

Old Age

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Aging is a long term process of change for both individuals and populations. However, the concept and process of aging are surrounded by considerable controversy and suspect evidence. Human aging is a process of differentiation and individualization. Aging has two integral elements – intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic aging means those age-related processes that are internal and specific to the individual, while extrinsic aging comprises those age-related changes that are brought about by external factors related to the physical and social environment of the individual (United Nations, 1982). Older persons, who were born at a particular historical time, and in a particular region and society, belong to a cohort sharing similar social and historical experiences, life-styles and other characteristics which differentiate them from other older persons born at different historical periods in diverse social situations. Individuals derive social meanings and develop expectations regarding themselves, their families and their society as they grow older from these processes of aging and within the context of social, historical, cultural and economic situations.

Old age is a relative concept which varies from society to society. In fact, there are several explanations of old age and we are likely to slip unknowingly from one to another. Though aging is a universal process, identifying the chronological threshold to old age is not possible. Depending on the expectation of life, the definition of old age is found to vary from about 40 in some developing countries to 70 and beyond in some developed countries.

The common assumption is that the passage of time , as measured by the chronological age , is a reliable index of changes in our minds and bodies, and in our abilities and limitations. But

this assumption is highly erroneous which is well illustrated by the example of compulsory retirement (Kastenbaum, 1979). The age of 65 is still the most frequent cut-off point for compulsory retirement in developed countries although more diversity has been shown lately. It is the institution of retirement which clearly labelled a section of persons old. Social historians contend that the social constructs of 'youth' and 'old age' have in fact grown up after the industrial revolution (Aries, 1962). There is no scientific support for retirement at any particular chronological age. These age markers have no foundation in any biological reality. Instead, political and economic reasons have been responsible for the age-based retirement practice. In India, the mandatory age of retirement of most of the personnel in government service ranges from 55 to 60. Only a small section could work till 65.

The World Assembly on Aging held in 1982 under the auspices of the United Nations adopted the definition of aging population as persons 60 years and older without obscuring the great individual, societal and temporal differences in actual and perceived characteristics of the elderly population. The United Nations (1985) report adds that such a demarcation is convenient only for statistical analysis. The Census of India has been adopting the age of 60 years to classify a person as old. Gerontologist Neugarten (1974) points out that, with increased survival rates and improved health, it is becoming apparent that there are two, rather than one, strata of aging population, which she has distinguished as the young-old (up to 74 years) and the old-old (75 years and above). **Ayurveda**, the traditional system of Indian medicine, divides human life span into ten stages and categorizes the aging persons into two broad groups : **Vriddha** (60 to 80 years) and **Jaratha** (above 80 years).

The definition of old age is dependent on the cultural norms and social context of any society. In India, **Shashtiabda** (completion of 60 years), is traditionally celebrated as a significant milestone, while the completion of 70 years is celebrated as **Sapthadi**, which is an achievement in

the life span of an individual. It is the duty of the offsprings to celebrate these milestones. But these are observed only by the well-to-do and those belonging to the upper castes. In most of the societies under the influence of Chinese culture, the sixty-first birthday has been associated with the beginning of old age (Maeda 1978). In ancient China, the calendar year was named with the combination of two sets of Chinese characters – one consisted of twelve characters and the other five characters. Therefore, on becoming sixty-one years old, the name of that year becomes same as that of the year of birth. Hence the sixty-first year after birth is called **Kanreki** (return of the calendar) which is often regarded as the beginning of second childhood. In Japan many people used to hold a passing rite to mark **Kanreki**. At the time of the ceremony of **Kanreki**, the person becoming sixty-one used to be presented by the children and relatives with a red vest designed to signify the coming of second childhood. Generally speaking, people of sixty years of age and over are not obliged to work to earn money. In other words, **kanreki** signifies the social sanction permitting entry into **Inkyo**, meaning retired life, though most Japanese elderly people continue to work. But now the concept of old age is changing greatly in Japan. Age sixty marks a universally accepted point in time for entry into the oldest generation in China (Friedmann, 1983). Consequently, in terms of social functioning, the years between fifty and sixty are a transition period in which Chinese men and women come increasingly to be seen by others and by themselves as old, while the years after sixty mark a clearcut turning point and are virtually always designated as the years of old age.

The marriage of one's children –particularly of one's sons – marks the beginning of old age in Indian society far more clearly than does the passing of a specified number of years. This is especially so for women (Vatuk, 1975). The arrival of grandchildren is strongly associated with the onset of old age in Indian and many other societies. The birth of a first grandchild also encourages self identification as an old person. For those persons who had their child at about eighteen and whose first

born also had a first child at eighteen, grandparenthood can come as early as age thirty-five or thirty-six. The effects of the family life cycle may have different implications for people living in different cultures. In societies, where marriage and child bearing occur at young ages, persons may achieve the “old age” status of grandparent while in their thirties as discussed earlier. In other contexts, where childbearing is delayed because of the desire of young women for education and work experience, persons attain this status at more advanced ages. Thus, even if persons are defined as “elderly” with reference to similar social roles, there are great differences among societies in the chronological age at which such roles are attained (United Nations, 1985).

Society has another way of classifying people by age. Anthropologists refer to this as age-grading. It has been the most important basis of age distinction in many societies. Age is a very important element of social organization that anthropologists are convinced that age-grading is a universal feature in the assignment of social roles, rights and responsibilities in modern as well as pre-industrial societies though the nature of the criteria used in the distribution of roles varies. As people encounter the sequence of age-graded roles, rites of passage are one of the mechanisms used by society to indicate their movement from one phase of the life cycle to the next. Originally such rites were celebrated by highly ritualized ceremonies and had as their function the provision of an institutionalized means for facilitating the cessation of certain behaviour and the introduction of a new set of expectations (Hendricks & Hendricks, 1977).

Age-grading can be as powerful as chronological age in shaping a person’s life. The rules of behaviour are often quite different for the various grades. This means that moving from adulthood to old age can have different implications, according to the rules that characterize a particular society’s age-grading. Age-grading establishes guidelines as to who should do what kind of work and who owes what kind of obligation to whom, and so on. In a thoroughly age-graded society, everybody has a

pretty good idea of what he or she is supposed to be doing at a particular time of life. Kastenbaum (1979) observes that becoming an elder is often an improvement in status for the woman in age-graded societies.

A contribution towards an integrated concept of age was made by Birren (1959), in differentiating the concepts of biological, psychological and social age. Biological age refers to the position of an organism with respect to its remaining potential longevity. Psychological age refers to an organism's level of adaptability, that is, the state of those capacities which permit the individual to adapt to external and internal environmental demands. Social age is the individual's position in expected age-graded social roles and social habits. The concept of functional age has been added to these three different concepts of age.

A person's functional age is viewed as a composite index of his potential biological, psychological and social capacities, and his current or manifest ability to adapt competently and efficiently to environmental demands of working or living conditions. In other words, the more these three dimensions of an individual's functioning enable him to adapt successfully, the "less old" he or she is.

There is a plethora of terms in gerontological literature to refer to persons as they grow older, indicating the uncertainty prevailing in all societies towards the later years of life. 'Old', 'aged', 'elderly', 'mature' , 'senior citizens' , 'old old' and 'older people' are the commonly used terminologies. Some prefer to use the adjective 'older' to 'old' which (whether as noun or adjective) is falsely suggestive of the existence of a group clearly distinctive from the not-old. The same objection applies to the terms 'aged' and 'elderly' whereas the word 'older' does not have such dichotomous reference as we are all older than some and younger than some others. Even 'older' is extremely vague as far as chronological precision is concerned; so are the other age-terms (The Open University, 1979). The World Assembly on Aging preferred the term "the aging" as it highlights

the process of continuous aging of individuals even when they are already “aged” or “elderly”(United Nations, 1985).

Lesnoff-Caravaglia (1986) is vehemently critical of such terms. She observes that not only do meaningless euphemisms abound, but researchers adopt confusing labels such as the young old, the old old, the oldest old, the mature, the elderly, the very old, the aged, senior citizens, or the “risky” versus the “frisky” built upon their own characterizations of aging. She offers the following categorization scheme (developed jointly with Marcia Klys) : septuagenarians (70 to 79 years old), octogenarians (80 to 89 years old), nonagenarians (90 to 99 years old), centenarians (100 to 109 years old), and centedecianarians (110 to 119 years old). Yet the difficulties in finding a satisfactory terminology of “old age” continue. Perhaps this reflects the general unease in all societies about old age.

The Hindu scriptures divide the life of a man into four stages or **asramas** :**brahmacharya**, **grihastha**, **vanaprastha** and **samnyasa**. The first is the stage of study, discipline and celibacy, and the second that of the householder. The third stage, **vanaprastha**, starts when the hair of the householder turns white and he sees his son’s son. He should relinquish his responsibilities to his sons and retire from the active pursuit of material life. He should leave the family (**kula**), the home (**griha**), and the village (**grama**), and go to the forest (**vana**) to live there as a hermit leaving his wife to the care of the sons. Though the presence of wife was permitted in the forest, he should withdraw from sexual relations and bring under control his senses of enjoyment. **Vanaprastha** is the preparatory stage for the final separation from the pains and pleasures of human life. In the final stage, the individual leads the life of an ascetic casting off all attachment (**samgam**)

with the world striving for the attainment of his spiritual goals and the final salvation (**moksha**). A staff, a begging bowl, and a few rags of clothing are his only belongings. A **samnyasin** or an ascetic is a person who has made complete (**sam**) renunciation (**nyasa**)of everything; a totally detached person

(Prabhu, 1961.). This, however, has been the scriptural ideal, but not the usual social practice. It is unlikely that the scriptural prescriptions of detachedness were ever practised to any significant extent. Even in the remote past, only a negligibly small number, that too belonging to the higher castes, would have adhered to the scriptural norms. In fact, observance of the four **asramas** was expected only of those who were born into the twice-born castes – **brahmans** (priests), **kshatriyas** (rulers) and **vaishyas** (merchants). Further, the scriptures do not articulate whether the women should observe the four **asramas**. The woman, according to the laws of Manu, should remain under the control of her father in childhood, under that of her husband in youth, and on the husband's death under that of her son. The **vanaprastha and samnyasa** stages, though not followed by most persons, have, however, a profound influence on the thinking and behaviour of people.

To sum up, it is evident that old age defies any specific definition. It is not a mere statistical categorization or fact. The social definition of old age depends on the norms of a particular society. Ageing and being an older person are essentially social and cultural phenomena.

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Old People of Makunti

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Makunti is a small, multi-caste, kin - oriented village located in the Malnad track of Karnataka. The people are generally following their traditional occupations according to their caste. The population of the village was 1,630 (850 males and 780 females) and the total number of households was 315. For the study, persons aged 55 and above were defined as old. Accordingly, there were 154 elderly persons (81 men and 73 women) in the village.

Makunti people use different terms to identify the elderly or old persons: Yajamana, Hiriya, and Muduka; Yajamani, Hiriyalu and Muduki are terms for women. The term Hiriya means the elder, the leader, the husband and the older person. The term Yajamana means, in addition, the owner and the employer. But Muduka means older person only. Every Muduka is not considered as Yajamana or Hiriya. For, the younger people also occupy the seats of Yajamana or Hiriya. These are the terms of title. But the convention requires the Makunti people to address all the older persons with the term Hiriya. When a person becomes a grand-father of his son's child he is known as Ajja or Tata in relation to the newborn. For a grandmother the terms used are Aji or Avva. The terms are used not only to identify one's grandfather or grandmother but also used for addressing any old person by any one.

Normally the eldest son leaves the family after his marriage. Owing to the departure of the eldest son the family suffers changes, no doubt. But it is welcomed by the family as well as by others, as it is considered to have averted the major disaster for the family, i.e., the partition of it. The eldest son, however, would allege that his younger brothers, their wives and children are always helped and supported by the parents, and not his

wife and children. The departure of the first son, though it averts a major crisis, does not cease to create a series of tensions in the family. It is, in a way, the beginning of the family break-up and it is a clear indication of the declining authority of the elderly persons.

An interesting point is to be noted here with regard to the partition of the family. If both the parents are alive, and if they desire to live together, they may do so. The parents would be given a portion of the house, a piece of land or whatever that is decided by the village elders who sit in judgement on such occasions. But often the parents, along with the land, house, utensils, ornaments, grains, money and such other trivial things, are also divided. It is found that if the choice is left to the sons to choose between the two parents, they would prefer the mother to the father and if the choice is given to the daughters-in-law they would prefer the father-in-law to the mother-in-law. The son probably thinks that the mother would work in the house and look after him and his children well; while the daughter-in-law probably feels that the father-in-law would not interfere in domestic matters, unlike the mother-in-law who would always pass critical remarks, pointing out the "defects" of the daughter-in-law. This type of choice has psychological implications. If the parents are given the choice, they would prefer to stay with the youngest son if he is unmarried or has married their granddaughter. Otherwise, they would prefer to stay independent of their sons. As has already been stated, the partition of the family takes place during the advanced age of the older parents. The persons, who are relatively young, say between the years of 55 and 64, are actively engaged in the organization of their family. Those who are above 64 years are mostly widowed and have lost interest in their life and they are removed from the sphere of controlling and co-ordinating the threads of family life.

Family life in Makunti is shaped mainly by the agrarian economy, and even those who are not agriculturists are also influenced by that economy as they play complementary roles to those of the agriculturists. There are rich young men of

agricultural occupations who have brought new things from the urban communities to be used in their homes. Changes, therefore, are found in the types of vessels, kind of dishes and in the mode of eating. Otherwise the traditional way of family life continues to influence the members.

The kinship and the sub-caste are the wider spheres for the activities of the older persons. In the family the elderly person, the father or the grandfather, may be ignored. But the kinsmen do not disregard the elderly person unless they have special reason to do so. The older person is either a grandparent, or a relative-in-law (a near relative always), and he or she is on the periphery of the kinship world. The person is consulted on various domestic, marital, religious and legal matters. The older is the one who is spared to attend to the relatives whenever the latter is in need of such help. Sometimes the old man is seen guarding his relative's house when the owner is gone on urgent business.

During various rituals, the older persons are specially invited by the relatives, and especially on the ceremonies connected with the child, and of marriage and death. In Makunti, on the third year of the child, a ceremony called ChettigavvanaVara is performed. Chettigavva is the deity of children's diseases. The deity is to be propitiated or appeased, so that she will not trouble the child, and in addition, she is said to prevent any evil spirit from attacking the child. It is the maternal grandparent who is very much interested in attending such functions.

Settling marital alliance of the partners is still in the hands of the elders; there are deviations in the village of course. Some young men have tried at selecting their own partners against the desires of their parents. There are also instances of divorce. Apart from attending ceremonies, the elders are associated with solving disputes that arise between kinsmen; of course the elders of the Lingayat caste are also the elders of the village. That way there cannot be much distinction in their case between the two spheres (caste or community) of activities. But the relatives prefer the elderly persons of their group to take the major role in the solution of their problems.

Though the older persons in Makunti are playing still their traditional roles in their families, among kinsmen and caste fellows and in the village as a whole, they are losing their grip on the younger persons. Much against their desire, their sons get the property and family divided, try to get brides of their liking, spend money on things which the older persons consider it to be a waste, oppose their decisions and even at times beat them. Formerly, the kinsmen and caste people, it is said, used to consult the aged, follow their advice in a number of matters and rarely went against their decisions. But now the elders are not consulted on certain important matters. In the case of village administration, it is quite visible that the younger persons have replaced the elders, and the earlier actions of the latter with regard to the developmental activities in the village are severely criticized by the former. The replacement of the aged by the young, how-ever, has not led to the improvement of village conditions. Disputes between the villagers, the kinsmen and even between the brothers are nowadays taken to court of law instead of to the elders for solution.

The changes taking place in the community are not welcomed by the aged. They show their distress in a number of ways. Their declining authority has added another dimension to their age-old problems. They feel they are not sufficiently fed and clothed by their sons and relatives. The aged attribute all this to the play of Kali, the Lord of Kaliyuga. Some feel it may be their bad fate or their action in their past life (Karma). However, the neglect of the aged by the young and immoral actions committed by the people are clear indications, according to them, of the onset of Adharma (unrighteousness). Similarly, the failure of rains, frequent visits of famine, low rate of agricultural yield and the rampant poverty are, they believe, due to the neglect of virtuous ways of living by the people in modern days. And some young people also agree with them.

According to the villagers, a virtuous person is one who respects and obeys the elders, protects the parents, is polite and speaks always the truth, does not deceive others, does not think

in terms of breaking away from their parents and brothers, marries the girl selected by the elders and lives with her for life, looks upon all women (excepting of course, his wife) as his mothers and sisters, earns his living honestly, does not flaunt his wealth, does not look down upon the poor and the depressed, and does not break the traditional practices set by his caste and forefathers. But these ideals of behaviour are not always found in all the persons, even including the aged. People quarrel for trivial matters, elope with girls, divorce wives, steal from fields, deceive the kin and the aged, beat the parents, run away from home leaving their wives and children to starve, and speak lies. It is insisted by the aged that the number of violators of Dharmic norms and the incidence of sinful actions are increasing these days.