

Article

'They had to Go': Indian Older Adults' Experiences of Rationalizing and Compensating the Absence of Migrant Children

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Abstract: In transnational families, it is often the older adults who are left-behind or choose to stay behind. Currently the population aged 60 years and older in India constitutes over 7 percent of the total population (1.25 billion) and is projected to triple in the next four decades. In the past family has been the major source of support in later life. One of the consequences of increased mobility is the decreasing role of family in care provision. The Indian middle-class norms on higher education, which stressed on engineering and medicine, have resulted in professionally educated children leaving the parental home to seek work and thus family life in other geographical locations. In this paper we examine how transregional and transnational mobilities and the resulting absences impact the lives of older adults. We draw upon 37 in-depth interviews conducted in Dharwad district of Karnataka, India. The results show that older adults employ two strategies of rationalizing absence and compensating absence of migrant children. These strategies reflect the resilience of the older adults to make sense of this trans-local family life, that in a previous generation they were not aware of.

Keywords: transnational families; absence; ageing; care; emotional costs; India

1. Introduction

With increasing mobility and globalized lives, present-day family life is carried out across multiple places, with multiple actors and in different time zones. The concept family and the notion of belonging get constantly (re)negotiated to sustain relationships across large distances. There has been interesting work from the perspective of the migrant and his/her efforts to maintain such transnational families [1–3] but the home land perspective in terms of the experiences of how the people left behind contribute to and sustain the transnational linkages is relatively less studied [4–6]. The academic lens that has examined the exchanges between migrants and their family has done so merely in terms of economic remittances [7–9]. Economic remittances are an important source of livelihood in families and communities where people left-behind include older adults and very young children [3,10,11]. India is now one of the top recipients of economic remittances: the change has been remarkable—in 1990 India received \$2.1 billion and two decades later, nearly \$65 billion [12]. Financial remittances have surpassed both foreign direct investment and foreign aid to India [13]. Asian scholars have highlighted

the need to look beyond the economic benefits to see the consequences of transregional/transnational mobilities on the well-being people left behind [14,15]. To understand this broader wellbeing, we first need to examine holistically the older adult's experiences of living away from their migrant children. In the Indian context, also in many Asian countries, family is the main source of support for older adults. Compared to Western societies where leaving the parental home is considered the norm. In India patrilocal residence and often co-residence with multiple generations is generally the norms for sons [16]. Many older adults have invested their earnings in the education of their children with the hope that they would be take care of in their old age. This dependence is also related to the non-availability of geriatric care institutions and welfare mechanisms, which would give the older adults financial stability. Urbanization and employment related migration has led to younger families moving out of the parental home to bigger Indian cities and internationally. The impact of such mobilities is much more for older adults who are chronically ill and need long term care. Thus, in this paper we examine how transregional and transnational mobilities impact the lives of older adults and how Indian older adults use different strategies to rationalize and compensate the absence of co-residing children.

In this paper we take both the internal (transregional) and international (transnational) migration into account. In our earlier work on skilled migration from India to the Netherlands [17] and on low-skilled migration from Albania [18] we highlighted the importance of examining both forms of migration and their impacts on people left-behind. In the skilled migration study, internal migration was a precursor to international migration and in the low-skilled migration study, international migration led to internal migration of people left behind in urban areas. In the Indian context the scale of internal migration is much larger compared to international migration. Bhagat [19] analyzing the 2011 census data observes that nearly 30 per cent of the India Population moved internally. The international migration from India pre-2000 was largely low skilled and more focused towards Middle East, post-2000 with rapid globalization increased the migration of skilled workers to the developed countries [20]. Much of this skilled migration has been among the middle-class households and flowed a trajectory where education and employment mobility to cities fueled further migration plans to other countries. Hence it is important to take both trans-regional and transnational mobilities into account as care givers for older adults could be located both in India and aboard.

1.1. Older Adults Left Behind

The term left-behind gives a negative connotation of being isolated from the family. The older adults could have also chosen to stay in their own houses rather than move to co-reside with their emigrant children. Jónsson [21] suggests that staying behind reflects that this group has the social and financial capacity to remain sedentary while others look for resources. We need to differentiate between being *sedentary* and *being immobile*. Ill-health and poverty can lead to immobility of older adults. Alternatively, policies and visa regimes for family reunion could also deter older adults to co-reside with their children. In the USA, favorable visa regimes have enabled older adults to move and co-reside with their children with different levels of association. Research that focuses on South Asian older adults in the USA [22,23] shows that co-residence with children is more common and the role of being dependent decreases with the length of stay. Older Adults who do decided to remain sedentary, or not follow their children, do so due to the strong bonds they have with their place of origin and the social networks they have developed over the years. This process can be also broadly linked to the concept of Ageing in Place. The emphasis in this concept is to have older adults live in their own home/community/social group as long as they can immaterial of their age or income status. The ability of older adult to live independently and sedentary gets diminished with ill health and the need for long term care. In these situations, either the older adults move to co-reside with their children or adult children return home for short period to provide care for the older adults [5].

There is mixed evidence with regard to the benefit of migration to the older adults left behind in the country of origin. Kuhn, Everett and Silvey [24] find that Indonesian older adults with migrant

children are better off on health indicators compared to older adults with non-migrant children. Some studies attribute this to time saved from engaging in agricultural labor and used more for rest and leisure activities [25,26]. Conversely, studies [27,28] also report on the health and economic challenges faced by the older adults with migrant children. Guo, Aranda and Silverstein [29] report that older parents in rural China whose children had emigrated tended to have significantly more depression and lower life satisfaction. This also reflects the emotional costs of migration on the older adults left behind. Knodel and Saengtienchai [30] in Thailand see marked changes with relation to the relationship between older adults and their migrant adult children. They observe that increase in household incomes, through remittances, has led to improved material wellbeing it has deteriorated the social ties due infrequent visits and limited interaction. In another study in Thailand Knodel et al. [31] comment that in the long run the out-migration of younger family members will have detrimental effect on older adults who are chronically ill and need long term care. In a study on left-behind groups in rural China, Biao [32] cautions that in some situations the left-behind may not be that different economically compared to older adults living with their children, and suggests a more contextual understanding of the social and economic situations before migration is brought into the discussion. Such a contextual understanding will further show us the consequences of uneven development on vulnerable groups in the society.

1.2. Absence and Family Life in Multiple Locations

Transregional and transnational mobilities lead to dislocation and disruption of the family life. The absence of different family members makes family life difficult. Absence in general has rarely been theorized in the migration literature. This absence can occur at various levels, starting from the immediate family, to the extended family, neighborhood and society at large. Absence within the family settings due to migration has been studied with regard to long-distance couples and family life [33], parental absence and the development of children [3,34,35], and absence of family and older adults [25,28]. At the neighborhood level the absence of younger people is more evident in regions experiencing population decline [36,37]. In a study on experiences of population decline and ageing in Bulgaria [38], the absence was further exacerbated with the older adults losing social contacts and experiencing loneliness and lack of social support within the village.

In the context of transnational families and care, Bladassar and Merla [5] view absence and mobility as common features of transnational family life. It is the manner in which these absences are compensated and the people and things involved in reducing the distance. Travel of family members, sending of gifts and paying for care are also mechanisms that are used by transnational families to compensate for the absence. Mazzucato and colleagues [6,35] who studied Ghanaian transnational families stress the importance of both onward and reverse financial and social remittances in making family life across multiple locations possible. Remittances play a huge role in supporting families with education, health care and housing. Communication technologies also act as way to reduce the distance between family members. Mobile phones/smart phones in particular have revolutionized the manner in which family members can maintain a sense of co-presence in each other lives. Madianou and Miller [34] for example studied Filipina mothers-nurses and domestic workers- in the UK and their left behind children found that the mobile phones helped the women to reconstruct their role as mothers but the mothers were also worried about the long-term consequences of such transnational parenting/care practices. Ahlin [39] who recently studied the role of ICTs in the care for older adults in Kerala India finds that transnational families through the use of ICT form care collectives and ICTs are not just a medium of communication but becomes an integral part of the collective and have an agency in themselves. Following this line of thinking, in this paper we investigate how Indian older adults use different strategies to rationalize the absence of co-residing children and how they compensate for this absence through the use of technologies and tapping into kin and non-kin support.

1.3. Middle-Class Norms and Expectations

The Indian middle-class norms on higher education, which stressed on engineering and medicine, have resulted in professionally educated children leaving the parental home to seek work and thus family life in other geographical locations. High-skilled migration from India can be seen essentially as a middle-class phenomenon [40] with variations between the nature of occupation and the country of destination. The aspiration to migrate internationally for work and build a family life overseas has become a norm among middle-class families [17,41]. In many urban centers, more highly educated families have at least one of the family members living or working abroad. Those who move from smaller towns to seek work in the bigger cities have been exposed to globalized workspaces or have lived short periods abroad. The latter more so in industries such as Information Technology and related service sectors [42]. Transnational flows of capital, especially in the field of Information Technology has created hubs of multinational companies in cities such as Bengaluru, Gurgaon and Hyderabad. The rapid growth in these cities has been fueled by the inflow of foreign direct investment. These cities then also become escalator regions for transnational mobility of skilled labour. Thus trans-regional mobility is part of trajectory of transnational mobility both for short-term mobility (such as intra-company transfers and onsite assignments) and for the long term in terms of settlement in the country of destination.

The middle-class parents of this wave of the highly skilled are of the generation which entered the Nehruvian public sector jobs, moved to urban areas, adhered to the two-child norm [43], educated both sons and daughters professionally, arranged marriages [44,45], and are residing on their own or with one of the children on a pension [46]. The greater emphasis on engineering and medicine has meant that parents aspire to educate their children to join such occupation which offer possibilities to find high paying jobs in bigger cities and in developed countries. Ali [41] comments that such norms create a culture of migration where mobility becomes a *rite of passage* towards successful lives. The values and expectations surrounding marriage, child bearing and filial support though inculcated from a very young age get renegotiated due to mobility trajectories and non-co-residence with parents. The norms, values and social expectations act as a cultural meaning system through which the older adults and their migrant children make sense of their everyday lives. The migrant children of course are also constantly negotiating between the family norms and those of the culture they are living in. The expectations of older adults on co-residence care giving and receiving, intergenerational transfer of norms, values and traditions gets disrupted with migration. The receipt of filial support is not possible on a daily basis but gets channeled through the use of ICTs and family visits. The focus thus far on middle class families is been more from an economic perspective and very few studies go deeper on the social aspects of these households. Hence, in this paper we examine how middle-class pensioned older adults make sense of living away from their children and grandchildren.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in Dharwad district of Karnataka, India using a mixed methodology; the qualitative study (37 in-depth interviews) was followed by the individual survey interviews of older adults ($N = 477$). The data gathered from in-depth interviews and support network mapping fed into the formulation of the survey instrument. In this paper we focus on the qualitative component to document the experiences of the older adults and use the quantitative data to support these experiences.

2.1. Selection of the Participants

All household included in this study had at least one older adult living in the household. The cut of age of the older adults was 60 years. In addition, we had two more criteria for selection: one was that the household must have at least one adult child who had migrated abroad or to a different city in India, and the other involved the living arrangement of the older adults (co-residing with other children/kin, living with spouse or living alone). Eligible households in the study area were

listed and then approached for in-depth interviews. We used a snowball technique for identifying participants. We included different nodes in the snowball technique to avoid recruiting participants from the same social circle. We interviewed where available couples, widows and widowers. Most of what we report in this article describes people of middle-class India who have relatively high education levels (both the older adults and their children). The areas we chose are also places inscribed with middle-class aspirations of owning a house, areas populated by pensioners with good access to healthcare and the ability to pay for care, and who have children living abroad or in other cities. The discussion in this paper does not apply to lower socio-economic groups where their immediate concerns are about meeting day-to-day needs.

2.2. In-Depth Interviews

Participants were asked about what meaning they give to the situation of living away from their children and how this shapes their social ageing process. The interviews explored the various domains where older adults perceive the absence of their children. The interviews ranged from 30 to 90 min. They were conducted in Kannada by trained interviewers. Each household was visited by one male and one female interviewer. Where possible, the interviews were held at the same time in separate rooms and in other cases, the interviewers made appointments to do the interview at a later date. The interviews also focused on the manner in which older adults manage care giving and receiving from both kin and non-kin members, through the exchange of both material and non-material resources. We conducted 37 in-depth interviews with couples, widows and widowers. Participants in this study include both older adults co-residing with kin and older adults residing on their own.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

The interviewers were trained to ask for consent. Some households refused to be interviewed, or were not interested, as they did not trust the researchers. Hence, each interviewer was given a badge and letter of reference about the study. Before the interview could start the interviewer explained the nature of the projects, that the information would remain anonymous and asked consent to digitally record the information. During the interview, if the older adults were observed to experience any physical discomfort or if they became emotional, the interviewer halted the recording and offered to interview at a later point in time. The interviews were transcribed and translated by the project staff. All identifying information was taken out of the transcripts. Each transcript was assigned a code and linked personal information was stored safely with the principal investigators.

2.4. Analysis of Data

The analysis has followed the principles of grounded theory and derived a range of codes, categories and themes. The interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative data software Atlas-ti. The first cycle of coding involved identifying both inductive and deductive codes and in the second cycle the codes were grouped together in code families. The main code families include daily activities, autonomy and decision making, comparison across households, economic situation, family and linked lives, health condition and access to care, perceptions of residential care homes, perceived impact of children's migration, and relationships in the household.

3. Results

The results show that the older adults use different strategies to deal with their living situation. The two strategies that we highlight in this paper include rationalizing absence and compensating absence. These strategies help older adults to make sense of this trans-local family life, a family life with which they were not acquainted in a previous generation.

3.1. Rationalizing Absence: Inevitable Migration

The migration of their highly educated children was perceived to be inevitable—the parents reasoned that Dharwad was too small to serve their needs. The twin cities of Hubli-Dharwad have many higher education institutions but not many industries, thus the highly educated had to move to the nearest bigger cities in Karnataka such as Bangalore or outside the state to Pune or Mumbai. We observed that many of the international migrants had either lived part of the time in other cities before migrating to other countries. Previous research in the Asian context has also reflected on such inevitability and the need to move out of rural areas and towns [47]. Among the international migrants most of them migrated either as single migrants, have left spouses behind while the rest migrated with their spouses. The emerging family migration literature in Asia also supports such migration trajectories that display the pattern of single migrants, mostly male but increasingly also female, followed by spouses [48,49], children as linked movers [50,51] and parents who (temporarily) move to provide care [22,23].

P: Feels lonely, if someone was there with us, and then it would have been better. We have to think about his life also, don't we! In many families people are going to foreign countries; it is—when it is the question of his career, we cannot restrict him. Even though we think (manasu) he should work here, he may not get a job here in Dharwad that matches his qualification. Because this is not an industrial area, according to his education he may not get a suitable job. I know that he will not get a job here, but I still think that it would be better if he got the job here. (Male, 68 years, living with spouse)

P: Suppose we have some festival and I have prepared some dish that my children like—it's then that time I miss them, my mother's heart remembers them. I don't know about their father, how he feels. We will be going to visit them. I like to go and stay there, but not for a long time. I want to be in Dharwad but I have to think of my children, too: their career is important, and Dharwad is so small that they don't have any opportunities here. (Female, 65 years, co-residing with eldest son and family)

The experiences of our participants exemplify the consequences on uneven development due to transnational flows of capital to select regions/cities. Out-migration due to lack of employment opportunities is a reflection of less attention paid to tier-2 cities and towns. Older adults in our study recognize the importance of freedom to move for their younger family members. Critically viewed this 'freedom to move' for one generation comes at a cost for the older generation as their well-being is tied to availability of the younger people for care provision.

Though they would prefer that their children live with them, the older adults also value autonomy and independent living. The preference to live in Dharwad and in their own homes was linked to the ability to be independent and their access to their social circle. If it came to a situation where they were not able to care for themselves, then they would consider moving in with their children. Their aspirations are very much in line with the 'ageing in place' discussion [52,53] that is being strongly promoted by the western countries.

P: Han! Children gone abroad . . . here only many friends are there; stays alone. They manage very well, we also help them many time. They manage . . . but I feel for their career children need to go. Children need to go, they invite parents also. But it's difficult for old aged people to stay abroad. Difficult to pass time, many people do not know language, do not know English, even if they know, the accent may not be understood and whole day they should stay at home. There all leave home by morning 8 and returns at 9pm only. Nobody stays at home, it's better to stay in India; even two also can live happily. Sometime children say we will send money and suggests keeping servants, parents can keep servants; I feel here it's better to live. (Female, 64 years, International, with children)

We should, however, take into account that in the Indian scenario, the other option of 'ageing in institutional care' is not well developed and carries with it significant cultural stigma [54–56]. Some of the participants had gone through major surgeries and health problems, had then moved in with their

children temporarily, and then moved back to Dharwad. The quote below shows their perceptions regarding old age homes as not being an alternative living arrangement.

P: According to my knowledge old age homes must not be there, because these days if son does not look after his parents or son and daughter in law go away from parents and if we give them trouble then they themselves will put us in old age homes. (Elderly couple, living with one of their non-migrant sons)

Older adults in most of their narratives here rationalize the absence of their children by blaming the region for not providing enough opportunities for work—it made sense to them that their highly skilled children had to emigrate. The inherent cultural schema that adult children would always co-reside, as was the practice in previous generations, is very much apparent in these rationalizations. However, in reality they have to accept that the expectation of return migration or co-residence becomes less of a possibility with the number of years the children live apart from their parents. In their rationalizations they use terms such as sacrifice as a way to make sense of this situation of living apart. The following quote show the constant struggle between expectations and reality.

P: Nothing I feel. Some times I feel that my son should be here. We cannot do any thing, he has to go there for service and this is the question of his life. If I made him to stay here his future will be destroyed. We stay for only four days and will come back; his life should flow further, is it not? So one has to sacrifice. If I want also I cannot do anything. What I can do by making him to stay here with me? He will also suffer mentally that 'my father made me to stay here and what is my future'? He feels bad and his future will be destroyed, his mind will not work. Now he is there outside and he mingles with people, he can study further like any extra courses. So he will grow further in his field. If I oppose for this means I stopped him for further development. So parents have to sacrifice. It is necessary him to stay with us but it cannot happen.

3.2. Compensating for Absence: Migration to Children and Family Visits

In the course of the interviews, participants who were either living on their own or were living close to a daughter were asked if they would like to migrate to live with their children. Most of the participants said they would prefer to live in Dharwad while still able to manage on their own. In case of emergency they would then go to live with their children. In the study we did find couples who said they would expect their children to come and live with them.

P: Ours is a retired life, so we only have to go [to Bangalore] if we need to go for treatment. Nowadays it is not possible for them to come here and stay with us for a month or fifteen days, it would be problematic. Besides which, we can't inconvenience them. Till now that type of situation has not happened, but if it comes then we can explain the problem and pain: if I am sick I would need 15 days treatment, which means I can go to Bangalore for that and stay with them . . . [That way] they can take care of me without missing any work. It is difficult for them to come here and take care of us, so . . . (Male, 60 years, living with spouse)

P: No, there (in USA) they don't care for us in the hospital, [the insurance] only allows treatment of his wife and children; they don't have that facility. Anyway, we can only stay for six months, and they don't check us nor even give tablets, so we are afraid to go there. Also, if he were to call us now [and ask us to], we wouldn't be ready to go because it would be problematic for him. My sugar level fluctuates [dramatically], so I will not go. Sir (husband) went once, but I will not go. (Female, 65 years., living with spouse)

With regard to international migration, the parents preferred to live in Dharwad and to visit their children once a year. They found they could not adjust to the cold climate, different cultural setting and the fact that they had to depend on their children for most things. The participants who had children living in the United States of America reasoned that without the green card they could stay only for six months per visit. In this study, we had only one couple who had a green card and who lived part of the year in the USA and the rest in India.

P: Actually, we should not send our children to foreign countries and according to me they should only stay there for a while, make money, and come back to their native land and get settled (. . .) We saw it when we went there—it's not a real life, because your house can be in one area and the city in another, and one can't feel free to go for a walk because it's considered dangerous; no one walks on the street. It's dangerous—some Blacks there will take all we have; if we don't give it to them, they might kill us and leave us on the street and go. It's not safe in America... Their work is five days a week, but they were busy with it Saturday and Sunday, too! And then we were supposed to just go wherever they wanted to take us, otherwise we were supposed to just sit at home and watch TV... (Male, 77 years, co-residing with eldest son and family)

Living in their own house and close to friends and relatives was perceived to be the ideal choice. They thought that they had more time with their children when the children came to visit them than when they went to visit the children. The shorter visits to their children were something that the older also looked forward to. This gave them an opportunity to spend time with their grandchildren. In her study of transnational families, Baldassar [57] suggested that the emotions of longing and missing motivate kin to create a sense of co-presence through virtual, proxy and physical presence in each other lives. Grand parenting is also seen as an important facet to maintain inter-generational relations. The shorter visits were also more related to purposeful activities such as accessing health care, family gatherings, or caring for grandchildren or for daughters during pregnancy. Two families in this study had migrated to Dharwad in order to live with their sons, who then migrated out of Dharwad to other countries. The parents had stayed, reasoning that the climate and facilities were much better in Dharwad. Participants had also migrated temporarily to live with their children and then returned to Dharwad. The quotes below show us how transnational migration is linked to trans-regional migration as well as return migration.

P: My daughter was doing a MA study in Karnataka University where my son was also studying for a M.Sc.; my husband retired, and travelling was not comfortable for our children. My son decided we should stay in Dharwad so we came here. (. . .) When we were in Navalgund we used to do those things (religious activities), here, it's like a golden jail for me; other house members or our neighbours never came out of their house to talk with us. I feel I have been kept in a golden jail; actually, I am from a village called Mushegeri. (Female, 57 years, co-residing with grandchildren and youngest daughter)

P: My first son was doing a B.E. (Bachelors of Engineering) and after his completion he went to Bangalore for his M.S. He ended up completing his M.S. in the U.K. University. My second son graduated with honours from his MBA programme and he also went to Bangalore. My daughter and myself lived here (in Dharwad) for three to four years. My sons said no need to stay here, so then we both moved to Bangalore, too (. . .) I was there for seven years and am back here now just one or one and a half years (in Dharwad) (after the marriage of the daughter). (Female, 57 years widow, living on her own)

The more local social capital the participants had, the less they reported the need to move in with their children. Those with daughters preferred to move closer to the daughter's house but not to co-reside. Co-residing with a daughter was seen to be culturally inappropriate. With patrilocality and the cultural schemas that surround the move of the daughter from her natal to her marital home, that daughter's obligations towards her parents are not taken into account. Seeing the daughter as belonging to a different family, the older adults did not expect her to care for them as they grew older.

P: I will be back and forth between here and Bangalore, if my younger daughter gets married, and then there may be a change. My elder daughter says to come and stay with them, and if we are not ready, at least to come and stay in a rental house—they would arrange for that. (. . .) I don't want to give them trouble [by asking them to move here], as she is married and her child goes to school and her husband has to work. They will face inconveniences. I don't have that many problems, I'd like to go. I don't know if my husband would, though, because he has to look after his sister. He would say,

'you go, I won't go'. His mentality is different. (Female, 62 years, living with spouse and a mentally challenged sister-in-law)

Previous studies on living arrangements of the older adults have shown that they prefer living specifically with sons [58,59]. This also partially explains the societal norms and pressures surrounding the preference for sons in India [60]. Older adults in this study had various level of autonomy when they had to use resources for themselves. Economic independence was a key to autonomy and decision-making among the elderly. What we did see however is that there is a gender difference in the extent of power or role in the decision-making. Women who were homemakers had less say in the process and depended on their husbands to make the decisions on issues surrounding purchase, health care. Following the husbands, it was the adult sons who took on the role. Among the participants who did not have a son it was the role of the elder daughter and the son-in-law who aided in critical situations where decision-making was involved.

P: No, till now that situation has not come and if we go to Bangalore for any health checkup then he (son-in-law) will pay and he will not ask anything. If we go to pay him back then he will say to us that since your other daughter is still studying let her study and after that she will work and if needed she will give (the money) and you don't worry at all. He is very helpful to us. (Male, 64 years living with spouse)

3.3. Compensating for Absence: Mobile Phones and Internet

Participants felt with the arrival of the mobile phone it was easier for the children living away to contact them. It also gave the opportunity for the parents to reach their children in case of emergency. The frequency of calls varied among families: some families spoke to their sons and their family on a daily basis, whereas others spoke to them on the weekend. The reliance on the phone and the easy accessibility it provided served as a coping mechanism for living far away from their children.

P: No, we don't miss them emotionally, we don't feel that they are far from us; they are in touch with us via phone and Skype.

I: How often do they call you?

P: Once a week and we even have an ISD facility in our phone, if any emergency happens, we give them a miss call, and they call us immediately. They are always available for us. (Male, 57 years, living with spouse in joint family with the widow of his elder brother)

The use of mobile phones and Internet then reduces the distance between the households and compensates for the absence with a daily or weekly exchange of domestic issues [61,62]. The use of computers and internet was rare and reported more among parents with children abroad. Participants found it difficult to use the computer or the internet and depended on someone else to help with the contact. Few of the participants used emails or made video calls. The digital divide affects the older adults more – those who never had the chance or need to learn to use computers. The prevalence of smartphones in India may now be reducing this barrier. Participants who did use the internet and its applications such as Skype and webcam appreciated that fact that they could see and share in the lives of their children and grandchildren. This technology facilitated the development of emotional connections and bonds.

P: No, I don't keep contact via that (computer) because I don't know how to use it, actually I didn't even have a phone, so my granddaughter told me to get one because even servants have cell phones (in the USA). She also taught me how to use it, and told me she will teach me computer after coming back. We did not have these computers, so I don't know how to use them. I don't like them! (Female, 65 years, co-residing with spouse and eldest son)

P: I miss him that's all, in functions, festivals, and get together parties, we miss them, but weekly they call us, they speak with us in web cam, we see them and speak, my granddaughter goes to day

care center, so what she has learnt there she will inform me, we love speaking with our granddaughter. Whenever we need them we just give them a call, they will come, but the problem is that they are far from us, but when we speak in web cam we feel they are here only. (Female, 60, Co-residing with spouse)

The participants who lived with one of their children did not report problems vis-à-vis communicating with their children. They could discuss most issues. There were only two families who had a troubled relationship with their children living close by. In both cases, the older adults reported that the children neither communicated on daily basis nor enquired about their health. In a survey carried out across seven states in India, nearly one-fifth of older adults living on their own reported never being contacted by their non-co-residing children [63], p. 83. Non-communication and neglect lead to lower well-being and is a major cause of loneliness among the older adults.

3.4. Compensating for Absence: Kin and Non-Kin Support

Some of the participants perceived that even though they had the economic resources to pay for their own care, there were not enough people around to provide it. Thus, in many situations, they had made other arrangements, such as getting the groceries or medicines delivered to their home. The main concern was in cases of emergency they needed someone close who could provide care. Those parents with children abroad relied on extended family members or non-kin relations to provide care for them.

P: I feel better now that they are close by—[smile]—just in case I have any problems, they could be here immediately. When he was in America he used to come every two or three years, [smile] but now I feel like he's just in Dharwad, because whenever there is any emergency he takes the car and comes immediately. ...Why should we spoil their lives? He is working for the future of his family. As for mine—it is nearly over, today or tomorrow, I will die. (Male, 71 yrs., living with spouse)

In Table 1 we provide three case studies that illustrate the kind of support the older adults received from both kin and non-kin. Miltiades [64] emphasizes that the availability of hired domestic help makes independent living more possible for parents with migrant children. The case studies show how within this small group of participants, care giving is moving from the sphere of the family outwards to non-kin actors, which has an effect on the social structure of the household. As seen in the quotes, some of the non-kin caregivers were incorporated into the family structure by the assigning of fictive kinship terms such as 'like my son or daughter'. Case study number three is an example of this trend. In this household, the older widower's care giver lives with him, together with his wife and children. The widower then compares them to his biological children and reports that he receives more care and affection from the 'adopted son and his family'. Douglass [65,66] uses the concept of 'global householding' to show how family life is conducted through non-kin actors performing care-giving roles. Though his concept applies to international migration, it is also useful to explain how non-kin are incorporated into the household at different levels. In this study we see that assigning fictive kinship terms reduces the 'strangeness' of non-kin entering intimate domains of care giving.

Table 1. Kin and non-kin care and support for the older adults.

Case Study	Household	Nature of Care	Gender of Care Giver	Relation to the Care Giver	Quote
1	Older couple	Visits twice a day	Female	Domestic help	P: My mother lived with me, she lived for 97 years, we were in need of one person to look after her, bathe her and care for her, so we had a servant, and she has been here for the last 20 years . . . mornings she comes at nine and does all work and goes to school to work as a care-taker, and in the evening she comes at five and does all the cleaning up until five thirty and then goes back to her home. She shops for vegetables, cleans the kitchen etc.
2	Older couple	Live-in care giver	Female	Relative	P: We kept our relative's girl here for four years and gave her an education here. She stayed in our house. They were poor people and were also in trouble, that's why we kept her with us. She stayed here up to 4 years, which was very useful to us. After she completed 10th grade, she left. Our children advise us to create a similar situation now, to have a girl come stay with us. I am suffering from little knee pain, so I have little trouble walking.
3	Widower	Live-in care giver	Male and a Female	Son of a former employee	P: There was a watchman called K, and his son is S. I meet him told that I am alone , my Mrs. (wife) has died so there is no one to look after me , [so I told K,] I want your boy to cook for me. I will look after him, and the condition is that he has to take care of me. I'll take care of all financial matters, but he has to cook, and look after me. Later he got married now he and his wife look after me a lot—I have experienced such affection from them that when I compare them to my own children, I think my own children don't love me. They don't even come to see me.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed the experiences of older adults living away from their children. Ageing in itself brings about many physical and social challenges. With migration of younger family member this situation gets further exacting. The transnational flows of people and capital from the Global South to the North create spaces of absences for the left behind. They then have to find new ways of coping/strategies with this absence. These strategies of rationalizing and compensating for absence reflect the resilience of older adults in dealing with the absence of their adult children. Much of the literature has focused on how migrants yearn for home and are involved in transnational family ties, while relatively fewer studies focus on the people left behind and their efforts in sustaining the transnational ties [4,35]. Setting up of a transnational family life through visits, communication and asking for non-kin support are the way different ways older adults and their children maintain a sense of co-presence in each other's lives.

The narratives on rationalizing absence point towards a specific coping behavior exercised by the older adults, which entails blaming the city/town for not being able to retain their highly educated children. With uneven development characterized by rampant urbanization and the concentration of industries in major cities, the smaller towns and rural areas are bound to experience decline in population. Countries such as India with reducing fertility and increasing longevity will soon have

to face the situation where smaller towns and rural areas experience population decline, especially among the young, working-age population [67,68]. The striking element with regards to the impact of migration is the emotional costs suffered by those left behind, a burden which is being eclipsed by their desire to consider the happiness of the migrated children. Geriatric care and counselling initiatives are almost unheard of in the developing country context [69]. Future research needs to take note of a possible increase in mental health issues such as loneliness and lower life satisfaction.

One of the key contributions of this paper is the discussion on the agency of the older adults in making sense of their surroundings and finding ways to cope or overcome the hardship of the situation. This is in line with the wider debate that older adults need not be seen as passive sufferers of the migration process, but more so as active agents who take control of their lives and employ ways to maintain the sense of family across geographical locations. The older adults show their agency in dealing with their living arrangements by compensating for the absence of their family with short visits, communicating with the children via telephone and computer, and tapping on kin and non-kin support. Remaining in their own homes and keeping to their social circles aids in retaining an appearance of normalcy as well as a sense of stability that they do not wish to change by moving to co-reside with their children. The role of non-kin in the lives of the older adults and the manner in which the older adults incorporate them into their family through fictive kinship gives a new dimension to the exchange of care and resources. In societies where institutional care and welfare regimes for older adults are not well developed, the incorporation of non-kin into the household is one of the ways in which local solutions are found to continue care provision and give space for emergence of a local economy of care. This paper contributes to the emerging focus on the lives and perspectives of the people left behind by the emigration family members, paying particular attention to their role in sustaining family life across the distance.

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