

Sarah Lamb. *Aging and the Indian Diaspora: Cosmopolitan Families in India and Abroad.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. xvi + 336 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35343-6; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-22100-1.



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Older Indians and Their Housing in India and the United States

Sarah Lamb's interesting book breaks new ground in several ways, although the title, *Aging and the Indian Diaspora: Cosmopolitan Families in India and Abroad*, overstates its range. The author conducted fieldwork only in India and the United States, and she focuses on older Indians, residents of old age homes or elder hostels in the two sites, rather than on families (she discusses the difficulties she encountered when trying to talk to the families of the aging people whom she interviewed). Once this minor quibble is out of the way, this is a book that is accessible as well as significant, fun to read and with important applications to both theory and practice in several domains.

Anthropologists and others are beginning to look more closely at aging populations; changing demographic structures of national populations point to the need for such attention. The "problem" of aging also attracts cross-national attention as entrepreneurs construct old age homes in "elder-friendly" and inexpensive countries, aiming to attract clients from wealthier and more rapidly aging national populations. Examples in-

clude the builders of old age homes in the Philippines and Thailand with the explicit goal of attracting Japanese elders.

Lamb argues that the recent and perhaps unexpected initiation of old age homes in India does not signal the uncritical adoption of Western ideas and institutions. To illustrate this "Indian modernity," she draws effectively on residents' words about their old age homes, suggesting that many see their housing situations as continuations or adaptations of Indian culture. They mention the third and fourth stages of life in the Hindu life cycle, the (male) retreat to the forest, with or without his wife, and the individual spiritual quest, without his family. They also stress the *seva* or service to elders offered by old age homes as an alternative to the adult children who are abroad or otherwise unavailable to care for their parents. Old age homes themselves often have names that suggest these themes: *ashram* or *briddhasram*, for example (shelter or spiritual shelter for the elderly), and Lamb found examples of homes where the proprietors acted as family caregivers would ideally act.

However, Lambâs major finding is that the âbreak-downâ of the family, that is, the failure of adult children, especially sons, to assume their ideal role as caregivers for aging parents, is producing new institutions and new ways of thinking about them in both India and the United States. Her anecdotes are effective, her elderly speakers eloquent as they discuss their readjustments and their thoughts about them. She brings up the question, why now? She answers this by invoking economic liberalization, transnational migration, the rise of working women, and the circulation of global ideologies; to my mind, a discussion of the changing demography of India, the increased proportion of the population that is aging, would have been helpful here. In other Asian countries, too, where respect and care for the elderly has been a central cultural notion, the rising proportion of aged people in the population has challenged the implementation of cultural values.

Thus, structural factors underpin the cross-national ideological currents, and this becomes clear in Lambâs fine material on the relationship of the state to the care of the elderly. Her contributions here are clear and incisive. She shows that, in the United States, subsidies to the elderly (SSI, or federal Supplemental Security Income to the low-income aged) have not only been accepted but in

some cases also welcomed by aging immigrants or green-card holders as an alternative to dependence on their children. Perhaps the most compelling chapter is âChanging Families and the Stateâ; in it, she looks at Indiaâs policymakers as they confront changing ideas and practices concerning the family and its aging members. The Indian Parliament in 2007 passed the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Bill, which fines children and can even jail them for neglecting their parents. The details here are fascinating. Lambâs thorough discussion brings out the point that daughters and even daughters-in-law could be liable under this bill for proper care of parents. This Act is being implemented from October, 2009. Policymakers are also considering state supports for the aged, like medical and pension plans as well as old age homes.

Although I do not think âcomplexifyâ or âinerasableâ are words, and Lamb repeats some material from two of her previously published articles, the writing is clear and accessible. Many of Lambâs informants are memorable and illustrate her point that agency remains among elders, that it is not just youth who initiate and think well about social change. The photos add to the quality of immediacy and liveliness. This is recommended reading!

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