

Old Age in Prehistory

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Scholarly studies or doctrinal attempts usually stop at elucidating the various functional facets of a process, while social activists attempt to manipulate the issues that cause human misery. These are the two poles in the swing of a pendulum, but both miss the point that human culture is a process in time. Hence a synchronic approach to culture is grossly inadequate.

We have just observed the International year of the Aged People, and we have tried the world over to understand and solve the problems of contemporary old people. In this discourse, archaeological and historical clues to aging are relegated to the back seat. To my knowledge, rarely do we address ourselves to the archaeology of aging, a gap in our knowledge I intend to address here.

To begin, old age is not a phenomenon unknown in the past. It is natural to an individual's life span and each community has its own cultural apparatus to deal with it. It can, however, become a matter of serious concern when a community consists of a substantial number of old persons. In prehistoric times one may logically surmise that such a situation could hardly arise because both birth and death rates were high and governed by natural law. This enabled a society to maintain a demographic balance in terms of age and sex which was best suited to the overall adaptational strategy. Modern medicine on one hand and the cultural preferences for nuclear family (with less number of children) on the other hand, has created a distortion of the demographic structure. Cumulatively, this distortion progressively increases the load which the cultural apparatus of a society is unable to manage.

Archaeologists are naturally curious to know if such a problem ever arose in the past. If it did, how was it solved. But the interpretation of past societies is not possible with the usual material available to archaeologists who deal with mute objects, the products of past human activities. Studies conducted on contemporary 'primitive' (simple) societies show that such activities might

not have been as simple as was presumed by early archaeologists. It is primarily because we cannot overlook the possible conglomerate of symbolic interaction that operates in group behaviour. Our interpretation of past societies, therefore, have to be cautious. Based on extended logic they are more at the level of a possibility.

It has been argued by anthropologists that the earliest human social organization was a band which consisted of one or two adult males, several adult females and a large number of children. Usually such a band had 30 to 40 individuals, of which almost a third were sub-adults. There is no reason to believe that such a group would not utilize the entire fertility span of its women (notwithstanding the short life-span of this stage). Yet, the number of live children could never exceed a limit because of high infant mortality. Studies conducted on the available skeletons from prehistoric sites have indicated a surprisingly low level of longevity. For the period between 1 million years to about 10,000 B.C. the mean longevity is estimated to be merely 27 years. From this we may infer that the old age stress must have been virtually non-existent during this period.

It is suggested by some that band exogamy might have developed (with wives moving to their husbands' band) to prevent able bodied males being constantly lured to competing bands with the help of their female inmates. If allowed to continue, it can deplete the hunting potential of one band while increasing the same in another. Enforcement of mate exchange regulation must have maintained the resource retrieval potentiality of a band. It is not surprising, therefore, that may prehistorians believe that mate regulation might have been a matter of greater concern in band societies than the actual quest for food. Indirectly it also indicates that these members of a band who were closer to their maximum limit of life expectancy were fairly dependent upon the adults for subsistence. Otherwise the need for constructing such a cultural mechanism would not have arisen. However, to

maintain such cultural rules beyond one's life time (i.e., in successive generations) is not easy, and can be achieved only with the help of rigorous ideological dictates. Therefore, the concept of 'social aging' must have come into practice. It can be said that for the various stresses the solutions would always be sought culturally. Early ethnographies by Christian missionaries refer to certain communities where old were left to die or killed (and even eaten) by members of the lineage. Even when these documents are discarded as preposterous reporting, one has to admit that these might have been the legitimate cultural solutions a society evolved in areas of scarce subsistence where an invalid member was incapable of constantly moving with a hunting band.

Hunting and defending territorial boundaries was left to the young. The older members are relieved of labour intensive activities, but it does not make them parasitic. They can easily take over the job to fashion and repair implements, dwelling structures, make and maintain fire as also take care of social order within the band. Decision regarding the band's mobility to a new camp, or the season when specific animals or plants are to be targeted or any decision regarding social or economic activities of the band must have been prerogative of the older members.

One may argue that if longevity was so low, sexual competition between members must have been present till one's death. Such a situation can create considerable stress within the society. Prehistory does not yield any information about the management of such a possibility. However, if we assume that marriage as an institution was non-existent in remote past, it becomes easy to formulate a strategy of management of mating within the band. Studies on lower primates demonstrate that a 'suitable female' in rut obliges several males wishing to mount her according to the strict rule of alpha-male hierarchy. Earliest human organizations may not have experienced this stress, otherwise a cultural device to remedy it would have certainly evolved.

Contemporary hunter-gatherers have the institution of marriage, although in many cases it is reduced to a fragile contractual relationship. A glance at tribal societies shows that the status and role of elder members of the group shift to

esoteric realm. Meillassoux (a reputed social theoretician) has demonstrated that authority may reside in the monopoly of 'social knowledge'. Usually institutional barriers are erected to delay the access to such knowledge. In prehistoric societies, probably such barriers were not needed and one could enter the power base smoothly with the progression of social age. When the possibility of more contestants to the power base increases then these artificial barriers become important. Initiation is one such barrier which can select out contestants to adulthood.

Among some Australian aborigines initiation ceremonies continue until the age of twenty five (or at times even thirty). Considering the fact that the average longevity of the tribals seldom exceeds 60 years, the delayed initiation prevents these people from economic independence for almost half of their adulthood. Seen from the angle of older members, it is clear that this mechanism helps them to have the benefit of the resource retrieval potentiality of the strongest in the group. Since only the fully initiated can marry, the young men are usually beholden to the elders who circumcise (or initiate) them and then provide a daughter in marriage. The elders, as such, not only retain their monopoly on social knowledge but also gain economic control. This is further enhanced by the old man's ability to take several wives. By this he can delay the time of his entering into the androgenic phase and hence postpone social aging. Evidently, both the means of production and reproduction tend to polarise to the elders. In contrast to Australian aborigines where at least every member has a right to enter the elder or social knowledge group, among the Nomlaki of California only a select few are initiated, hence a large majority can never enter the privileged category.

Palaeolithic hunter-gathers (2 million years to 10,000 B.C.) probably had a simple band structure without any specific stress of old and invalid individuals. It is only during Late Palaeolithic (35,000 to 10,000 B.C.) that considerable change in their chosen habitat and economy is noted. The important role that hunting rituals must have played in their life is reasonably indicated in their art. This also shows their complete involvement with large-game

hunting as against the trapping of r-selected species (by this we mean short maturation species and also usually having multiple birth). Such hunting behaviour requires a relatively compact and co-operative group. Redistribution of the produce becomes an additional requirement. No norm can become functionally operational unless a selected few members are vested with power. Like in the tribal world discussed earlier, one may visualize the possibility of 'social knowledge' forming the basis of power structure.

Archaeologically the only evidence which alludes to this kind of a position for the elderly is reported from a cave site named Shanidar in present day Iraq. Here the skeleton of a 27 year old male was found which shows extreme affliction of osteo-arthritis. Such a stage of the disease could have reached only through a long duration of suffering which makes a patient bed-ridden and immobile. The band members must have taken care of him for all this period so that he survived in the stage he was. This behaviour cannot be ruled out as mere altruism - a faculty which even the earliest man is also believed to have developed. But possibility of altruism in the earliest human society is believed to be present only for new born or young ones. Consequently, considering his age which is the upper limit of life expectancy, one can surmise this man as socially powerful and hence important.

Farming societies have begun at different dates in different parts of the world. In Middle East it can be put within 6000-4000 B.C. bracket. In many parts of India, farming emerges as late as 2000 B.C. This change in economy from foraging to farming called for substantial social changes. These changes were pre-requisites to the success of man's chosen economy, hence could not be avoided. As agriculture is a 'delayed returning' labour intensive economy, human management becomes focal to this mode of subsistence. Institution of family and marriage are heavily emphasized within the group. In fact, the management of its members is easily carried out through the operative mechanisms of kin ties and obligation. To maintain this arrangement, the society creates a suitable ideology and a mosaic of rituals. Thus, the activities related to basic subsistence often appears secondary to

those related to inter- and intra-population management. Surplus storage and redistribution of produce can be easily managed through established norms of ties and obligation, in addition to gift exchange and even feast giving. Although craft specialization is normally denied for the pre-metal stage, age and sex grading must have been well established by then. In this system, the elder could occupy important positions as they were the repository of knowledge. Further, because of their proximity to dead ancestors they were also the intercessors, between the 'inner' and the 'other' world.

The institutions of invoking the spirit of lineage ancestors for health and prosperity and dispel disease and crop failure elevated the older members to an avowed status. In the pre-statehood and farming societies the privileged status of the older members must have been nearly universal. An early state rose around the fourth millennium B.C. and more often than not this coincided with discovery of metal and rise of professionals. This kind of a society could not have functioned without a strong and polarised power base. Manufacturing secondary products (like beads, metal ornaments, etc.) on the strength of the surplus of primary produce (agricultural products took up an important position) of a designated segment of the population (artisans). These product subsequently entered the channel of trade and commerce bringing prosperity to the power base.

One of the earliest set of governing laws of a society is given by Hammurabi (probably around 2300 B.C.) for the Babylonians. The annotation and elucidating of this body of law gives rich information about the struggles of city states where the basic success of the society is sought either by trade or war. Many contingencies are anticipated and provided for in this law. It discloses a persistent effort to guard the owner of property against loss. The supremacy of the kind, the privileges guaranteed to soldiers and magistrates in land owning and infliction of penalties disbursed by the king on transgressors are elaborately discussed. The absence of any specific deliberation of who should retire and when from the power position, indicates that old age as a rehabilitative problem of the family or the state must have been non-existent in these early states.

The social and economic life under the earliest Hellenic world (nearly another 1000 year later in Greece) also shows that there was hardly any change in attitude towards senior members. Kings selected their officials more or less in an arbitrary manner. Sometimes they are known to have even transgressed the usual practice of excluding slaves from bureaucracy or military functions. (Wilbur Smith describes the role of Tahita the slave during the 11th Egyptian dynasty quite vividly in his novel, *River God*).

These men, like the king himself, accumulated a stock professional knowledge which was partly borrowed from the past through elderly instructors. Also partly this was further elaborated by themselves through hard work and practice. They were then supposed to pass it on to their successors, the accumulated experience, in this process, maintained the tradition. That there was hardly any conflict experienced by the population in this process of transfer from one generation to the next is indicated by the fact that the well known *Theban* documents make no specific prescription on aging. It would appear from Hammurabi's laws or even Egyptian scrolls that the aged not only enjoyed the privilege of being the keeper of 'social knowledge' but also his status used to be hallowed by the presiding divinity of the community. If conflict management is in the hand of elderly members only, they would hardly want to walk out of this role unless physically impaired.

In India *Dharma Shastra* was written most probably around the same time (300-100 B.C.) when small kingdoms were established in Greece and its neighbourhood under Ptolemies. Here we start getting the earliest reference to old age management. *Skanda Purana* and several other *Puranic* writings (broadly around the same period) allude to varieties of old age management recommendation. Of these, the prescriptions of *Dharma Shastra* would appear to be for the widest range of people. (*Skanda Purana* for instance talks about old age in prostitutes or state entertainers). It refers to four distinct stages in one's life. The *Chatur-ashrama*, as they are called, consist of *brahmacharya* (student), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (hermit) and *sanyasa* (renunciate). Of these the third stage (or *vanaprastha*) is relevant to our discussion. It is

prescribed to a person when he starts greying, wrinkling and when he sees sons born to his sons. Significantly these prescriptions are recommended for the upper three *varnas* only (i.e., Brahmins, Vasya and Kshatrias). It is specifically mentioned that the Sudras need not follow this.

Leaving out the Sudras from retirement is sociologically significant. Originally Sudras were involved in such occupations as agriculture, fishing, pot-making and similar other artisan activities. One can assume that this enabled the production base to be strong and vibrant besides the possibility of one generation having time to train a younger generation.

Political history of India during this period shows that small mono-ethnic states and principalities were for the first time attempting to establish poly-ethnic states. Consequently, crowding at the sector or sectors which govern the relations of production could create conflicts which would ultimately become dangerous for the power base. Court intrigues and assassinations are not uncommon in later history when too many people try to usurp the position of power. We know how the Peshwa court fell apart because of these attempts to usurp the power base. They brought in the Nizam into the fray in the beginning and then it was not difficult for the British to enter. The *Chatur-ashrama* was possibly thought of only to prevent the possibility of such breaks. The periodic replacement of the members from the top and the middle rungs of the ladder could also provide rich possibilities of incorporating change in governance or military with changing demands of time. In practice, such a rule may not have been as strictly followed as one would think. This merely served as an ideological model for one to train his mind away from the material pursuits after a particular age in his life time.

The emergence of an industrial society started bringing diverse kind of stresses on the family. Pragmatic norms had to be evolved in an ad-hoc manner. 'Make love, no babies' became popular west European slogan. This reflected the pragmatic mind of the people where every women started entering the work force instead of going into the rigours of child rearing and caring. When fewer youths are available and

older people continue to live, a stage comes when the youth starts looking at the old as a problem. The aged no longer form the 'knowledge base' that had enabled them to have power in the earlier phase. Now knowledge is available elsewhere, with the media, books and internet. States guided by Christian morals have initially taken up some responsibility in the form of pension, old peoples' homes and the like. In the non-Christian world (like the Arabs, the Chinese, Japanese, Africa and Oceania) age old customs are revived to bring back the dignity of life to the old. Probably this is a losing race. We all know pragmatic perception of life will take over the entire world's attitude to the aged very soon.

If history or even prehistory has a lesson for us, the problems of old age, it would seem, can be substantially reduced when we seriously consider strengthening the family, which forms the binding block of society. A weak family does not augur good social health.

KEY WORDS Aging. Family. Demography. Archaeology.

ABSTRACT International year of aged people has been just observed and we are trying to understand and solve the problems of contemporary old people. In this discourse, archaeological and historical clues of aging are relegated to the back seat. In the present paper an attempt has been made to understand archaeology of aging.

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