



Exploring Ageing and Changing Kinship Relationships

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Abstract

The socio-economic transformations have drastically changed the dynamics of kinship and aging in contemporary society, thus resulting in the waning of conventional familial support structures favouring elders. The idea of filial piety is undergoing a steady decline because of various reasons like increasing individualism, urban migration and changing gender roles. This paper tends to explore the delicate relationship between kinship and aging through personal experience and academic insights. It brings forward the dynamic nature of elder care. Drawing from the anthropological works of scholars like Yun Xiang Yan and Sarah Lamb, the work tries to examine the changing nature of caregiving. This article further goes on to challenge the notion of perceiving aging as an undesirable process formed by the utilitarian motive of contemporary society. Finally, it suggests alternative frameworks of support for the elderly by reiterating the importance of their agency and a call for wider social networks transcending families. Besides confining to normative conclusions, this article posits a more nuanced comprehension of kinship, aging and its care in the contemporary world.

Keywords: kinship transformation, Intergenerational reciprocity, Filial piety, Aging and care dynamics, Elderly neglect, Changing family structures, Socialization by elders, Modernization and industrialization, Migration and elderly care

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Introduction

Changing kinship relationships in the contemporary familial setup, due to various forces in play, has got nexus with the process of ageing and support for the elderly. Since kinship is not only confined to the families, we should seek other networks besides families to care and support the elderly. The process of aging itself has a negative connotation that the elderly is incapable of doing productive things and expect others should care for them. This has led to perceived ageing as an undesirable thing, due to the negligence of paying attention to the individual perception of ageing by the elderly.

In this paper, an exploration will be made into how contemporary ageing and changing kinship relationships are interlinked through the narration of personal experiences involving the author's paternal grandmother (Dadi). An

explanation will then be provided regarding how the decline of filial piety

has resulted in the negligence of support for the elderly. The waning of intergenerational reciprocity and filial piety will be highlighted as central issues in the process of ageing. The paper will be concluded by presenting alternative ways of viewing the process and modes of ageing, and how individuals' agency within it can offer a new perspective—beyond solely attributing the decline of filial piety as the root cause.

Change in Family Intimacy

Since the parents of the author were working people, she used to live with her grandmother for most of the time. She used to take care of her, cook for her, feed her, bathe her, and teach her about family and societal norms. The grandmother used to teach her about humanity and everything.

So, the author owes everything that she has learnt, the values she carries with her, to her grandmother. According to the author, her grandmother has played a major role in her socialization.

Not just the family of the author, there are examples of great personalities that help us understand this in a better way. Barack Obama, the former US President, and Yukio Hatoyama (former Prime Minister of Japan) can be taken as examples. In his first Presidential address from Capitol Hill, he promised his countrymen and humanity at large that he would work for the dignified lives of elderly citizens and rosy-happy lives at homes for young and old alike. Yukio Hatoyama wanted Japan to take the path of love and wisdom, respect for the elders and bring a feeling of home not a happy isolated home. Sweet homes of three or four generations living under one roof will be 'HOME TRUE'.

Respecting our elders and aged people should be our priority because with the help of elders we learn about societal relationships since they are the embodiments of wisdom. By this we communicate with people. However, nowadays the perceived decline of it, informs us about the self-centric and utilitarian nature of people. Hence, we are perceiving aging as an undesirable process due to people's insatiable quest for wealth and taking older people as their liability.

Evolving Care Dynamics: A Brief Analysis

The Indian family structure has undergone profound changes due to socio-economic transformations, leading to challenges in traditional elder care systems, which were once integral to the joint family setup. Scholars like A.M. Shah has explored these changes, highlighting how modernization, industrialization, and occupational shifts have reshaped family dynamics. As sons often move away for

employment, parents are left without their primary emotional support, relying instead on financial aid (Shah 1998, cited in Sen 2021). This trend is further compounded by large-scale migration of young men from rural areas to urban hubs like Bangalore and Mumbai (Lamb 2009).

Decades ago, researchers identified patterns of neglect and isolation among the elderly, which have only intensified over time. In the absence of sons, the burden of caregiving frequently falls on daughters-in-law. Their responsibilities extend beyond managing household chores.

Preparing meals to provide companionship and emotional support for elders, along with facilitating their social interactions. These demands often take a significant toll on the physical and mental health of daughters-in-law.

Judicial remedies are coming in the rescue of the elderly citizens; section 128 of CrPC. authorises the magistrates to take care of not only deserted wives but also non-attended elders. Various judgements/decisions of High Courts and Supreme Court have directed negligent sons/ daughter-in-laws in particular not to neglect the maintenance of dependent parents. Property restoration is also the issue involved.

A particular challenge arises for the ageing parents of daughters-in-law, as their natal families, or *maike*, are often sidelined in favour of the *sasural* due to patriarchal traditions. This leaves the parents of married daughters isolated and neglected, with limited support during their old age. Cultural and societal norms position daughters as caregivers for their in-laws, often at the expense of their own parents. While this shift is normalized in media and cultural narratives, it creates emotional pain for ageing parents who lose regular contact and care from their daughters.

However, the traditional caregiving structure within marital homes is also evolving. With globalization, capitalism, and changes in gender roles, the reliance on daughters-in-law as primary caregivers has diminished. As more women are entering the workforce, it increases their agency in the families, thus changing their subordination and inclination to live with or care for in-laws. As anthropologist Sarah Lamb (2009) notes, modern professional women possess greater autonomy, which has weakened the traditional caregiving expectations placed on them.

Crisis of Filial Piety and its Challenges

Filial piety refers to the respect and care shown by younger family members to their elders, which encompasses emotional, physical, and material support. Traditionally seen as the primary source of elderly care, its modern decline has raised questions about the well-being of the elderly. This decline is linked to various social issues. This discussion will draw on the works of Yunxiang Yan, a professor at UCLA known for his research in the Xiajia Village of China, and Sarah Lamb's contributions on intergenerational reciprocity, alongside Ira Raja's allegories.

Yan provides several accounts of the decline in filial piety from his research in Xiajia. For instance, in 1990, a patriarch ended his life, unable to cope with losing authority to his son and daughter-in-law. Public opinion was divided, with some blaming the man for being overly strict, while others criticized his family. A similar incident occurred in 1995 when a 71-year-old man, marginalized by his family, committed suicide after being denied a place at the family dining table. Despite the public outrage that followed these events, the living conditions for the elderly continued to worsen by the late 1990s.

In Xiajia, the lack of filial piety is perceived as more alarming than physical

or material neglect, deeply rooted in cultural ethics emphasizing unconditional respect and care for elders. Local terms like "Yanglao" and "Xiaoji" or "Xiaoshun" encapsulate these values, reflecting the longstanding cultural expectation of providing basic needs and showing obedience.

The understanding of filial piety varies between generations. Older generations see raising children as an act that demands repayment, while younger generations often view it differently. They acknowledge a moral duty to care for parents but reject the notion of obligatory reciprocity. For example, one married son wanted to support his father financially but felt that living together would limit his freedom. This highlights generational differences in attitudes toward parental care.

Yan also notes that older villagers believe their parents were treated better during the collective era, as societal systems ensured care for elders. The decline of collectivism, combined with new state policies after the 1949 revolution, weakened traditional notions of filial piety. These policies promoted equality among family members and dismantled patriarchal and feudal structures, eroding the sacred status of parenthood.

Today, children who achieve financial independence often question traditional expectations of care. This shift underscores the growing sense of individual agency among younger generations. (Yan 2003:182-89)

As mentioned by Lamb (2009: 31-50), providing care for seniors in the family is often termed as *seva*, service to and respect for the aged. *Seva* can be offered to gods as well as elders, which involves reciprocal transactions between parents and children. Such transactions create

and sustain intimate bodily and emotional ties. Nowadays, older parents who are residing in old age homes consider their life there as *vanaprastha*, which is late-life spirituality and gradual withdrawal of emotional bonds. But people consider that it is their children's duty to take care of the elderly parents as they have done to them once upon a time, just like a gardener who plants trees and nourishes them with the hope that he will be able to rest in their shade when he grows old.

As mentioned by Raja (2010: 3-22), an allegory depicts an old woman who has been disposed of by her children, lying down somewhere alone and five people continue to talk about her in order to unleash the mystery of her status quo. This old lady is having a bundle with her, which makes those five people baffle about it. Finally, it manifests the confusing stance of those youngsters on whether to care for her or not.

The way the media depicts

Life in a Metro (2007) directed by Anurag Basu presents a unique love story featuring an elderly couple, Amol (played by Dharmendra) and Shivani (played by Nafisa Ali). The two had parted ways 40 years earlier due to Amol's career aspirations but reconnected in their seventies to relive their unforgettable first love. In one memorable scene, Shivani tells Amol, "You haven't changed at all" (*Tum bilkul nahi badle*), highlighting a refreshing perspective on old age, where love transcends biological aging.

Mahanagar (1963) directed by Satyajit Ray depicts the plight of elderly parents. In a story, 'Chief ki Dawat "The Visit of Boss" in a middle-class family relentlessly shows how an old-mother is treated as a storeroom item which is nothing less than an old age home.

Conclusion

Kinship and aging in contemporary society have undergone profound transformations

due to rapid social, economic, and cultural shifts. Traditional models of familial support, especially those centered around filial piety and intergenerational reciprocity, are in decline. In earlier generations, the care of the elderly was largely considered a moral and familial obligation, deeply embedded within extended family structures. However, with modernization, urbanization, migration, and the rise of nuclear families, these systems of support have weakened significantly.

The erosion of filial piety has contributed to what many scholars describe as a "crisis of care" for the elder generation. Increasing individualism, especially in urban societies, has redefined priorities—personal fulfillment, independence, and career ambitions often take precedence over caregiving responsibilities. As a result, elderly individuals are increasingly at risk of social isolation, financial insecurity, and emotional neglect.

Nevertheless, this transformation also opens up space for reimagining elder care. While dependence on younger kin is no longer a reliable or sustainable model, alternative structures—such as community-based elder care, state-supported welfare programs, and elder cooperatives—can help bridge the gap. Importantly, this shift calls for recognizing the agency and autonomy of the elderly. Just like younger individuals, older adults possess the right and the capacity to make decisions about their lives, health, and care arrangements.

Empowering the elderly through participatory decision-making, promoting active aging, and designing inclusive policies can offer a way forward. Technology, too, plays a vital role—telemedicine, digital literacy programs, and assistive devices can enhance the quality of life for the aging population. Therefore, even though traditional kinship-based care structures are in flux, society can and must innovate to create a compassionate and

dignified aging experience.

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