

EXPLORING BUILT ENVIRONMENT FEATURES FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE SOCIAL LIFE OF ELDERLY AND YOUNG ADULTS IN URBAN AREAS IN INDIA, IN THE COVID-19 SCENARIO: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted and forced upon drastic changes in all spheres of our lives. In comparison to other age groups, the imposition of home quarantine and the associated social isolation is far more detrimental to the well-being of the elderly and the young adults. Conventionally, the educational institutions, where most of the young adults in urban areas spend a significant amount of their time, provide them with the opportunities to form social relationships and involve in meaningful social activities. The shift to the online education system, is disrupting their social lives and also leading them to withdraw from active outdoor lives and immerse in sedentary virtual worlds, which might lead to harmful long-term consequences on their overall psychological well-being.

The crucial need for outdoor activities and social communication on the well-being of the elderly has been established by a plethora of studies. Additionally, the change in the traditional Indian family structure due to urbanisation, has led to the shifting of adult children away from their parents, leading to the loss in the family based care-giving and social support system for the elderly population. Besides, in contrast to other age groups, a substantial population of the Indian elderly, are still not well-acquainted with social media, and therefore, are suffering from higher degrees of social isolation, deprived of physical communication with their social peers.

The pandemic has made us realize the immense need to equip our home and the immediate surrounding or neighborhood, with essential infrastructure or built environment features, to cater to the requirements of our daily well-being. The present study, through discussions with small groups of individuals belonging to young adults and elderly population in India, first identifies how the pandemic has changed the pattern of their daily social engagements and then explores the features that they desire to be incorporated in their built environment to improve their social lives.

1. Introduction

The COVID 19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of everyone across the globe. The lockdown, travel restrictions and social distancing norms has led to the reconfiguration of our everyday lives. The social distancing guidelines has limited our contact and communication with friends, family, relatives, colleagues leading to a sense of isolation and loneliness. Considering the requirements and daily activities, this imposition of home quarantine and the associated social isolation was observed to be far more detrimental to the well-being of the elderly and the young adults, in comparison to other age cohorts.

Educational institutes provide the youth with opportunities to engage in social interactions, physical exercise, etc. which help in dealing with the negative consequences of stressors (Rosen, Rodman, Kasparek, Mayes, Freeman, Lengua & McLaughlin, 2021). However, with the closure of educational institutions, and the evolution of the digital sphere of learning, the youth have been deprived from opportunities of direct communication with same age peers, and have been compelled to immerse themselves in a world of virtual reality, where social interactions take place only on mobile gadgets and computers. Though internet based communication is increasing human connectivity and spanning it beyond the limited acquaintances of the real physical world (Menezes, Arvanitidis, Costa, & Weinstein, 2019), it is debatable if these virtual social connections are increasing or decreasing the quality of social relationships.

The imposition of strict physical distancing, restrictions on outdoor visits, fear of interacting with outsiders, closure and limited functioning of organizations providing health-based, social and emotional support to the elderly have cut-off many older adults from their existing social networks, aging network services and the health-care system, through which they were accustomed to fulfill their physical, emotional, and social needs. As observed in existing studies, the elderly is more vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation due to loss of connection with colleagues, family members and friends arising from the age based restrictions imposed upon their physical activities.

Presently, with the vaccination of the world wide population and the decrease in the severity of the impact of the disease, the world has started to retrace its steps back to a 'neo-normal' scenario, by restructuring daily habits and everyday life. However, until there is a permanent cure for the disease, the practices of cautious social distancing and restrictions in outdoor activities arising from fear and apprehensions about the pandemic will not subside any time soon.

Studies have established the role of spatial planning and urban design on public health, sociability and well-being. The built environment and open spaces in a city influence the life of its residents, as it is the factor, responsible for determining the opportunities which can be provided to implement their preferred list of daily and occasional activities. An environment that inspire people to take leisurely walks, and spend time in open spaces increases opportunity to engage in social interactions (Menezes et al., 2019). Engagement in casual spontaneous conversations in natural landscapes and open spaces help people relax and release their stress (Lau, Gou, & Liu, 2014).

The home isolation, social distancing and restrictions in outdoor activities imposed by the pandemic has established the immense need to equip our home and the immediate surroundings or neighborhood, with essential infrastructure or built environment features, to cater to the requirements of our daily well-being.

This paper, through discussions with small groups of individuals belonging to the age group of young adults and elderly population in India, attempts to identify how the pandemic has changed the pattern of their daily social engagements and also explores the features that they desire to be incorporated in their built environment to improve their social lives.

2. The social life of the youth and the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic

In this paper, we shall refer to people belonging to the age group of 18 to 25 as young adults and the people belonging to the above 60 years of age as 'older adults' or 'elderly'. The young adults are at the stage in their lives when they need to develop new acquaintances, friends, and need real world places to meet and build new social relations (Lips, 2021). Besides, the associated issues of increase in unemployment, and uncertain job opportunities increases the vulnerability of young adults towards depression.

With the restriction on conventional leisure activities, Lips (2021) assumes that the young adults may have come up with alternative leisure activities to keep them occupied in their domestic environment. While some might consider their experience at home as restriction, some others might have considered this lockdown as a welcome release from their scheduled commitments and obligations. The ambience at home, relationship with family members, etc. have been observed to be important factors influencing the experience of social relationships at home for young adults during the pandemic.

The numerous restrictions on outdoor activities imposed to decrease the risk of being infected by the COVID-19 virus has a detrimental effect both on the psychological and physiological functioning of the elderly (Kasar & Karaman, 2021). For the elderly, in general, limited contact with other people leads to the loss of social support, which may lead to loneliness, consequently leading to depression in the elderly (Kasar & Karaman, 2021). Besides, in India, a substantial group of the elderly are still struggling to cope with the changes in the social and family structure which has led to a loss in their intergenerational family based support system. Additionally, many older adults do not have the resources, like access to smart technology, etc., required to deal with the stress of COVID-19 (Vahia, Jeste & Reynolds, 2020). Considering the increased vulnerability of the elderly, it is necessary to explore how the elderly has coped up with the reconfiguration of their social engagements in the pandemic.

3. Study Methods

The present study first attempts to understand the changes, issues and reconfigurations in the social behavior pattern of young adults and the elderly during the pandemic and formulate policies to promote psychosocial well-

being during their stay-at-home period. Understanding the changes in the types of daily social activities of these age groups of population can help in identifying the social activities and inclinations that these groups of people are most likely to be involved in and design built environment features with adequate preventive measures that can enable their safe involvement in the same. In order to achieve these objectives, the study involved qualitative discussions with two small groups of young adults and elderly (eight to ten participants in each group). The discussions consisted of two parts: a) understanding of social behavior and activities before and during the pandemic and b) changes that may be brought about in the public space and built environment to enable and encourage involvement in social activities of their choice. Besides these, the discussions also included questions on the family type (nuclear or extended) and the details of the family members with whom maximum time was spent with during the pandemic.

4. Study findings

4.1. Social behavior and activities of young adults

The respondents belonged to 19 to 24 years of age. Most of the respondents belonged to nuclear families, which comprised of their parents and siblings. All the respondents were university students of National Institute of Technology, Rourkela, who stayed in the university campus before the pandemic. The outdoor social activities of the respondents, before the pandemic, were mostly limited within the campus boundaries, due to unavailability of adequate socializing or leisurely opportunities outside the campus (in Rourkela). Within the campus, the most common socializing activity for the students was engagement in leisurely chats with classmates and peers in hostel mess, canteens, etc., where they had the opportunity to meet and interact with intra-department students. Sports activities, hobby clubs and groups were also observed to serve as a constructive opportunity for socializing with like-minded peers. On some weekends, visiting the main town for watching movies and shopping also contributed to the opportunity of socialization.

During the pandemic, all the respondents experienced a drastic change in their daily lifestyle when they had to confine themselves to their home and neighborhood. Most of the respondents noted that they started engaging more in indoor hobbies and started learning new skills. The time spent on social media increased to three fold during the pandemic. All the respondents agreed that they started bonding more with their family and siblings. Mothers and siblings were the ones with whom they spent most of their time. It was interesting to note that one of the respondent also started to learn gardening and fish farming with his siblings at their home.

To summarize the observations from the interviews, the need for developing social connections and maintaining relation with peers was observed to be important for the well-being of young people. As observed by Lips (2021), besides the resources available in home to maintain social relationships, like computers and mobile phones with internet connections, their relationships with other family members is also significant for the well-being of the youth. Mothers and siblings are observed as the most important people for communicating and connecting to in a family.

4.2. Social behavior and activities of older adults or elderly

The respondents belonged to the age group of 60 and above. Most of the respondents belonged to nuclear families, with adult children who lived in other cities either for educational or for job purposes. Before the pandemic, the social activities of most of the respondents comprised of visiting and meeting neighbors and relatives. One female respondent who lived in a housing society, regularly participated in organizing small parties with her neighbors and was a member of a ladies' group in her housing society. Another female respondent was a member of a spiritual organization and spent her weekends visiting the Ramkrishna Mission and engaging herself in associated tasks and activities. One of the respondents regularly participated in musical events in and around her neighborhood. Visiting the daily market, taking leisurely walks in the neighborhood, and meeting neighbors at local tea stalls were the most common socializing activities for the male respondents.

During the pandemic, with the imposition of the lockdown, almost all the socializing activities had come to a stop. Though some of the male respondents went outside their homes wearing masks and maintaining social distancing norms, their socialization activities were limited as most of them feared of getting infected with the disease. In order

to cope with the vacuum in their social sphere, the respondents learnt the use of social media (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.) . One of them had even opened up a cooking channel in YouTube with the help of her daughter. However, respondents who had adult children staying away from them due to educational purposes noted that the lockdown served as a boon in having their children back home with them and cherished the good quality family time that they could spend together during this pandemic.

4.3. Desired neighborhood infrastructure identified by the youth and older adults or elderly

Parks, open space, and large community spaces were identified as the most desired spaces for conducting social activities and meeting neighbors or friends in the pandemic by both age groups. Large open spaces provide ample space for maintaining the required social distancing while meeting people and spending time with them. The lack of open spaces in the present urban development scenario has led to a loss of breathing space in residential settlements. The pandemic and its impact in our lives has made us realize the significance of adequate green and open spaces in a neighborhood. The need for organized spaces for community activities was also realized from the present study respondents.

5. Conclusion

The impact of COVID-19 on the social life of youth and older adults or elderly is likely to consequently affect their mental well-being. In this scenario, it is essential to understand how these age groups have coped up with the present crisis and their additional requirements for catering to their social needs. Though the importance of digital connectivity has emerged as essential for social connectivity of both the age groups, since home and neighborhood have become essential to our lives in the pandemic scenario, it is essential to equip the same with necessary features required to cater to the requirements of our well-being. The present study identifies the changes in the social activities of the two most vulnerable age groups and the built environment infrastructure required to cater to the same. The study findings can be used by new policy makers to develop guidelines on neighborhood design to provide the required infrastructure for the social well-being of its residents.

The study limitations include the sample size, technique and distribution since the sample collection was based on access to digital infrastructure and voluntary participation of the respondents. Another limitation of this study is the fact that all the respondents belonged to middle and upper middle income groups.

Further qualitative studies focusing on in-depth analysis of youth and elderly well-being belonging to different socio-economic strata, with and without access to digital connectivity, during the pandemic, can be conducted to help in the formulation of guidelines catering to their social relationship.

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