

## **The Aged in Vedic Society**

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### **Abstract**

Ageing relates all of us in many different ways. It has been culturally embedded at the centre of Indian Society. We are familiar with the traditional wisdom attributed to the Aged and the folk conviction that old age is the apotheosis of all that is virtuous in life. The conventional representations of old age as the most fulfilling stage of life have been popular and have been propagated repeatedly. A certain meaning is thus attributed to the old age that keeps changing with the changes in the social structure where it is located. Interestingly ethno-history of Old Age and of the Aged as a socially constituted entity does not emanate easily from our enquiries into India's past gerontology. Where we succeed generally is in having only a broader and sparse conception of ageing as a social process. Perhaps the related data is not easily amenable to the processes and tools of enquiry accessible usually to history/sociology disciplines. One needs to go "beyond" the contours of academic disciplines to access and comprehend social practices associated with ageing as a distinct stage in one's life-span.

The Vedic period in India is rich in literature and there does survive valuable archaeological-literary evidence. An examination of the structure of Vedic society

provides interesting clues to the status of the Aged and the role played by the Aged in Vedic times. This paper examines the position of the Aged in Vedic society and probes the framework of arrangements made by Vedic society for Aged persons. It tries to come to grips with ageing as a process, having ramifications both individually and socially, in the Vedic literature. Equally interesting has been the traditional portrayal of the Aged as constituting an innate fund of long life-experience. The paper also probes this aspect and tries to see how the process of ageing affected society, family, and the individual simultaneously.

### **Key Words**

<i>Jara</i>	: the act of becoming old
<i>Roop</i>	: form, shape, grace, beauty
<i>Vriddhavastha</i>	: old age
<i>Yuvan</i>	: youthful, young
<i>Puratan</i>	: ancient
<i>Usha</i>	: the goddess of dawn
Sage-poets	: the composers of Vedic hymns
<i>Napat</i>	: grandson
<i>Tatamaha</i>	: grand-father
<i>Kulapa</i>	: father as the head of the family

Ageing relates all of us in many different ways. It has been culturally embedded at the centre of Indian Society. We are familiar with the traditional wisdom attributed to the Aged and the folk conviction that old age is the apotheosis of all that is virtuous in life. The conventional representations of old age as the most fulfilling stage of life have been popular and have been propagated repeatedly. A certain meaning is thus attributed to the old age that keeps changing with the changes in the social structure. Interestingly ethno-history of Old Age and of the Aged as a socially constituted entity does not emanate easily from our enquiries into India's past gerontology. Where we succeed generally is in having only a broader and sparse conception of ageing as a social process and aged as a meaningfully constituted social category. It seems the related data is not easily amenable to the process and tools of enquiry accessible usually to history/sociology disciplines. One needs to go "beyond" the contours of academic disciplines to access and comprehend social practices associated with ageing.

The Vedic period in India is rich in literature and there does survive valuable archaeological-literary evidence\*. An examination of the structure of Vedic society may, therefore, provide interesting clues to the status of the Aged and the role played by the Aged in Vedic times. This paper addresses ageing as an issue anchored in ancient Indian social structure and scans Vedic literature, particularly Rig Veda, to elicit information about the aged and the processes of ageing as predicated in the poetical compositions of the sages and the poets of the Vedic period. It tries to come to grips with ageing as a process, having ramifications both, individually and socially, in the Vedic literature and also tries to see how the process of ageing affected society, family, and the individual simultaneously.

The sage-poets of Rig Veda generally follow a binary classification of society- the vibrant and vigorous youth drawing numerous references to their physicality and enfeebled, enervate old age persons referred to as members of the family or located at the terminal of the lifespan of mankind. In fact these sage-poets celebrate youth with abandon and see all the objects in this universe as imbued

with *roop*, an attribute, which is mostly used as a definitional term<sup>1</sup>. *Indra*, the principal Vedic god, possesses the attribute of transmutation into whichever *roop* he desires<sup>2</sup>. *Vayu* another Vedic god has similar attribute<sup>3</sup>. *Som*, the libation made from the famous *Soma* plant and ritually offered and consumed at the time of Vedic sacrifice has been described in the manner of rising like the tidal waves of the ocean and flowing in all the various *roop* of the universe<sup>4</sup>. Almost all such references are an act of ovation of the youth, the springtide of life. It is significant that all the various gods and goddesses of Vedic literature are youthful and exquisitely winsome. *Indra* has an unparalleled handsome bodily form, *vapuh chitratamam*<sup>5</sup>. He adorns himself with ornaments, the *anji*<sup>6</sup>. *Agni* and *Surya*, similarly, have youthful charming form as they are *vapushyaha*<sup>7</sup>. Special mention in Rig Veda is made of the youthful forms and the decorative physical features of *Ashvini* and *Marut* brothers. The poets have reserved a special term, *valgu*, to describe the splendor of the *Ashvini*<sup>8</sup>. *Maruts* are quintessentially youthful and all of them are of the same age as no one is elder or younger to any other- they do not undergo ageing. They are especially fond of ornaments. The Rig Vedic expression for this is *anjishu srakshu rukmeshu*

*khadishu*, adorned with many ornaments<sup>9</sup>. Their favoured ornament is *rukmi*, a rounded embellishment made of gold and worn on the chest<sup>10</sup>. The goddesses too are exuberant and youthful. They are described as *vapushi*, of beautiful physical form<sup>11</sup>. *Usha* is mentioned in the singular and also as many *Ushas*. When they rise at the dawn, *yat Ushasah shubhra shubham charanti*, it is not possible to distinguish between the new and the old as all of them are identical in their physical appearance<sup>12</sup>.

Old age, the binary other, is referred to as the destroyer of *roop* and of the exuberant youth. The usual expression for old age in Rig Veda is *jara*, meaning the act of wearing out<sup>13</sup>. Rig Veda says *nabho na roopam jarima minati*, that old age destroys human body in the same manner as the clouds cover sun-rays<sup>14</sup>. The loss of physical strength during old age is very clearly realized by the sages. In another context a losing dicer is admonished by comparing him to an aged horse, of no value to any buyer<sup>15</sup>. The onset of old age brings with it the decay in physical form and attendant social problems. At one place, at least, Rig Veda gives a hint that the aged *svasura*, the father-

in-law, when he ceases to exercise control over the family due to his old age, passes under the control of his son's wife<sup>16</sup>.

Rig Veda mentions longevity as the cherished goal of all humanity. It declares *jyok cha suryam drishe*, the desire of the poet to see sun everyday for a very long time<sup>17</sup>. It announces *jyok jeevantah prajaya sachemahi*, the resolve of the king to live for a very long time along with his subjects and many offsprings<sup>18</sup>. It also declaims *jeevantah bhadrām jaranam asheemahi*, let us live a long, happy, and beneficial life and thus attain ageing<sup>19</sup>. The norm set for a meaningful life by the sage-poets is one hundred years. This longevity is further qualified by declaring that it should be healthy and disease free. Rig Veda expresses, in no uncertain terms, the human desire to see at least hundred autumns, *shataminnu sharado anti deva*<sup>20</sup>. In this desire for longevity, an interesting comparison is drawn between nature and humanity. Reference is made to *Usha* which is ever youthful inspite of being quite old in age. Rig Veda says that *Usha* is *purani yuvatiha*, such a young girl who by age is ancient<sup>21</sup>. Rig Veda does not see any paradox in conjoining *yuvati* with *puratan*. *Usha* belongs to nature. Nature has the unique property of

continually renewing itself; humanity, unlike nature, experiences senescence, an inevitable process. There are other gods too who carry this property of renewal – *Agni* and *Surya* are described in Rig Veda as free from ageing. The poets clearly know that, for humanity, escape from old age is not possible. Therefore they earnestly aspire for a healthy, disease free, splendid long life and pray that the old age should come towards the end of a fulfilling life.

Old age is also very closely related with family life in various references available in Rig Veda. The home and by metonymy the family itself is referred to by the term *Kula*. The chief of this family is *Kulapa* literally meaning as house protector<sup>22</sup>. The word *Kula* distinctly refers to a system of individual families consisting of several members and headed by the *Kulapa*, the father in all probability. Another word used for father is *Tata* from which in the latter period is derived *Tatamaha* denoting grandfather<sup>23</sup>. By connotation grandfather is an aged person and also a respected elder in the family as deduced from references in Rig Veda. There are several references to the grandson as integral member of the family bringing joy to the aged grandfather. The expressions

denoting grandchild are *napat* and *pautra*<sup>24</sup>. At least at one place Rig Veda refers to *pra-napat* denoting great grandson<sup>25</sup>. Subsequently, we also find a mention of *pra-tatamaha*, the great grandfather<sup>26</sup>. This ardent desire of the Rig Vedic poets for long life matches with references to the elderly, aged, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. In the patriarchal family of the Rig Vedic time the grandmothers do not find any mention.

The family originates at the time of marriage between young bride and the groom. Generally these marriages are for life and both bride and groom expressly desire that their companionship must last long, until both of them reach old age. The general word used for the couple is *dampati*, an association of perpetual togetherness<sup>27</sup>. A vow announced by the groom at the time of marriage says that the relationship is for the entire life so that the two should attain old age together and should have a fulfilling life by begetting sons and grandsons of cheerful and playful disposition<sup>28</sup>. The elder, aged members of the family, father and grandfather, are treated with respect. At one place the Rig Vedic poet welcomes *Agni* in his house and declares that his good advices

are as delightful as that of the old age people living in the city<sup>29</sup>. At an other place the poet again says that his contact with *Agni* is as soothing and pleasurable as is the contact of the father for the son, *sa nah pitev soonave*<sup>30</sup>. It is believed that one entire *sukt* in Rig Veda is attributed to *Apala* in which she compares the bounty of her father with that of the fertile land<sup>31</sup>. The elevated status of father in the family is regularly mentioned in Rig Veda. *Agni* is compared with the father and is venerable like him. Often *Agni* is directly addressed as the father<sup>32</sup>. *Indra* is invoked by the poet for support in the same manner as the son takes father's support<sup>33</sup>. At another place the worshipper expresses his desire to serve *Agni* in the same manner as a son serves his father<sup>34</sup>. The generosity and bounty of the mother and father is equated by the poet with the bounty of mother earth and father sky, *anu dyava prithivi rodasi ubhe*<sup>35</sup>. Mother is given a very special status in the family. The sage-poets take cognizance of the fact that mother holds the unique virtue of giving birth to a new life form and equate her with nature and its characteristic ability to renew itself, *matarau punah punah navyasi kah*<sup>36</sup>. It is noteworthy that the rivers are referred to by Rig Vedic poets with great

reverence. They are mentioned as *deveem aapam*, mother like waters which are nectar sweet, *madhumadhiha arnobhiha*<sup>37</sup>.

The process of ageing or senescence is mentioned in Rig Veda in such a thoughtful form that it cannot escape our attention. Nature, as has been described above, is repeatedly mentioned as carrying the original attribute of unabated renewal, *punah punah jayamana purani*<sup>38</sup>. In many ways the nature is *amar*, immortal or imperishable. By contrast the mankind is definitely perishable. Ever since the birth, humans continually age and at the end of this process die and perish. Rig Veda equates the process of human ageing with the goddess of dawn, *Usha* and says that each rise of *Usha* and its day long journey across sky signifies the decay of human life. The expression used is *martasya devi jarayanti aayuha*, meaning that these goddesses bring about a continual decay in the age of the humans<sup>39</sup>. This very feature of senescence is repeatedly mentioned by using other expressions such as, *praminati manushya yugani*, limiting the time of the humans; *manushya yugani praminati*, limiting the life span of the humans<sup>40</sup>. The paradox of immortality of nature and the mortality of the humans is beautifully described with

reference to *Agni* where the poet addresses the god as *amrit Agni* and offers *havi*, oblation in the name of *martasaha*, the mortal man<sup>41</sup>. Rig Veda further exemplifies this relationship by declaring that the immortal *Agni* has been generated by the mortal man, *martyasaha amritam*<sup>42</sup>. This immanent fact of human ageing and the intrinsic newness of nature seem to have given rise to the dual conception of human existence, an immortal *Atman*, essence, and a perishable physical form. The Rig Vedic poet invokes *Adityas* to ask for the bounty of longevity, *aayuha su tiretan*<sup>43</sup>. The request, similarly, to *Som* is to make the gradually approaching old age happy<sup>44</sup>.

It is significant that Rig Veda does not mention senility as a symptom of old age. The desire for long and healthy life free of diseases as expressed in the invocations and prayers to Vedic gods does not gel with the concept of senility. It is only later, in Atharva Veda, that the word *visras* occurs denoting senility or decrepitude<sup>45</sup>.

Another interesting theme discussed in Rig Veda relates to the process of rejuvenation or reversal of the process of ageing. It is said that the *Ashwanis* the eternally youthful twin gods

reversed for the sage *Chyavan* the process of ageing and for the old and aged sage the energetic youthful days were returned<sup>46</sup>. In another similar reference *Ghosha* recalls the *Chyavan* episode and invokes *Ashwanis* for the reversal of old age in her own case<sup>47</sup>.

The organizational structure of Rig Vedic society refers to the existence of *Samiti* an assembly of elders as an advisory body to the king<sup>48</sup>. Clearly the *Samiti* was composed of the persons who were ripe in age and by implication also wise.

The Rig Vedic desire for longevity and mental and physical well-being throughout is best exemplified in the much quoted Atharva Veda *sukt: Pashyem sharadah shatam, Jeevem sharadah shatam* ,

## End Notes

\* The Vedic literature is an abundant compilation of poetic compositions of the sage-poets of the Vedic period generally divided into four major main books, viz. *Rik/g*, *Yajur*, *Sama* & *Atharva Veda*. Of these the Rig Veda is considered the original and the most ancient and it is a compilation of *Sukt*, the hymns, each *Sukt* containing several *Richas*, the verses. The current general consensus is that the compilation of Rig Veda was completed by 1400 B.C. The subjects of the *Sukt* of Rig Veda are many- prayer, history, method of *Yagna*, eulogy, agriculture, family, morality and community relations etc. The Rig Veda contains 1028 *Suktas* which are divided into ten sections, each section called a *Mandala*. Each *Mandala* contains from 3 to 58 *Richas*. In referring to Rig Veda, therefore, we normally use a numerical notation having three numerical figures separated by periods. Thus 1.71.10 refers to the 10<sup>th</sup> *Richa* located in the 71<sup>st</sup> *Sukt* from the 1<sup>st</sup> *Mandala*. The same notation has been followed in this paper to refer to the evidence from Rig Veda. It is also noteworthy that the collection of the *Sukt* and *Richas* has been so beautifully organized that the original text has by and large been retained during such a long period of time. The text of Rig Veda used in this paper is the one edited by Archarya Vaidya Nath Shastri and published by Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Maharashi Dayananda Bhawan, New Delhi, 1972.

<sup>1</sup> Rig Veda, 1.47.18

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Rig Veda, 2.2.10

<sup>4</sup> Rig Veda, 5.42.13

<sup>5</sup> Rig Veda, 4.1.12

<sup>6</sup> Rig Veda, 5.53.4

<sup>7</sup> Rig Veda, 5.47.5

<sup>8</sup> Rig Veda, 6.62.5 & 6.63.1

<sup>9</sup> Rig Veda, 5.53.4

<sup>10</sup> Rig Veda, 2.34.8, 5.55.1, 5.57.5

<sup>11</sup> Rig Veda, 10.75.7

<sup>12</sup> Rig Veda, 4.51.6

<sup>13</sup> Rig Veda, 1.164.11 & 2.34.10

<sup>14</sup> Rig Veda, 1.71.10

<sup>15</sup> Rig Veda, 10.34.4

<sup>16</sup> Rig Veda, 10.85.46; Also see R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *The Vedic Age*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bombay, p.361

<sup>17</sup> Rig Veda, 7.66.16

<sup>18</sup> Rig Veda, 1.23.21

<sup>19</sup> Rig Veda, 1.136.6

<sup>20</sup> Rig Veda, 1.89.9

<sup>21</sup> Rig Veda, 3.54.7

<sup>22</sup> Rig Veda, 10.179.2; Also see A.A. Macdonell & A.B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Vol.I, Motilal Banarasi Dass Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, Reprint 2007, p.171.

<sup>23</sup> Atharva Veda, 5.24.17; Macdonell & Keith, I, 298.

<sup>24</sup> Rig Veda, 10.10.1; Macdonell & Keith, I, 435

<sup>25</sup> Rig Veda, 8.17.13

<sup>26</sup> Macdonell & Keith, II, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Rig Veda, 5.60.4

<sup>28</sup> Rig Veda, 10.85.36

<sup>29</sup> Rig Veda, 6.2.7

<sup>30</sup> Rig Veda, 1.1.9

<sup>31</sup> Rig Veda, 8.91.3

<sup>32</sup> Rig Veda, 4.23.6

<sup>33</sup> Rig Veda, 2.5.1

<sup>34</sup> Rig Veda. 3.18.1

<sup>35</sup> Rig Veda, 2.1.15

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36 Rig Veda, 3.25.3  
37 Rig Veda , 7.101.1  
38 Rig Veda, 1.92.10  
39 ibid.  
40 Rig Veda, 1.92.11  
41 Rig Veda, 5.4.10  
42 Rig Veda, 3.1.18  
43 Rig Veda, 8.18.22  
44 Rig Veda, 10.59.4  
45 Macdonell & Keith, II, 315  
46 Rig Veda, 3.30.20  
47 Rig Veda, 10.39.3  
48 Rig Veda, 8.4.9

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