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

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MARY AUNTIE & JOSEPH UNCLE

INTRODUCTION

Old age is often associated with the physical problems that can accompany the last years of life. From the previous chapters it is clear that these problems can be very different in nature and do not befall on all older persons equally or at all and that it is therefore important not to speculate too much on the general health of all seniors or on an inevitable and universal demise in well-being.

This chapter introduces Mary auntie and Joseph uncle through a description of our meetings, my observation material and direct quotes from our conversations. Mary auntie and Joseph uncle were without a doubt in a difficult position because of their failing health. An insight into their situation may allow us some understanding of how social relations can work in times of distress. In more dependent times, care becomes an even more dominant aspect of social relations with kin, friends, ‘servants’ and acquaintances. The conversations I had with Mary auntie and Joseph uncle in 2003, 2005 and 2008 provide an interesting starting point to think about issues like dependency and care relations.

Research knows great limitations when it comes to an understanding of ill or bedridden older persons. Dependency, pain and fears are not always easily expressed and there are additional communication difficulties when persons have little energy, patience or memory. Additionally, a researcher herself may find it complicated to ask appropriate questions without disturbing those who seem to be fragile. To illuminate these difficulties and challenges and to so allow for nuances and incongruities in the analysis of these conversations this chapter consists of a rather lengthy and inclusive account of my visits to Mary auntie and Joseph uncle. The changes that occurred throughout the years; the silences in our conversations; the difficulties I sometimes had with reacting to some of Mary aunties utterances and the development of our relationships all become more clear in an integral coverage instead of a fragmentary one. Although some details of these conversation may seem unimportant, it is those details that form the context within which there is meaning to words as well as silence, repetitions and understatements.

FIRST VISIT IN 2003

In 2003 I received Mary auntie’s telephone number from Ginny, her niece. I had told Ginny that I was hoping to interview the oldest old who were not that active any more and she had replied that her aunt, her late mother’s sister, whom she visited on alternate days fit that description.

When I called Mary auntie¹ for the first time she said that she was still alive by God's grace. I could come by a few days later on a Monday morning at ten o'clock but had to call again before coming. When I called again that Monday morning Mary auntie didn't seem to recall my name and my intentions, so I explained them again and asked whether I could come by that same morning. Mary auntie agreed—but to what?—and I decided I would explain my purpose again upon arrival.

When I arrived an older man was on the telephone, Mary auntie's husband Joseph uncle. He told his wife that there was somebody to meet her and I was told to sit on a chair on the veranda. For about ten minutes I sat and waited while Mary auntie was finishing her bath. I was looking at the well-kept garden and had a chat with Joseph uncle. He asked me about my research project.

After he had enquired about my intentions Joseph uncle went inside and told his wife who seemed to have forgotten my earlier explanations that I was doing research about 'old women'. Only when Mary auntie was ready to receive me by the table Joseph uncle came and told me to come and sit next to her. Below are excerpts of our first face-to-face conversation:

-I was taking a bath. I need help with that now, I am too sick to do it by myself. So the servant helps me with it. After my bath I am so tired, it takes so much energy to take a bath. I am ready to go now. It is time to go to my heavenly home. All my dear ones are there now. My father and my mother and my sister and so many friends of mine. All there in the heavenly home waiting for me. Take me God.

How old are you now?

- I am 84 years old now. Whatever you have wanted me to do God, I have done it for you. I can't do anymore. Please let me go.

The Lord Jesus is with me.

I used to be very active. I was working in the hospital as superintendent in Gujarat. I've worked very hard for my Lord. My only intention was to give joy to other people. But our birthplace is there [points to the sky] and we also should return there. In this world we have nothing.

Where were you born?

- I am from Kerala, Thiruvella.

And how old is your husband?

- My husband is 86...87 years old.

Do you have any children?

¹ At that time I still addressed Mary auntie as Mrs. Isaac. It was only in 2005 that I started to call her auntie, especially after Joseph uncle referred to his wife as auntie.

- We have one daughter who lives in Ernakulam, she has a son who is in 8th standard. They are so nice. The daughter is nearly 40 years old. Very often she comes. This morning the two telephoned already. Grandson also spoke to me, he is so excellent.

[...]

Is your husband also wanting to go to his heavenly home?

- My husband is a good man, but he should be more prepared to go. He is nice and he knows God, but he should be more ready. People focus too much on earthly things.

When I was seven years old I came to know the Lord. My parents were so lovely, they knew the Lord. My only sister is now with them in their heavenly home. O God, I am ready. Come and take me Lord.

Life is all passing away.

[There is a sound from upstairs] Those are the people upstairs. We had so many rooms lying bare and then my son-in-law [?] said: “ why don’t you rent the upper part of the house?” So now there is a husband and wife and one child living there. They don’t use this staircase but use a separate entry. I see them often.

Who else live in this house?

- Husband and I live here. The servant lives with us. I need help, I’m helpless.

Do you remember how long you have been in this condition?

- four or five years...I don’t remember too well. I’m losing my memory.

During my hospital days I had a lot of friends. Whatever I could do for the Lord I have done.

With which things do you need help?

- If I want anything I can call her [servant]. If I don’t need help I don’t call.

Do you get visitors sometimes?

- Yes, people come and visit. Mostly people who know the Lord.

I told him [Joseph uncle] I wanted my bed in the living room. Only here I can see the sky, my heavenly home and ask the Lord to take me. Also I can see people passing by from here. But everybody is moving around being busy. People think this is our eternal home, but it is only temporary. I have no earthly desires any more.

Would you like to live with your daughter or are you more happy here?

- My daughter says: you should come here, but then what about him? Then she says you should both come. But why should we leave a comfortable home.

And would it be possible for her to come and live with you?

- She has her job, how can she leave? I like talking to my grandson so much. I call them once a day, at least. He [husband] says the telephone bills are too high and I should stop calling so much. But I don’t care, I have to talk to them.

[...]

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

- My eldest brother is 94 years old now and he lives with my other brother who is 81 and his

wife. They all live together. The oldest brother is bedridden. He is very loving. He told me that he wants to come and see me, with tears in his voice. I told him, we are not able to see each other now, we just have to wait for our heavenly home so that we can see each other again. My younger brother was also telling me over the phone that he wanted to come. I told him, don't come. It is dangerous for you to come by travel, I don't want you to come. We'll see each other again someday. That's enough. They all live in my native place.

We telephone each other often.

[...]

Did you find a servant easily?

- No, it is very difficult to find a good servant. She is bad behind my back,² but I have to ignore it because I am helpless.

Are you able to go to Church?

- I used to be the secretary of the Women's fellowship. I was so active. Now I can't go to the church any more. The priest comes and so many godly people come here. But the priest has a very big parish to attend to, so a big responsibility. If I call him, he'll come any time.

But it is time. I want to go to my heavenly home. God, take me.

How does your daughter react if you say this to her?

- My daughter wants me to stay and stay and stay. She tells me to not say these things and then I tell her, I won't go by myself but I want Him to take me.

[...]

How do you manage to keep the garden so nice?

- Oh, it used to be so much nicer. Compared to the gardens I had, this is nothing. But there is a boy in the neighbourhood. He comes to take care of it.

[Joseph uncle came and joined us at the table. At first he was very reluctant to speak perhaps because I told him I was focussing on women. After some time he talked too]

How long have you been living in Kerala now?

- We have been in Kerala for 25 years now. First we were in Gujarat for service. Then we went to Puna, that is a really nice place but we stayed there only for one year. Then one year in Mumbai and later in Ahmedabad. I was manager of the airlines, Indian Airlines used to be the only airline in India. Now, I'm only working in a small way.

When did your daughter come for the last time?

- Only 2/3 days ago they came. The daughter and her husband. The daughter brought a really good lunch she had made herself. In the vacation they will take their son with them. He is in puberty now, so she finds it difficult. But they make these young children study so much. Only study, study.

² I interpreted this comment as 'She does not work when I'm not watching' but it could also mean that Mary auntie accused her servant of being dishonest or disrespectful.

[After another almost prayer-like repetition of 'heavenly home, I want to go', I ask Joseph uncle:]

Do you feel the same way about this?

- We are in the evening years of our life. Sometimes that is difficult. A grand time we had. We have nothing to complain, in every stage of our life we had God's blessing. Even after retirement we still had a really good time. But what they say is: After 80 is the Grace period. God has given us some extra time to prepare.

How do you prepare?

J: There are different ways of preparing.

M: For me there is only one way.

J: You think about what you have done and you pray: Give us a peaceful time. Any time is good enough now. We have prepared a place in the cemetery. We are ready.

M: You must have that hope.

J: It is a difficult time for her brother. He is bedridden and can only lie down.

M: Anybody would be sad under those circumstances. There must be somebody to look after him, he can't do anything himself. That time should not be there. The time of being dependent should not be there.

Our parents have not lived up to that age. It is only now that we all get so old.

J: But we think of the good days.

M: We had tremendous God's blessings. We were always supported by God's grace.

We also worked hard. We were given many good opportunities and we took them. Our services were very well utilised. We stood up and were well placed.

We should wrap it up.

May I ask one last question. What is your denomination?

M: We are Syrian Christians.

COMING BACK IN 2005

In 2005 I first called niece Ginny. She told me that Mary auntie and Joseph uncle were both alive and that I could best call them on Tuesday since they would then have a new servant. Ginny explained that they were having many difficulties and that they had been without a servant for some time but that she had now managed to find a new lady. She said that older persons may complain more easily and that the servants did not understand that and would leave. She also related that she visited them almost every other day.

I telephoned on the Tuesday and first spoke to Joseph uncle who quickly passed me on to Mary auntie. She didn't really remember me and said that I was welcome to come on Thursday at eleven o'clock. Since Thursday turned out to be a hartal-day I could not make it to the appointment and called at about ten o'clock to cancel. Joseph uncle picked up the phone and could not understand me. He talked in Malayalam and seemed to have trouble

converting to English. After some time he threw down the horn. Some minutes later I again called and now he did speak English. He understood that I couldn't come because of the strike and said that I was welcome any time. I asked him to tell Mary auntie that I would be coming the next day at 11.

When I approached their house, I could see Mary auntie lying down on the bed in the living room. When I came in, she told me to sit down next to her bed. I don't know whether she remembered me or not but she was not at all upset by my visit. She asked me where I was staying but didn't seem very interested when I repeated my research intentions. Meanwhile Joseph uncle was sitting somewhat further away in the hall. He was reading the newspaper wearing a neck support. Mary auntie looked frail and appeared much worse health wise than in 2003. She was wearing a nightgown and was covered with a sheet.

I asked about the servant who was there and Mary auntie told me that she had a new servant since two days but that she was no good. While the servant was chatting to her husband, Mary auntie told me that servants shouldn't chat but should be working instead. Her own mother used to be very strict with her servants and Mary auntie's father didn't even know who the servant was because he would never interact with her. When the servant was making some tea for me, Mary auntie whispered that she was stupid and couldn't do anything right.

Several times during the visit Mary auntie explained that there was nobody to give them love and care. People who helped them only helped because of money. Not because they genuinely cared for them. Meanwhile the servant looked at me and raised her eyebrows as if to say: I don't know what to do with this lady.

After some time I went to speak to Joseph uncle. He asked me what I was doing and I told him that I had visited them two years back. He understood, but didn't really remember. He told me he had now completely stopped working. He was wearing the neck support as a protection since his neck was hurting.

Just as in 2003, Mary auntie repeated that she wanted to go to her heavenly home and asked why her seat there wasn't yet ready. Her oldest brother had passed away the year before and her younger brother was not well. He was still staying in Thiruvella and was asking her to come and stay with him. Mary auntie had told him that she was not able to travel because sitting up straight was too difficult for her. Still she would have liked to be in her native place.

Their daughter was still in Ernakulam. And the grandson was now in 10th standard. When I asked whether she had seen them recently, Mary auntie said no. But she had seen her son-in-law some time back. Her daughter was very busy working for the airline. She called them regularly and they called her. Her daughter had asked her to come and live with them, but Mary auntie said it was too far away and that she wouldn't be able to manage.

Mary auntie reiterated how good God had been to her. She had great memories about all the nice things and places she had seen.

The garden was well-maintained and during the interview the dhobi's came with their material for ironing. Mary auntie seemed happy to see them and told me that one of the two men had been their dhobi for very long now. Joseph uncle walked from the bathroom to the living room with the laundry. Mary auntie told me they did have a washing machine but that the dhobi man ironed for them.

When I asked Mary auntie how old her mother had become she told me that her mother had been around 80 and her father had been in his late 70's but she didn't seem very sure about these answers. She added that the whole family enjoyed longevity.

Halfway during the visit, a neighbour dropped in. Mary auntie seemed happy to see her and told her neighbour that she was feeling worse every day and that the Good Lord still hadn't come to take her. The neighbour told her to be patient and rest assured: He would come one day soon, it wouldn't take long anymore. Then Mary auntie told me that she was the only neighbour who came to visit her, all the others were too busy with their own lives to care for her. This neighbour was from the same parish as Mary auntie and herself 79 years old.

When I asked Mary auntie whether the priest sometimes came she said that he should come by himself but that he didn't. Or at least not regularly. Then she added that he must be very busy with the people in his parish. When I asked whether the doctor sometimes came, she told me that she didn't ask the doctor to come. The only doctor she needed was God. He was helping her with everything.

After several minutes the neighbour left and said goodbye to Mary auntie and me. When she was laid down the bed sheet wasn't properly covering her legs and feet so I arranged it a little better. She said that that was nice of me. Her toes had long nails and Mary auntie said that when her daughter came, she would soak them in water for some time and then cut them. Now they were too hard and it had become too painful to cut them. So she was letting them grow.

When I said that I too would leave she told me to stay a little longer. She told me we would do some praying together. In her prayer, she thanked God for sending nice people, and mentioned me. She asked Him to take her to his house so that she could be with her friends and family and especially with her parents who had taught her about the Lord. She prayed for about two minutes and then asked me whether I too wanted to pray. I told her I had prayed with her. When she asked me which church I attended I lied and said Palleam church.

I told her I would visit her after three weeks. Mary auntie said that she would like to see me again and told me there was no need to call in advance since she wasn't going anywhere.

I later talked to the neighbour who said she tried to go every day for about ten minutes. On some days if she didn't manage to come Mary auntie would call her: "And when I don't come, she'll call me up and tell me to come. She wants me to come every day, so that she can talk to me for some time [...] I can't remember when this visiting has started, we were neighbours you see, so I always visited her".

SECOND VISIT IN 2005

A few weeks later I was in the neighbourhood and went to visit Mary auntie. Mr. Verghese, had told me that he was going to attend a prayer meeting in Mary auntie's house. I went ahead to meet Mary auntie before the meeting would start.

Joseph uncle seemed to recognise me immediately this time and said: "Auntie is inside" and we chatted for a little bit.

Mary auntie was in the same condition: "There was a time when I could also say: I'm fine. But things have changed. It is enough. Enough. Take me to my home, father. Take me, I can't come by myself, you have to come and take me".

Inside, the chairs had already been put in their proper positions. Mary auntie complained that the people hadn't come yet:

"They used to come at this time already. Nowadays people are losing their religion. They are only interested in worldly matters. I have no worldly interests anymore. My husband also, he is a good man: doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, but he is not enough prepared. See, now nobody is coming anymore. It used to be completely full this house. The whole week I am looking forward to the Monday. What is better than praying together to the Lord? I used to be the one who was always asked to speak. Everywhere I would go to church, people would ask me to speak. Also in Gujarat and in foreign countries. I don't know how people knew that I could speak. They must have seen it, must have been told by the Lord.

My niece Ginny has married a Hindu, that's why she has lost her religion, she doesn't come for these meetings. Her mother, my sister, died because of that. She said: I have raised her to know the Lord and now she is marrying a Hindu, I better leave. And they have a daughter who now is also not getting to know the Lord.

But she does come and visit you very frequently, doesn't she?

- Yes, she does come...

COMING BACK IN 2008

Upon approaching the house I saw someone was lying on the bed. It was not Mary auntie but Joseph uncle. At the gate the servant who I recognised from 2005 came to look and motioned me to come in. Inside she woke up Joseph uncle and told me in Malayalam to sit down. I told Joseph uncle that I had come to see how he and auntie were doing that I had visited them some two years ago. I explained that I had wanted to visit them again for my

research and hoped to see how they were. Joseph uncle nodded but seemed a little confused. The servant gave me a picture book which said:
Mary Isaac, born 25/03/1919 died 01/09/2007

Although I had not known what to expect and had hoped for Mary auntie that her wishes and prayers had come true it was a shock nonetheless.

The book contained pictures taken at the funeral and the church service. There were a dozen pictures of persons saying goodbye to Mary auntie through a bow towards her forehead and several detailed pictures of Mary auntie's head. Several pictures depicted a middle-aged lady crying who I understood to be daughter Annie. I asked whether I could take pictures of the book and was allowed to do so. While taking them I knew I would never be able to use them for my research.

According to Joseph uncle Mary auntie had been ill for a short period. Nurses had taken care of her in her bedroom where she had been lying. Finally she had passed away quietly, without any pain and in peace.

Joseph uncle told me his health was not good and not bad and that he was getting by. The neck pain had stopped but he was feeling old. He was 90 years old now. Their daughter had asked him to come and stay with her in Kochi. She was very busy and working for an airline company so she herself couldn't come often. Joseph uncle said he didn't want to go and visit her. Mary auntie had wanted to stay in Thiruvananthapuram until she died, also because of the renters upstairs. He too wanted to stay here. It was their house and he didn't want to rent it out entirely or sell it. There were still people staying on the top floor of the house and Joseph uncle saw them often.

I asked about the prayer group and whether it was still continuing. Joseph uncle said that after Mary auntie had passed away, the prayer group people had stopped coming. It was because of Mary auntie that they had conducted the group meetings in their house; she had been the one to keep it going. Also Joseph uncle said that very few people nowadays come to visit him. The visitors like their neighbour who used to come would come for Mary auntie. For him they didn't come.

The servant came and gave a cup of tea and a small banana. Also, a vendor lady came by the door who sold some curry paste and some snacks to the servant. Joseph uncle said that the vendor had some pains in her hands and had some short conversations with the two women. During our conversation he often dozed off a little. We talked about Mary auntie a little bit and he agreed that she had been a very religious person. His grandson was doing fine. He had gotten entrance in some college where only very few people got admitted.

ANOTHER VISIT IN 2008

A few weeks later I visited Joseph uncle again, this time after I visited Mr. Verghese, the man who lived in their neighbourhood and belonged to the same prayer group.

The first thing Joseph uncle said was: “I heard you are getting married?” He had heard the news from his neighbour whom I had started to visit regularly too.³ The news excited him and he asked me about my husband-to-be. The start of our continued conversation was mostly a monologue of Joseph uncle with only limited probing from my side.

- I wouldn't want to go and stay with my daughter. She and my son-in-law they have their own things and I wouldn't want to go there. I have my peculiarities and if I'm there I would be alone with their servant all day. Here I have this lady servant and she is very good. She helps me and I help her. I gave her 10'000 rupees and my daughter also helped her. Then I have a pain in the foot and every morning and every evening she gives me a massage. She is out doing shopping now.

[When she comes back she is carrying shaving cream and toothpaste.]

I don't like shaving now, I'm too lazy and weak. Also taking bath I don't like. But she is insisting that I take a bath and that I shave. [But he has quite a beard now]. Slowly, slowly the weakness has come. But I'm over 90 now, that is very old. The only thing I want is a peaceful death. I pray and ask for a peaceful death. But I think I will have two more years. I asked for two more years.

Two more years?

- But that is nine months ago now, so now one more year and three months. That is enough.

Why?

- I prayed for two more years. After that everything is God's grace.

Why two more years?

- That is enough. Two more years I asked when I prayed so I think I have some more time.

But why two, why not one or three?

- Two is enough. That is enough. I am over 90. I only wish for a peaceful death.

Do you have duties to finish before those two years?

- No, no. Duties are all finished. I just want to have a peaceful death so I pray for that.

[...]

You say it is 'God's grace' when something good happens. What do you say when something bad happens?

- Nothing bad happens, it is all good.

³ Joseph uncle told me that the neighbour had stopped coming after auntie had died. The neighbour said: “About once a week I go to visit him. I used to go every day to that Mary chechi. She would tell me to come and I used to think: I hope somebody will also come when I'm old like that. [...] I feel so tired nowadays. I like to have some company”.

But what do you think when there is a problem?

- If a problem comes we have to find a solution for it. We can pray for a solution. I pray to some saints. There is a lady that I gave a loan for 10'000 rupees. She said she would be giving it back but she hasn't. She is in hospital now and I wrote to the doctor saying that she borrowed this money. She says she is planning to give it back.

Now I'm praying to Judah that she will give back the money. So many people pray and then it happens, you can see it in the newspapers: 'for blessings received'. I believe she will pay it back. Because I pray and ask that she gives the money back to me. My daughter and son-in-law told me that I should file her in court. But I don't want that. I believe she will give it back. ... So many people came to ask for this house. It is now worth about two crores [20 million rupees]. When auntie was alive an American came to buy it and I was thinking about it, but auntie didn't want it. She wanted to die here. Another time I was thinking about selling but if we keep it after my death and rent it out it will give about a 10'000 rupees per month. I've written all these things down. What they should do. I want a very simple coffin. Not a big expensive one. For auntie they took a very expensive one. My co-brother [wife's sisters' husband], he is very high-positioned [a governing function] he did that and he came all the way from Kashmir for her funeral. I wrote down I want a simple coffin and I want to be buried on the same day. I don't know if they'll do it but that I wrote down. Also, selling the furniture should bring up one lakh [100,000 rupees] so that should pay off all the remaining debts I may have. Then the rest of the house they should keep and rent off. Now I have about one lakh savings in the bank. In interest that gives me 4000 per month [This seems incorrect].

[...]

I was having some financial trouble so I asked my daughter for some 2000 rupees. She sent me 5000 rupees. I think because she knows that I've spent so much on her. Education and everything. And they are very well off. Her husband also makes a lot of money. Then I've taken about 10,000 of the savings to pay off some debts and now I get 3900 per month. I don't want to touch the savings. I have adjusted and am looking carefully at the expenditure now. They [daughter and son-in-law] ask me how come I spend so much but there are so many things to pay [points at the shaving cream].

[...]

Mr. Verghese [the neighbourhood friend and prayer group member] I know very well. How is he? He is not well now? I knew his wife also. We're very close to that family. His son is here and two daughters. The son is staying here [in Thiruvananthapuram] only. He should be coming to stay here in this house. I don't know why he is not coming. It is a big house, he should come with his wife and they should stay here. It is not good that he is not coming.

[...]

I like reading the newspaper and having my tea. Very systematically the day goes on. First this than that then food. I used to have some gastro problem and then went to a very respected doctor. He was so respected and so good that he was very busy but he and his father came to see me then he prescribed me a medicine that I should take in the morning and the evening before taking food. It has helped, there is no more pain. The other medicines I got, also ayurvedic ones, they always had some downside but with this everything works all right.

She [the neighbour] also is staying alone. Her sons are very well placed. Her son must be making a lot of money per month. He is an architect in the US and now he has accepted a job in Hong Kong.

LAST VISIT IN 2008

I was motioned to come in when uncle saw me. His servant was sitting in the other portion of the living room and listened to the very loud television.

- She watches now and then. I will only watch from 6.30 onwards. We look after each other. She helps me out and is very good and I help her out. She needed a lot of money, 40,000 rupees, to pay back for a loan she had taken to pay for her daughter's dowry. So I help her to pay that loan. Every month we pay something. ... Even after my death she can go on working here and paying off her monthly loan. ... So you won't be coming back here after marriage. I wish you a very happy married life.

[Another lady came inside. She did the cleaning.] [...]

- I wouldn't want to stay with my daughter even though she tells me to come and stay with them. But then I have my way of life and here, with her [servant], I can do whatever I want. ... I used to have three cars, but now I've sold them all off. Now it is the tenants car that is staying there. We used to get 15'000 rupees per month as a pension. But now since auntie's death it is much less, maybe about 10'000.⁴ That is not enough for us to live from. Anyway, the money in the bank account is also there for the grandson. My daughter is making enough money by herself she doesn't need it.

[...]

- Now these people have come to enquire about the neighbouring house.[Joseph uncle is helping his migrated neighbours to sell of their house and is promised a commission for that help]. They want to sell it for four crores. If I could sell this house also for four crores I would do it. But they [daughter and son-in-law] don't want me to sell it. Now with the 10'000 per month I am touch-and-go managing. They all ask me why since we are only the two of us here [Joseph uncle & servant]. But all these expenses I am budgeting and still it is difficult to manage. Now the electricity bill is also high so I'm selling off one of our two

⁴ Since Mary auntie had had a government job and Joseph uncle had been self-employed, Mary aunties pension had been a great source of income.

fridges. I have asked her [servant] to keep the accounts so now she is asking me about the balance all the time.

[...]

I'm from a place about five miles from Kottayam. My younger brother is staying there, he's almost 90 now. I'm almost 91. Turning 91 on the first of August. I'm not celebrating but my daughter and her husband and son are probably coming and they will give me a gift. But what do I need?... When I was born, my parents and my brothers were staying in that house.

Your grandparents also?

Yes, grandparents also... [confused?]

This house is actually really big.

- One room is Annie's room. I constructed it from the money I made in a business that I ran with that auntie's [the same neighbour] husband and another man. Both are no more. I'm not doing anything with it. It is my daughter's room so when she comes she can stay there.

[We talked some more about his grandson. Joseph uncle said that he is guiding his grandson. This part of the conversation was recorded instead of noted.]

- For me, I would used to get hundreds of letters of appreciation, hundreds. So my bosses were very happy. The special increment was given and then when the next test came in there I was promoted as number one of whole India. That's all about my own success. Very, very great success, if I... hhm.

After that one I immediately got a job here... three of us joined together.

And we bought ... real estate.. real estate means that we bought a property of 10'000 rupees.

And then we sold. And got a profit of 10'000. That's how 10 years we worked together.

Afterwards myself alone as a travel agency and I got a profit of about 50'000.

So how are you guiding your grandson?

[...]

- I will tell him, first of all when you go for a test with a bank. One particular bank I have helped him to become the chief manager. I have helped. And also my co-brother, who was a governor, he has helped. And I knew one of the officers, the chairman. I used to tell the chairman.. the assistant.. and he was promoted. So I know many people with whom he should keep in best [contact]. Then there is another [bank] My co-brother's brother is a chief manager. He should talk. When you are going for an interview with a bank, you should know everything about that bank. Who is the chairman, what is the liability you got. All those things he should know. He should know. Whenever I went for an interview, people would... I used tell everything about my young life, my own progress. ... Like that, I used to give them good answers.

So are you advising him to go in banking?

Not me. I was once in banking a short time.

But are you advising your grandson?

-He will have to do a commerce class for two years. Then MBA two years. Afterwards he should go for a competitive examination in the bank. He should chose one line. I thought chartered accountancy but for chartered accountancy there is lots of maths. But in math he is poor. So, subject I have written.. I have given him a letter. A nice letter. Like this and this and this he should. Now this is the best choice, to go for a bank. So he should try it. And I should give him all the guidance as far as bank is concerned. Two banks we know, third bank... my co-brother is the governor and he was the director of some other banks. So... they all can help. In a test he can get help from them. All those things are there, but at that time I may not be there. That's why I brief him now. ... I'm sorry you are going away.

Yes.

- I'm sorry you are going away.

Yes, me too.

- Now we won't meet again. May God bless.

...

LAST TELEPHONE CALL IN 2008

The day of my departure, a Friday in 2008, was Joseph uncle's birthday. I was unable to visit him during my last hours in the city and called him over the phone instead. Joseph uncle picked up the telephone and I congratulated him with his birthday but he did not seem to understand who I was and what I was telling him. I repeated the birthday wishes a few times but after some time he gave the phone to his daughter Annie. I explained my relationship with Joseph uncle and repeated my best wishes for his birthday. Annie replied that Joseph uncle was not well and that many things had happened during the last few days.

First Joseph uncle's servant had had a fall and had fractured her arm. With her broken arm she was unable to stay with Joseph uncle and had left to go to her own home. The next day when Joseph uncle was staying alone in the house there had been a power cut. According to Annie her father had forgotten about the dark and had started to walk, fell and hit his head. He had been taken to the hospital immediately. I asked Annie who had taken him and she told me: "Ginny, my older sister [niece] is here so she does most of these things since I'm not here".

On his birthday Joseph uncle had been discharged from the hospital. He had two small fractures, one in a facial bone and one in his shoulder. Annie added "So we came and stayed here yesterday but we are leaving tonight... But he is much better now". We concluded the conversation and Annie thanked me for visiting her parents every now and then. I wished them all good luck in this difficult situation and said goodbye. In my thoughts I added many more heartfelt wishes for Joseph uncle.