

Spaces of Sanctuary and Socialization: Parks for Senior Citizens in Mumbai

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Abstract:

Industrialization has profoundly transformed socio-economic structures, driving rapid demographic expansion and escalating infrastructure demands in major urban centres. In a metropolis like Mumbai, this demographic evolution presents a dual reality: while remaining a dynamic, youth-centric city whose public spaces predominantly cater to younger populations, Mumbai is simultaneously experiencing a rapid increase in its elderly demographic.

This research paper investigates urban spaces specifically designated for senior citizens, commonly known as *Aajoba-Aaji* or *Nana-Nani* parks. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study evaluates public awareness, spatial utilization patterns, and the overall efficacy of these dedicated age-exclusive spaces. Furthermore, it critically examines whether reserving localized parks exclusively for senior citizens offers a sufficient response to the broader physical, socio-spatial, and accessibility challenges faced by an aging population within a densely populated urban environment

Keywords: Elderly in Mumbai, Parks for Elderly, Grey Spaces, Population Ageing, Demographic Ageing

Introduction

Parks for elderly were first conceived of in Mumbai in the late '90s. Mumbai has often been described as the city that never sleeps. It was felt that there was a need to carve out some quiet oases for those who had stepped away from the rat race and wanted to enjoy some calm within the bustling metropolis. The idea won over many and like popular ideas it took root and grew. There are now parks reserved for senior citizens in Mumbai. For many elderly residents of the city, these parks and the activities organized within these spaces provide meaningful and important social and emotional connections. In doing so, they reflect on the intent of city authorities to acknowledge and respond to the needs of its senior citizens and is therefore, a laudable initiative.

However, are there enough parks? Are these parks accessible to all? Are the activities designed for senior citizens within these spaces adequate? And most importantly, are parks exclusively meant for senior

citizens the ideal solution? These are the questions that have guided this study into the usefulness of senior citizens' parks in Mumbai.

Context: An aging city

The sociological perspective

Age like caste and class is an important criterion of social stratification. A society's age composition indicates its strengths and weaknesses, which, in turn, is a statement about its needs and demands. Analyzed in context, this information will help ascertain the extent and nature of care a community needs. Age is more than a number; in society, it is a social phenomenon. Social paradigms give it definition and the socio-cultural backdrop against which it happens, gives age its true implications. Thus, in different cultures and in different time periods, aging is different.

Contrary to the views of a section of demographers, sociologists, gerontologists, and economists, population aging does not have to be considered a problem nor do senior citizens have to be seen as a liability. Society can adapt to the rise in the number of senior citizens by analyzing, planning for, and catering to the needs of this group. Systematic and scientific data collection coupled with serious and vigorous documentation would enable sociologists, planners, and concerned stakeholders to decide whether senior citizens need to be looked at as subjects of welfare or as a value addition to society.

Demographically speaking

In the twentieth century, Mumbai (which was at that time Bombay) established itself as a promising economic hub, constantly buzzing with business and financial activity. People from different parts of India started flocking to the city. Besides employment, education also proved to be an important pull. The impetus given to formal western education lowered barriers of religion, caste, and community, and people from different backgrounds across India chose to settle in Mumbai. As a result, demographically, Mumbai is ever growing.

Table 1: Growth in Population of the Greater Bombay District (1901 to 2011 censuses)

Year	Total number of persons
1901	927,994
1911	1,148,757
1921	1,380,448
1931	1,397,812
1941	1,801,356
1951	2,994,444
1961	4,152,056
1971	5,970,575
1981	8,243,405
1991	9,925,891
2001	11,914,398
2011	12,478,447
Source: Compiled from data available in census tables	

Mumbai is a leading commercial city not only in India but in the world. The city's expansion is continuously being studied by different professionals and experts. However, not many scientific studies have been conducted on the city's senior citizens. This is surprising, given that senior citizens constitute a fairly large proportion of Mumbai's total population and their number continues to rise.

According to the 2001 census, Mumbai had a population of 1.19 crore, which rose to 1.24 crore in the 2011 census. Greater Mumbai comprises two main districts, namely, Mumbai and Mumbai suburban. For administrative reasons, Mumbai is divided into 24 wards. The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai is the governing body for these wards.

Mumbai has an interesting age composition. In 1991, the percentage of the elderly in Mumbai was 5.19 and in 2001, it rose to 6.49. (Note: The researcher has calculated averages on the basis of age-specific data available with census authorities.)

An increasing population of senior citizens means that by UN's parameters of population aging, Asia is aging and so are Maharashtra and Mumbai. This is a new reality with unfamiliar dimensions.

An examination of the infrastructural facilities, services, and concessions that Mumbai offers its 'silver citizens' (the term first used in the Harmony magazine) is likely to reveal the collective approach that administrative authorities have adopted towards the elderly.

Literature Review:

This study focuses on Mumbai as its main subject of inquiry. Surprisingly, Mumbai has been under-researched from a gerontological dimension. Very few academic studies have covered this subject. Among them are Desai and Naik (1973), Pathak (1978), Dave Chandra (1989), S. Siva Raju (2002). Doctoral work conducted by Sibbal Vatika (2009), and Tendulkar Anagha (2012) deserve mention. With the population of senior citizens increasing rapidly in urban pockets, it is imperative to study the dynamics between aging and urbanism. The current study, therefore, appears to have significant potential to generate information that is much needed at this juncture.

Perhaps the first systematic study pertaining to Mumbai and the elderly was conducted by K. G. Desai and Naik R. D. The basic objective of the study, sponsored by the Research Program Committee of the Planning Commission, was to find out about the various problems faced by retired people in Greater Bombay. The study was conducted among different sections of people: 600 retired persons (400 gazetted and non-gazetted, 200 primary and secondary school teachers), 225 young persons in the homes of the retired persons, and 100 persons on the verge of retirement. Variables like respondents' position in their family, their responsibilities, health problems, financial obligations, living conditions, and leisure activities were studied. The study also looked into the preparations that the elderly make before retiring. It concluded that family patterns and, consequently, the support system of the retired in India and their status were changing. This comprehensive study claimed that family support solved several problems of retirees adequately (Desai and Naik, 1973).

Another investigation was conducted in metropolitan Bombay with a sample of 449 old persons belonging to the upper middle class. The sample was studied to explore traditional and recent nutritional habits in different communities in Bombay (Pathak, 1978).

'Networking of Organizations Working for Care of Older Persons in Mumbai' was a scientific study with a defined focus on Greater Bombay, conducted by Siva Raju. It identified and classified the different organizations working for the care of the elderly in the city. The basic objective of the study was to assess an organization's readiness to network with similar ones and to determine contributory factors associated

with such readiness. It studied 11 old age homes, 45 senior citizens' associations, 12 pensioners' associations, and 2 day-care centers, through interview schedules. A qualitative as well as quantitative analysis of the collected information was conducted (Siva Raju, 2002).

Research methodology

The spatial area defined by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai is the universe of this study. Areas beyond Mulund as well as Dahisar are excluded from the scope of this research study to ensure scientific and academic precision.

To ensure reliable and valid information, a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative approach was utilized. A survey was conducted to gauge the level of awareness about and usage of parks by the elderly. The first stage of data collection had a twofold objective: to review the awareness and usage of parks; and considering the feminization of the aging population, to figure out if any gender-based variations prevailed in this area.

The universe of the study consisted of persons who were 60 years and above, residing within the boundaries of Greater Mumbai. Since it was not possible to include all the senior citizens of Mumbai in the survey, sampling method was used. Census authorities do not enumerate the 60-plus population category separately. Therefore, in order to ascertain this number, data from different categories of age-wise population statistics tables (from the census) had to be gleaned. Since ward officers were unable to provide age-wise information on voters in their wards, it was not possible to use this route to obtain a number for the population being studied (citizens aged 60 and 60-plus). A genuine effort was made to draw a proportionate random sample based on the ward population size. Unfortunately, because of non-availability of the complete universe (list of persons aged 60 and above per ward in Mumbai) it was not possible to use a random method at this stage.

Nevertheless, for technical convenience and to ensure equal distribution, a ward-wise sample was drawn. Mumbai is divided into 24 wards by the municipal authorities for administrative ease. These wards are unique — they vary demographically, socially, as well as culturally.

The wards are roughly divided into three segments — the town wards, the eastern suburbs, and the western suburbs. To ensure adequate representation of the diverse population, a fixed number of respondents were covered from each of the wards. A number that was neither too small nor too large was randomly chosen for every ward. Thus, the total sample was 432 (18 each from all 24 wards). Of the 432, 50% (216) were men and 50% (216) were women.

Approximately one-third belonged to the upper middle class, one-third to the middle class, and the remaining one-third to the lower middle class. The criterion used to classify people according to class was residential pattern. Those who resided in high-rise buildings (four or more floors, with an elevator) or a bungalow were classified as upper middle-class respondents. People living in chawls or buildings with three or fewer floors, without elevators, were considered middle class. People on pavements, in *kachha* houses, and in slums were classified as belonging to the lower middle class. Residential status can be a misleading indicator of one's class. However, questions asked to determine financial status did not yield satisfactory and reliable answers. Therefore, the researcher refrained from drawing class-based conclusions. The criterion of class was utilized solely to ensure a fairly good representation of the class structure of the population in Mumbai. The class-based identity of the respondent had no bearing whatsoever on the conclusions drawn.

While administering questionnaires the following precautions were taken:

- Sample selection was completely random. Respondents were met at temples, parks, housing colonies, and railway stations. Respondents were not spotted at /in/near the parks for this survey to rule out any element of bias.
- Only one member of a married couple was included in the sample to avoid any possible repetition of thoughts and opinions. Pre-test results had revealed that spouses often tend to copy answers or influence each other's answers.
- The respondents predominantly belonged to the age group of 60–75. The 75-plus category was consciously avoided, given their needs, expectations, and activity levels are different from those of the 60-plus category.

In the second stage, field visits were undertaken to select parks at Girgaum (Chowpatty), Dadar (Shivaji Park), Andheri (E), Andheri (W), Kandivali (W), Ghatkopar (E), Parle (E), Wadala. An unstructured interview guide was used to understand the respondents' perceptions of the parks.

Parks for Elderly : A space for senior citizens

The processes of urbanization and suburbanization in Mumbai can impact ageing in two possible ways. It can be positive due to the improved standard of living, better level of nutrition, increased awareness about healthy lifestyle choices, better transportation, effective communication channels, information revolution, connectivity, and availability of services, which create a better infrastructure for senior citizens to live in. Negative impacts could come from the fast-paced life, overcrowded roads, inflation, alienation, cut-throat competition, and pollution, thus marginalizing senior citizens in a youth-dominated urban culture.

In a city as densely populated as Mumbai, where space is always a prized luxury, senior citizens rarely have an exclusive space where they can meet each other and share their problems. Mumbai offers them an option in the form of Nana-Nani parks. The concept of such parks originated in Mumbai and is believed to be unique to the city.

The first ever Nana-Nani park was inaugurated in Mumbai at Girgaum Chowpatty on January 26, 1998. Its basic objective was, 'improvement in the quality of life of senior citizens'.

"To provide them [senior citizens] a home within a home" was the motto of this initiative. The park served a dual purpose according to the founder trustee of the Nana-Nani Park Foundation, Mr. Singhania, who also spearheaded the project: it gave local senior citizens an opportunity to get together and also beautified the area. While beautifying the famous stretch of Girgaum Chowpatty, the developers came across a piece of land that was filled with dirt and filth. A quick survey by researchers on local residents' expectations for this area ascertained the need for a separate meeting place for senior citizens. This resulted in the establishment of the Nana-Nani park at Girgaum Chowpatty. The park seeks to provide temporary relief for the elderly from urban congestion. It facilitates group reunions with their own kind to share joys and sorrows. Daily activities include yoga, exercise, laughter sessions, meditation, soft walking tracks, free newspaper service, and group discussions. Every morning many local senior citizens flock to the park and enjoy some serenity and calmness in the heart of busy, congested Mumbai. Groups of elderly can be spotted chatting, laughing, sipping tea, and at times even singing together.

The park created awareness of the need for providing such places for senior citizens in Mumbai. Thereafter, more parks were established in Mumbai using a similar if not the same idea. Aajoba-aaji parks and Dada-Dadi parks have come up in Mumbai town and suburbs as well. These include the Nana-Nani park at Seven Bungalows, the Deendayal Upadhyay Udyan at Dadar, and the aajoba-aaji park at Dahisar. Authorities at some parks follow the original concept of the Nana-Nani park by restricting access to people

other than senior citizens. Other Nana-Nani parks are open to people of all age groups. The Nana-Nani Park Foundation initially maintained the parks at Girgaum Chowpatty, Dadar (Shivaji Park), and Dadar (Portuguese Church). At Chowpatty, free tea and reading facilities are offered to senior citizens. There are

activities held for senior citizens and a conscious effort is made to provide them with a congenial atmosphere.

Data Presentation: Awareness and usage

The survey conducted on the sample yielded by the following data. Of 432 respondents, 328 (75.9%) were aware that such parks existed, while 104 (24.1%) were unaware of it.

Table 2: Awareness of the Existence of Parks for Senior Citizens

Are you aware of Nana-Nani parks / Dada-Dadi parks?	Score	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Yes	Count	162	166	328
	% within sex	75.0%	76.9%	75.9%
No	Count	54	50	104
	% within sex	25.0%	23.1%	24.1%
Total	Count	216	216	432
	% within sex	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

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Table 3: R Chi-square Value for Awareness of Special Parks

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
	1.291(a)	2	0.524

The chi-square value revealed no significant association between gender and awareness of the existence of Nana-Nani/Dada-Dadi parks in Mumbai: men and women were equally aware of this facility.

Table 4: Use of Parks meant for Senior Citizens

Have you used these parks?	Score	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Yes	Count	57	69	126
	%	26.4	31.9	29.2
No	Count	159	147	306
	%	73.6	68.1	70.8
Total	Count	216	216	432
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0

Access to parks is largely determined by their geographical location. Of the 432 respondents, 126 (29.2%) claimed they visited such parks regularly, while a majority of 306 (70.8%) had never been to any such parks.

Table 5: Chi-square Value for use of Senior Citizens' Parks

Pearson Chi-Square	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
	1.613(b)	1	0.204

There was no association indicated between gender and the elderly visiting Nana-Nani parks: both men and women had visited Nana-Nani parks in Mumbai.

Interpreting the data

This study showed that local senior citizens visited the Nana-Nani, Dada-Dadi, aajoba-aaji parks. Senior couples frequent these parks and voice their satisfaction about having the place exclusively for themselves. Interactions with some of the regular visitors at the parks highlighted their contentment with such ventures. They meet their age mates, take morning and evening walks, share their problems and joys with each other, and spend some quiet and peaceful moments in the park.

Too few in Number

Although awareness about the existence of such parks was satisfactory among the members in the sample, few fully utilized the facility. One of the reasons cited for the underutilization of the facility was not having it nearby. Some respondents suggested increasing the number of parks in Mumbai.

There are indeed only a limited number of senior citizens' parks in Mumbai. In order to make the city an elderly-friendly place, respondents felt that there should be at least one park per ward. Mr. Singhanian commented that the Nana-Nani Park Foundation was keen on developing more parks of the same type in Mumbai since he believes it is the need of the hour. However, the government through the city's Municipal Corporation has decided not to allow individuals and private firms to adopt vacant places for developing such parks. Mr. Singhanian cited dozens of applications sent to the authorities asking for permission, which have been to no avail. On one hand, the government seems to be reluctant to pay attention to the needs of senior citizens, while on the other hand it is unwilling to hand it over to private companies.

An inaccessible island of calm

The location of the park is also significant. Accessibility of parks is a precondition to increase footfalls, especially among the target users. Walking is the most advised activity for ensuring fitness among senior citizens. However, walking on Mumbai's roads is an ordeal. It is ironical that the elderly must walk for physical fitness but cannot walk to the park. Given the limited number of senior citizens' parks, those intending to use it have to walk or take some form of transport to reach it. Most respondents said they did not like this. They noted that although they would like to walk in the park they often could not walk to or get to the park easily.

For the people but not by the people

In some parks, certain activities are run on a more or less regular basis to keep senior citizens happy and occupied. These activities commonly include laughter clubs, reading, yoga, interactive sessions, and lectures.

Among the respondents, regular visitors noted that they were happy to avail the facilities provided but they were not insistent on having them. They also voiced the opinion that a lot more could be done structurally as well as functionally about these spaces.

This might be due to the quality of the activities conducted. Respondents noted that activities conducted for senior citizens were undoubtedly helpful but that the organization of some of these activities was

sporadic, scattered, and random. Such activities were usually planned externally or by people who were not senior citizens. This meant that the senior citizens were cast in the role of passive recipients. Some respondents felt that they should be allowed to decide on the nature and objectives of the activities

conducted for their benefit. They felt that activities needed to be designed with a definite purpose and needed to be consistent.

Some respondents also noted that their decision to visit the Nana-Nani parks was not always voluntary. Sometimes they were forced to sit in parks as part of an arrangement to get them out of the house temporarily. At Ghatkopar, where the locality is marked by housing colonies with small apartments, the elderly are stationed in the parks typically in the morning, when working children are preparing to go to work or in the evening when daughters-in-law need some time in the house by themselves. Some respondents also complained about park time being a babysitting activity as they were expected to bring their grandchildren along.

In conclusion: A service or a disservice?

Undoubtedly, these parks occupy an immensely positive and enriching space in the socio-cultural lives of the elderly. When respondents were asked if the parks met their needs, many noted that it was almost like an escape from the hustle and bustle of the joint family system. Moreover, it gave them the opportunity to form new bonds with members of their own age cohort better while allowing them to retain existing bonds with their family members.

Interestingly, however, some respondents claimed they did not visit senior citizens' parks because they were too young to be considered senior citizens. This is indicative of the fact that the age range that is popularly classified as senior citizens is not homogenous. It reflects different levels of health, different occupational statuses, different preferences for leisure pursuits, etc. Therefore, a space that offers laidback activities that do not challenge the body or the mind might not appeal to all. It is, therefore, necessary to devise parks that cater to the varying requirements of the age group classified as senior citizens.

Most importantly, perhaps, it is necessary to give a voice to the people these parks are aimed at. What do they want? Do they need senior citizens' parks? Or is it better to design intergenerational parks that would facilitate the intermingling of different age cohorts? This, in turn, might help the elderly feel relevant and still a part of the mainstream, rather than being relegated to peripheral spaces where they might seem unwanted, irrelevant, or ignored.

And if such parks are what we need, is it not then a civic responsibility to ensure that there are enough parks for all members of this population? Would our obligation end with parks or is there a larger civic responsibility to our elderly that should be inherent to infrastructure development, in the form of easy access to these parks and of course, making the city more accessible to them?

These are questions that necessitate further research and study. We can only conclude that while it has its advantages, Nana-Nani parks are by themselves, and in their current avatar, probably not enough to meet the requirements of the maximum city's older denizens.

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