a devotional song that appealed to persons from different religions. Notwithstanding the many crucial differences between the various faiths, most older person's social lives were touched by this plurality. The richer, highly educated older persons in Thiruvananthapuram had more social contacts with richer, highly educated seniors from other religious backgrounds than with poorer older persons from the same denomination. Associations and clubs as well as neighbourhoods, schools and shops contributed to the mixed social landscape as represented in this study.

There were individual differences in how persons from different religious backgrounds interacted. Some persons associated mainly with persons from their own denomination, others had relations with persons from all religious groups. The amount of inter-religious contacts also differed per context or situation. University, the neighbourhood, the SCA and many other clubs offered a stage for inter-religious contacts whereas the family and the church/mosque/temple offered a platform that was obviously less diverse. In the relatively small sample of this research, I noticed how the only persons who had no significant contacts outside of their religious community where a few Christians. This may plausibly be an indication of a larger phenomenon since many social institutions, such as schools, hospitals and old age homes had a Christian base. Christians could therefore have more exclusively 'Christian' activities. Many Hindus and Muslims on the other hand had gone to Christian schools and had therewith developed contacts with persons from other religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, I also came to know several Christian ladies who interested themselves for Hindu teachings and followed Bhagavad-Gita classes. Some individuals simply had more interest in inter-religious meetings or enjoyed activities that happened to attract a diverse audience.

Finally, the decision to focus on all three major religious groups (and several smaller sub-dominations) was partly empirical and partly ethical or principled. Through the SCA meetings and my attendance of several other organisations (such as the Pensioner Organisations and the Inner Wheel) it became clear that the social lives of many of these middle and upper class older persons included relations outside the religious community. Even if these relations were sometimes discriminatory or selective and not always comparable to more religiously homogeneous relationships, they existed. Because they

existed, I felt strongly about acknowledging them. Had I focussed on one religious group only, I would have ignored this important social dimension to most older persons' lives. Perhaps this would in itself have been a permissible and perfectly justifiable simplification. However, religious groups are already too often segregated in the political arena (in India as elsewhere) with possibly dangerous outcomes as a result. Thus concluding; whereas I judged the gap between richer and poorer too large to overcome in this research, I nonetheless took up the challenge to incorporate the possible gaps between the different religious communities. I was thereby inspired by many of the older persons I spoke with who had included persons from the different religious communities in their intimate private lives.

DRIVING HOME

At six o'clock the meeting is officially concluded. For the last fifteen minutes already, individuals have started to leave the venue. Once the meeting is over most persons quickly go outside to meet their driver or find their car on the parking lot. Only a handful of persons stay a little longer to evaluate the meeting and the intense discussion about the building project. The meeting venue is in the middle of the city centre, just of the central M.G road. Within a few minutes it is empty and all the cars have left. (Rewritten observation of the SCA general assembly meeting).

As I came to learn through later interviews, most of the members disliked driving by night. Especially those who were driving themselves, found it increasingly problematic to drive after six o'clock. The lights of approaching cars and the difficult sight on streets without proper lighting made them nervous. Several persons I later talked to told me it was their main reason for not attending such meetings in the city anymore.

Figure: A street in one of the calmer residential areas in the city

Most older persons lived in large residential areas just outside the city centre. Since I almost always interviewed persons at their own homes, I came to visit many residential areas throughout the years. The older persons I spoke with were mostly living in six neighbourhoods in different parts of the city; Vazuthacaud, Sasthamangalam, Kowdiar , Kuruvankonam, Kumarapuram and finally Ulloor. Apart from Vazuthacaud these neighbourhoods

were all at quite some distance (ranging from 1-8 km) from the centre of Thiruvananthapuram. The neighbourhoods were often composed of houses for the middle classes as well as houses for the upper classes. The latter often with a private guard and high walls around the property. In between there would sometimes be a handful of cottages for the poor, often combined with a little shop or enterprise. This was nothing however, compared to the concentration of poverty in some other parts of the city. They were just the limited exceptions to the segregation that otherwise existed in housing between the best-off and the worst-off. The state and comfort of the houses I visited varied widely. While some houses were commonly named 'modest', others were seen as extremely luxurious. While some were really well maintained others clearly needed a new layer of paint and finally, while some were clean and organised, others were a bit sticky.

A significant minority of the research population lived in multi-storied apartment buildings. Over the years more and more older persons sold their family homes for such new-built flats. Throughout the city these high-rise properties increased in number as well as size as the first buildings built early in the 21st century were mostly a maximum of ten storeys high but in 2010 one of the largest property developers called Heera Groups announced the construction of several nineteen storey flats.[11] Older persons were specifically attracted to these new forms of living because of the increased feeling of security they got from having neighbours close by and a collectively employed 'watchman'.

Although there were small differences in heights in almost all neighbourhoods, an increase in footpaths for pedestrians made these neighbourhoods pleasant venues for a morning or evening stroll. Small and larger temples were found near most of these residential areas, making an attractive destination for some persons' strolls. Churches and particularly mosques were less densely spread and were mostly located in the city centre or on the main roads.[12] Even though a great number of buses crossed this capital city, most buses did not come into the hearts of these residential areas. This made auto rickshaws a more popular mode of public transportation for those older

Figure: One older couple had sold the land and the old house in the front and had moved into the new apartment building in the back.

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[11] See www.heeragroup.com

[12] See google maps for Thiruvananthapuram and fill in mosque, temple and church to see the differences in distribution.

persons who did not employ a fulltime driver or drove by themselves.

Many of the houses had gardens with a few (coconut, mango, papaya, avocado) trees. Several of these outskirts of the city had up until recently been rural areas with lush vegetation and animals. Now, there were few wild animals to be seen, only birds and occasionally snakes. But even otherwise Thiruvananthapuram was a green capital city, although many older persons worried about the fast rate at which trees where disappearing for building sites. It's location between sea and hills and around the equator gave Thiruvananthapuram a favourable position to profit most from the two monsoons. All three visits I made to Thiruvananthapuram included at least one monsoon. To experience the true variety of the climate—which its position on the equator made anyhow limited—I should have included the hottest period (march—may), but this was never practically feasible. Many told me they were feeling better once the rains had freshened up the air. The rains where thus mostly welcomed and appreciated by the persons in this study even though they could make life complicated for others in the city. The poorest neighbourhoods, mostly situated downhill and with bad drainage systems, as well as part of the city centre, were for instance regularly flooded by monsoon rains.

CONCLUSION

The Senior Citizen's Association was one of the very many social associations for older persons in Thiruvananthapuram. Even though the category of older persons is easy to contest analytically, older persons in Thiruvananthapuram found their seniority an important definer. Seniority was considered more important than age, as it was in relation to younger persons and in their positions as retirees and grandparents that they most strongly experienced this component of their identity.

Older persons' identity was nevertheless made up by many more components than their age or seniority alone. Older persons, as defined 65 and older or by self-definition, were a very heterogeneous population. Their economic position in particular had great and daily ramifications that made the lives of rich and poor both segregate and different. Although I initially selected older persons for their ability to speak English and thus on the basis of their education and indirectly on their economic position, this social segregation and the great differences in situation between poorer and richer led me to restrict myself to the study of the latter's sociality only. While this population of highly educated older persons was still extremely varied in their health, religious and economic situation, their familial background, their gender, their age and many more personality traits, at least they interacted amongst each other with great frequency and therewith gave shape to their own common sociality.