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# The “Holy Joint Family” in South Asian Ageing Theories

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**Abstract** Recent notions of aging in South Asia often mourn the loss of the ideal of the joint family and the emergence of the nuclear family at the cost of elderly people. However, it can be shown that this ideal is not sustainable any more since historical sources give sufficient evidence for exiling and other maltreatments of old people. It seems that the cohesion and solidarity was not always very strong and that the situation of old people depended and depends on the interfamilial constellations, gender, social position, and especially on the integration of elderly people into ritual tasks. Examples from contemporary Nepal will illustrate that these factors still matter in traditional Hindu (and Buddhist) environments.

**Keywords** joint family, nuclear family, exiling old people, āśrama system, vṛddhāśrama, Nepal

*In the cross-cultural science of old age,  
far more than old age may be at stake.  
(Cohen 1995, 316).*

## Introduction

Lawrence Cohen in his seminal and fascinating article “No Aging in India: The Uses of Gerontology” aptly noted that gerontological writing and practice are dominated by a seldom challenged narrative of the decline of the Indian joint family, in which “old people had all their needs taken care of, were listened to and respected, and had few complaints” (Cohen 1992, 124). However, Cohen continues, with “Westernization, modernization, industrialization, and urbanization families begin to break up, and the social support and respect for the elderly declines, along with their quality of life” (Cohen 1992, 124; see also Cohen 1995, 315–316).

Cohen also pointed to an ill-fated link between the narratives of a decline of the joint family and the emergence of gerontology as a discipline in India, which, “since the early 1980s has produced an efflorescence of research projects, publications, commissions, welfare schemes concerned with the old people in India” (Cohen 1992, 123). He criticizes Indian gerontology for not reflecting on an *Indian* concept of old age, but rather sticking to a universal concept of ageing. What it needs, says Cohen, are different elaborate, functional, reflexive theories of ageing. In gerontology, however, there is no ageing in India, there is only ageing. Ageing in India is mostly understood in a localized sense, but not as a culturally different or transcultural concept. Understandably, he has a problem with this situation.

What would such a “Hindu” concept of old age look like? This is what I ask in this chapter. In doing so, I will refer to some notions that I found either in Sanskrit texts or in interviews with old people in Nepal.<sup>1</sup> My methodological approach is therefore what I call ethno-indological, a combination of philology and fieldwork.<sup>2</sup> However, it is impossible to work out *the* Indian concept of old age, because this would mean essentializing and reducing the complexity of India. I prefer to challenge the myth of the “holy joint family” that is often proposed, and instead try to elaborate on the ruptures and frictions in Hindu concepts of old age. To be sure, there are many more positive notions of old age in traditional and present India pointing out their wisdom and the affectionate relationship between parents and their children. I am not neglecting these aspects, but in this

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1 All interviews were held in Nepālī and Nevārī between December 2014 and March 2015. I am grateful to Rajendra Shakya for assistance with the fieldwork (interviewing, transcription, translation, and discussions), and to Christiane Brosius and Roberta Mandoki for their helpful comments.

2 For the theoretical grounding of this method and further literature on the joint family, see Michaels (2004a, 2005).

chapter I try to work out the more problematic sides. Naturally, the traditional Sanskrit texts have been written by just one social group, male Brahmins, and they are normative texts which do not necessarily mirror reality. But they reflect social ideas and situations of religiously dominant groups, more often than not imitated by other social groups and still valid in many parts of traditional South Asia.

## The fall of the joint family

Let me first clarify what I mean by "joint family," which interestingly does not have just one corresponding term in Indian languages. This makes it all the more important to define the central social group in South Asia. Every society has its descent and kinship groups to which families belong. But what is characteristic for much of India is the size of the extended family, of which the joint family is a part. In the West, a family consists maximally of parents and siblings, the parents of the parents, and possibly uncles and aunts and their children. Family size differs by region (more members in southern than in northern Europe), and denomination (more members in Catholic areas than in Protestant ones), but it is nuclear families or small extended families (possibly still with the paternal or maternal grandparents and a few other relatives) that form the lived world and economic units.

In Brahmanically influenced north India and Nepal, belonging to the family is defined in different ways.<sup>3</sup> First, it is highly patrilinear. The wife's parents and relations "belong to it" only to a very limited extent. "The wife's authority within the household is only a participation in her husband's" (Sharma 2004, 275). Second, many more family members live, work, and reside together, not necessarily under one roof, but close to one another: the paternal parents and grandparents, the father's brothers and their families, and other patrilinear relations; in addition, there are employees, servants, adopted or foster children, and—very importantly—the ancestors. "A typical extended family in Nepal would probably include grandfather, grandmother, their married and unmarried sons, son's wives, their children, and sometimes even children's wives," writes Sharma (Sharma 2004, 274), referring to the situation in the early 1980s in Nepal. I call this group an "extended family" (rather than "joint family"): a broad circle of in-laws and blood relations, who meet regularly, work together, and practice religious rituals, especially the major life-cycle rituals. It is a residential and commensal social group, mostly based on descent and blood relationship (*kula*). Such an extended family is also understood as part of a caste group (*varṇa*), and as a subcaste or a clan (*gotra*). It further includes various nuclear families, where parents live together with sons and their wives

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3 The following is partly based on Michaels (2004a, 165–174).

and children, sharing the kitchen and building a joint household, but this nuclear family is not nearly as central as in the “West.”

Cohabitation practices have drastically changed in the last decades, especially in urban areas, but also in villages affected by labour migration and media imaginaries of independent lifestyles. Today, the nuclear family is becoming more and more the centre of social life, at least in the urban middle class, and the joint family dissolves because the family members are scattered over several places or countries. This leads to the belief that the intergenerational contract of the joint family is in danger. Already in 1982, Sharma remarked:

In the urban salaried families, arrangements for ageing parents to live with their married sons have become a source of uneasiness to older people and, together with physical isolation, there is a corresponding psychological alienation within the family itself because of the tension between two different value systems (Sharma 2004, 277).

As a consequence, old people became more and more afraid of being forced to leave their home (cf. Lamb 2009, 69). For instance, Pradhyumna Lal (Shrestha), aged 68 with two sons, remarked in an interview in Patan (Nepal):

If you go to Pashupati Old-Age Home and look, people there have sons and daughters, who are well-known in the society. But they don't care for the elderly and dropped them there. They don't even go and visit them; they don't even know if the elderly are dead or alive. This isn't human relation. Ours is a very close family-knitting; ours is not the kind of society like in the West, where the family is usually disintegrated into pieces (Interview, December 25, 2014).

Nepalese media sometimes support this view. Thus, a certain Paavan Mathema complained in an article that “traditional family norms that valued and respected the elderly” (Mathema 2012) are now slowly eroding, and grandparents feel neglected and disrespected in nuclear families. “The trend of young families migrating abroad means that old parents are left behind with no one to look after them. The widening generation gap, family disputes, and even physical abuse drive away the old into the harshness of the streets” (Mathema 2012).

Sarah Lamb aptly notes, “[t]he ‘joint family,’ a multigenerational household in which elders make up an intrinsic part, is often described as something ‘uniquely Indian’ or ‘characteristic of Indian culture’” (Lamb 2000, 89). She quotes from an *India Today* article in which Madhu Jain and Ramesh Menon declare that “[a]ge was synonymous with wisdom, values and a host of things that made Indian society so unique” (Jain and Menon 1991, 26, cited in Lamb 2000, 89). “In contrast,” Lamb continues, “the ‘West’ is

associated with old age homes, negative images of aging, independence (that is, small or non-existent families), and individualism. In fact, the first old age homes in India were products of colonial penetration, constructed by Christian groups [...]” (Lamb 2000, 89).

When asked the reasons for the decline of the joint family, Indians often cite several: urbanization leads to smaller flats, Westernization leads to a more anonymous neighbourhood, modernity leads to individualism, etc. Repeatedly it is the daughters-in-law or the change in the role of young women which are made responsible for the growing lack of care (*sevā*). One middle-aged Mangaldih woman, Bani, told me: “Our ‘joint families’ are becoming ruined (*naṣṭa*) and separate (*prthak*), because women have learned how to go out. They are irritated by all the household hassles (Lamb 2000, 92).

And quite often it is just Kaliyuga, the last of four eons that the world goes through as part of its cycle of creation and destruction, that is blamed for all these changes. Once again Sarah Lamb has got to the heart of the problem:

The following often get grouped together: nuclear families, small flats, transnational living, consumerism, lack of time, efficiency, rationality, materialism and individualism. These are placed in contrast to more “traditionally” Indian characteristics: family bonds, intimacy, plentiful time, spirituality, large houses and families, care and respect for elders, material frugality (Lamb 2009, 71).

However, isn't the traditional family setting strongly idealized in these accounts? This is what I want to scrutinize by taking a closer look at some of these “more ‘traditionally’ Indian characteristics”—notions that belong to what I call “the joint family glorification package” and which I reduce to the following two aspects: retreat (plentiful time, spirituality, material frugality), and respect (better care or *sevā*).

## Retreat and abandonment of the aged in the āśrama system

A major factor of the joint family glorification package is the mostly voluntary withdrawal of old people from active work, a special form of retirement that is said to have only been possible within the joint family. This ideal is based in and glorified by the *āśrama* system, according to which the male members of the three higher classes, especially the Brahmin, should live his life in four phases: first the *brahmacarya* (studentship) and learning of the Veda; second, *gṛhastha* or householder founding a family; third, as a forest dweller (*vānaprastha*), and fourth, *saṃnyāsa*, or becoming a wandering ascetic (*parivrājaka*, *bhikṣu*) not dependent on the family any

longer. In the classical form of the *āśrama* system,<sup>4</sup> the last two phases are mainly for the aged. In the *Manusmṛti*, a law text supposedly composed around the first century CE, we find one of the oldest articulations of the four-staged *āśrama* system:

After spending the first quarter of his life at his teacher's, a twice-born man should marry a wife and spend the second quarter of his life at home. (Manu IV.1) [...] After spending the third quarter of his life in the forest, he should cast off his attachments and wander about as an ascetic during the fourth (Manu VI.33).

According to this concept, the ideal (male) life—traditionally comprising one hundred years (childhood excluded)—is divided into two different stages: an active part that entails learning as well as working and founding a family (stages one and two), and a more passive part, the two last stages, which imply a gradual withdrawal from the world (but not necessarily the family) and its materiality, seeking spiritual liberation in a kind of renunciation. This moral obligation of spiritual retreat is still stressed by many old people in South Asia, especially the better off. For instance, 77-year-old Gopal Man Shrestha said:

Ageing in the west and in our part of the world is different. They only look at it with the physical approach. In our part, we not only look at it at the physical level but also in the intellectual and a higher level. [...] For instance, yoga. When I went to Norway, in a book stall, I found books like “Yoga for Beauty” and even “Yoga for Sex.” In an interview there, I told that I also do yoga a bit but it's different here. We never say yoga for sex or yoga for beauty. We only say yoga for enlightenment. So I told them that you are more focused on the physical aspects. But we only focus on how to attain enlightenment (Interview, December 25, 2014).

And Kali Raj Joshi, 81, a retired government officer, joins him:

The main difference that I see is that we totally focus on spirituality while they focus more on bodily or economic aspects. Like *bājyā* [grand-father] just said, with the money they visit places they have never been, like swim in the Atlantic or go to polar regions. But in our case, we go to visit Benares or go for pilgrimage to the Vishwanāth [a temple in Benares] (Interview, December 25, 2014).

However, the history of this gradual and spiritual retreat in the *āśrama* concept is not as romantic as claimed, both by old people in South Asia and some scholars working on old age in South Asia. As I will try to show,

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4 For a detailed study on the *āśrama* system see Olivelle 1993.

relying on textual material also analyzed by Joachim Friedrich Sprockhoff (1979) and Patrick Olivelle (1993), that the *āśrama* concept is partly based on a gradual and ritual separating, expelling, or, in rare cases, even forceful exiling of the old father (and indirectly the mother). To understand this, we have to enter the world of the Vedic-Brahmanical sacrifice, the soteriological aspects of which are still prevalent in Hinduism.<sup>5</sup>

Part and parcel of the Vedic sacrificial world, which emerged in the first millennium BCE, is the strong focus on the father-son relationship. The son is the liberator of the father, he carries on his life work, takes care of him in illness, old age, and after his death. Through the son, one achieves immortality, as it is repeatedly said: "In your son you are reborn; that, oh, mortal, is your immortality" (*Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 1.50.5-6).<sup>6</sup> This sentence is to be understood both experientially and ritually. That is, the father passes on to the son not only his life and professional experience, he not only bequeaths his material property, he also bequeaths a sacral legacy: the duty to maintain the domestic fire and to provide for the ancestors (including him after his death). To study the Veda for the seer, to carry out the fire sacrifice for the gods to get married, and beget sons for the father are the three obligations (*ṛṇa*) the son has inherited from time immemorial, right from birth, and which must be fulfilled by any means.

The domestic fire is part of the Vedic sacrificial fire, which was considered extraordinarily effective, for the gods were fed through the fire. Only the Brahmins knew how to stack the fire and were aware of its salvational efficacy. This knowledge was the Veda. The priests identified themselves with the knowledge. They not only had the knowledge, they *were* the knowledge, they embodied it. This may have been the most important identification in the history of Hindu religions. Thus, when the father died, he did not pass on the knowledge to his son, but rather, put him in his place and thus, de-individualized, he lived on in him. His legacy—in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (14.4.5.25-29)—was: "You are *brahman*, you are the sacrifice (*yajña*), you are room to live (*loka*)!"<sup>7</sup> The son repeated these sentences and thus made them irreversibly effective. "He who has no child, has no place (no firm footing)," adds the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* (7.3.13.9, Haug 1863). And this is how the ritual transfer was articulated:

Next, the father-and-son ceremony, which is also called the rite of transfer. A father, when he is close to death,<sup>8</sup> calls his son. After the house has been strewn with fresh grass, the fire has been kindled, and a pot of water has been set down along with a cup, the father lies on top of him, touching the various organs of the father with his

5 The following is based on Michaels (2004a, 315–344).

6 See Olivelle (1993, 43) (with additional evidence).

7 See Sprockhoff (1979, 385–389) for a detailed analysis of this transference rite; cf. also von Stietencron (1979) and Olivelle (1993, 41–46).

8 The span the father has still to live is not clearly mentioned, but it could well be many years.

own corresponding organs. Alternatively, the father may execute the transfer with the son sitting and facing him. The father then makes the transfer to the son:

"I will place my speech in you," says the father. "I place your speech in me," responds the son.

"I will place my breath in you," says the father. "I place your breath in me," responds the son.

"I will place my sight in you," says the father. "I place your sight in me," responds the son.

"I will place my hearing in you," says the father. "I place your hearing in me," responds the son.

"I will place my tasting in food in you," says the father. "I place your tasting in food in me," responds the son.

"I will place my actions in you," says the father. "I place your actions in me," responds the son.

"I will place my pleasures and pains in you," says the father. "I place your pleasures and pains in me," responds the son.

"I will place my sight in you," says the father. "I place your sight in me," responds the son.

"I will place my bliss, delight, and procreation in you," says the father. "I place your bliss, delight, and procreation in me," responds the son.

"I will place my movements in you," says the father. "I place your movements in me," responds the son.

"I will place my mind in you," says the father. "I place your mind in me," responds the son.

"I will place my intelligence in you," says the father. "I place your intelligence in me," responds the son.

If he finds it difficult to talk, the father should say very briefly: "I will place my vital functions (*prāṇa*) in you." And the son should respond: "I place your vital functions in me."

Then, as the son, turning around towards his right, goes away toward the east, his father calls out to him: "May glory, the lustre of sacred knowledge, and fame attend you!" The son, for his part, looks over his left shoulder, hiding his face with his hand or covering it with the hem of his garment, and responds: "May you gain heavenly worlds and realize your desires!"

If the father recovers his health, he should either live under the authority of his son or live as a wandering ascetic. But if he happens to die, they should perform the appropriate final rites for him (*Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 2.14, cf. Olivelle 1996).

Basically, this ritual is a death ritual: the breaths are entering the son (thus leaving the father), there is circumambulation, the son should not turn around. The father then lives on in the son. However, the father is ritually replaced by the son: "The father is the same as the son, and the son is the



same as the father" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 12.4.3.1). The father himself is then ritually a living dead, i.e. he has the same status as an ascetic who, for instance, among the Daśanāmīs ascetics, is initiated into the sect while symbolically entering the burning fire for the deceased. And the father could, in fact, also become an ascetic: "If the father recovers his health, he should either live under the authority of his son or live as a wandering ascetic," says the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* at the end of the quoted passage. In no way can he then be reintegrated in the family since he is ritually and socially "dead." Like the widow who survives the widow-burning (*satī*), and like a child with whom the elder is often compared, he is not capable any more of holding any social, legal, and ritual rights. He has to retire from public life and live separated from his family in a hut or in the forest. In a way, he is exiled.<sup>9</sup>

Some texts even recommend a kind of religious suicide:<sup>10</sup> fasting until death, to take to the water, to go on the Great Journey, i.e. walking until death to the north or east—or to go to a place of retirement. The term for this in the Sanskrit text is *vr̥ddhāśrama* (lit. "the *āśrama* of the old people")—a term which appears in Vedic literature only here.<sup>11</sup> All this is a voluntary emigration and self-excommunication.

Given this Vedic background, it is likely that the Hindu voluntary retiring of the father from the family became a Brahmanical norm and moral obligation for all twice-born, expressed in the classical *āśrama* system:

When a twice-born man has followed the ten-point Law with a collective mind, learned the Vedānta according to rule, and freed himself from debt, he may retire. Casting off the inherent evil of rites by retiring from all ritual activities, being self-controlled, and residing the Veda, he should live at ease under the care of his son (Manu VI.94–95).

When a householder sees his skin wrinkled, his hair turned grey, and his children's children, he should take to the wilderness. Giving up village food and all his belongings, he should go to the forest, entrusting his wife to his sons or accompanied by her (Manu VI.2–3).

However, already in the early Upaniṣadic times (ca. 800–500 BCE) and in early Buddhist and Jaina texts, the concept of voluntary emigration and renunciation was also internalized. These texts criticize the sacrifice and the dominant position of the Brahmin and offer as an alternative the

9 See Sprockhoff (1979, 398).

10 See Sprockhoff (1979, 395) for references.

11 Nowadays old age homes are also often called *vr̥ddhāśramas* or *br̥ddhāśramas*, but there is an important difference: "[...] a widespread perception among Indian residents of old age homes, for instance, that these homes—commonly referred to as 'ashrams' (or *br̥ddhāśrams*, '[spiritual] shelters for the old')—are a contemporary version of the classical Hindu third and fourth life stages, in which persons purposefully leave their households of reproduction on a path of late-life spiritual cultivation" (Lamb 2009, 12).

internalization of the sacrificial fire, a kind of ascetic fire (*tapas*), even for young people. In this context, the withdrawal from the world became a fully voluntary, renunciatory act, and a more spiritual emigration.

We do not know to what extent the *āśrama* system meant a forced expelling of old people, but it seems likely that it was also used for this purpose:

It is debatable whether the practice of killing old people or of forcibly sending them into exile was a widespread custom or even whether it ever existed in ancient India. Nevertheless, even a widespread voluntary retirement, when it is expected by society and becomes an ethical norm, can have many features of exile. The most significant aspect of this hypothesis is that, given the association of old age with the assumption of an ascetic mode of life, economic factors may have played an important role both in the development of an Indian ascetical institution and in the history of the *āśrama* system.

The economic benefit from the exile of the aged to societies existing at marginal subsistence was simply that it would mean having fewer mouths to feed. Northern Indian society since about the sixth century, however, was at a more advanced stage of economic development. It was not a time of scarcity but of relative abundance. The possibility exists, however, that a custom that originated in an earlier time may have survived and may have been given a different significance during later and more affluent times (Olivelle 1993, 115).

## Abandoning the elderly in Nepal

Even today, the exiling of old people, now called abuse, neglect, or abandonment of the aged, is not so rare a practice. Thus, in a report by the Human Rights Commission Nepal and the Geriatric Center Nepal (2011), one reads that after physical abuse, "neglect by family members was found to be the most common form of elder abuse. Out of 117 cases, 39 cases of neglect or deprivation of proper care were reported. In twelve of thirty-nine cases, elders could not receive Old-age-allowance that they were entitled to receive as per the existing government rules." Moreover, in nine cases, dead bodies of elders were found abandoned in public places but they did not show signs of physical abuse. According to this report, other cases of neglect included family or relatives forcing old persons to get admitted in old age homes against their will; intentionally abandoning the elderly in crowded market places, temples, or near old age homes, who then generally resort to begging; or suffering neglect when their grown children migrate to other countries (NHRC and Geriatric Center Nepal 2011, 15–16).

I talked to a few abandoned elderly in the Paśupati Vṛddhāśrama,<sup>12</sup> a Social Welfare Centre old age home at the Paśupatinātha Tempel operated under the Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, which currently houses 230 elderly people, partly looked after by the Missionaries of Charity, religious congregation established in 1950 by Mother Teresa. Two examples may suffice:

This is what one elderly man, who has been living in the ashram for almost ten years, answered when he was asked whether he has a wife and children:

QUESTION: *Are you married?*

ANSWER: *Yes, I have a wife, but of no use. [...] What to do? I am forced to stay here, as my children don't take care of me. [...] What to do now that I'm unable to work and earn money?*

QUESTION: *Why? Don't they take care of you?*

ANSWER: *I can't say I don't [have a wife and children]. Can one say they don't exist to someone who is still alive? Yes, I have a son, a daughter, a wife, a grandson and a granddaughter.*

QUESTION: *Where are they?*

ANSWER: *Back there in Hetauda. What to do? I am forced to stay here, as my children don't take care of me.*

QUESTION: *You said you have a wife, didn't you?*

ANSWER: *I have the whole family. But they don't take care of me. What to do now that I'm unable to work and earn money? I don't have any land to make earnings; just a small house that I made myself. I used to work as a carpenter too. It's a wooden house.*

QUESTION: *Your children don't come to meet you?*

ANSWER: *No, no one comes. About two, three months ago, my wife had come here. They got into fights at home on various issues. If we stay together, won't there be fights? Something like that happened there also. Now the daughter-in-law has gone to live with her maternal uncle. My son came back from Qatar. He took his wife along and began to live separately in a rented house in the market.*

The other example is from an interview with Amar Bahadur Puri, who lives in the Pashupati Vṛddhāśrama together with his wife. During the interview his nephew, Ram Bahadur Karki, a serviceman of the Armed Police Force stationed at the Pashupati Area, showed up.

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12 The Social Welfare Centre Vṛddhāśrama in Pashupati is the only old age home run by the government. It was established as Pañcadeval Pāṭhashālā during the reign of King Surendra Bir Bikram Shah, and was converted into the Social Welfare Centre Vṛddhāśrama in 1978. The concerned Ministry allocates an annual budget of ₹13.9 million. Out of the 230 elderly people, 106 are men and 124 are women.

*RAM: Children can be bad; just because one has children, that does not mean that they will look after the parents. If the son goes separate ways with his wife and leaves behind his parents alone, one has to work in the fields in the village. [...] Here [in this ashram], people with power come to live even though they have children. There are people here who are the parents of the people who have the capacity to move the country right and left. It's not certain that the general public, helpless and weak people will get to live here. You need to have the power [he means political connections] to get [admitted] here. [...] Once you get here, there are no worries like the buffaloes are hungry, the goats are missing, or the fox has killed the hen and chickens. The rice is prepared; just eat it. Ekdam bindās.<sup>13</sup> No tension; nothing to care about; weekly health check-ups are there. After his death, if the person has relatives, they inform them. If not, then there are people here who will take care of the funeral.*

*YAM BAHADUR: Even if there are children, they don't come.*

*RAM: It will be a matter of shame for them. How can they come?*

*YAM BAHADUR: There are people here who say that they have children who don't care for them. But when they die, the children don't come here to even perform the last rites. One was saying that he had a son living nearby. They called him, but no, he didn't come at all. That's the kind of son they are.*

As we see from these examples, the joint family did and does not always mean that the elderly will not be mistreated. The joint family's solidarity, which is soteriologically based on the *āśrama* system and focused on patrilinearity, quite often structurally failed and still does. In some cases, its ritual structure led and is still leading to the exile of aged men. Even the conscious misuse of the *āśrama* system in order to expel unwanted family members is possible, as I have shown elsewhere in the case of exiling two young boys during their initiation ceremony (*vratabandhana*).<sup>14</sup> As this certainly unusual incident demonstrates, people could and can become victims of the *āśrama* system. This is not only true of old fathers, but also and even more so for women, and unmarried, childless men.

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13 "A wonderful time with no worries."

14 See Michaels (1986).

## Victims of the *āśrama* system: Old women and childless men

What is crucial in the soteriologically based intergenerational relationship of the *āśrama* system is the replacing of the biological father-son sequence with a ritual father-son identification. This not only makes the old father dependent on the son, even after death, but also leaves no independent place for the woman. The system is strictly patrilinear; a woman has no autonomy in it. Famous is the following verse in the *Manusmṛiti*:

Her father guards her in her childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her sons guard her in old age; a woman is not qualified to act independently (Manu IX.3).

At birth, a woman acquires the fictional kinship (*gotra*) of her father; when she marries, she receives the *gotra* of her husband. In parts of northern India, the married daughter is no longer considered a blood relative. Raheja (1988, 56) writes that, for the inhabitants of the village she studied, married women lose their "physical" relationship (Hindi: *śarīr kā sambandh*) after marriage and subsequently have only an indirect (kinship) relation (*rista*) to their own family. The woman thus loses her "ancient ancestors" or those of her father. When she dies, her husband's relatives perform the death rites; if her own parents die, she must not include them in ancestor worship.

Since a woman's protection and even her ritual salvation depends to a certain extent on her husband, changes in her family status like being widowed, divorced, or abandoned put her in a position of despair. As a consequence, in Nepal and many parts of India, daughters are generally not allowed to take their widowed or divorced mothers into their marital household. Very often old women do not even want to ask for it, as is evident in an interview with Indra Maya Chukām, 71, from Bhaktapur living in the Paśupati Vṛddhāśrama:

- QUESTION: *Did you come here on your own?*  
 ANSWER: *My neighbour brought me here.*
- QUESTION: *Why? Don't you have anyone at home to look after you?*  
 ANSWER: *I don't have a home. I don't have a home and land.*
- QUESTION: *Don't you have anyone in the family?*  
 ANSWER: *I do. I have a daughter.*
- QUESTION: *Is she busy, or ...*  
 ANSWER: *My daughter ... she's [now] the daughter of another's home ... what to do? Will they look after me? Her mother-in-law dishonours me.*
- QUESTION: *Does your daughter not like you or ...?*  
 ANSWER: *My daughter does like me. But her mother-in-law doesn't. It's difficult [for her daughter] to feed me*

*when I go there. What if my daughter asks me to come  
and eat there? Her mother-in-law dishonours me.*

As mentioned, the father who has no son or no family is without *loka*, i.e. without any place in the world—according to the logic of the traditional texts, he is ritually dead. “Who has no son, should think about himself and leave without looking back in northern or eastern direction,” says *Kathaśruti Upaniṣad* (cf. Sprockhoff 1979, 80 fn). Old men who did not, for a variety of reasons, marry, are therefore frequently residents of old age homes. They too become victims of the *āśrama* system.

## Respect and disregard of old people

The second aspect of the joint family glorification package which I want to discuss is the claim that, in the golden past, sons and daughters-in-law gave better care to their old parents. The “proof” of this claim is often a reference to the popular story of the pious Śravaṇa Kumāra:

Śravaṇa Kumāra’s parents were blind and frail. They wanted to go on a pilgrimage. As they could not walk, Śravaṇa Kumāra made them sit in two baskets hanging at each end of a wooden pole, and carrying them on his shoulder he went on the pilgrimage. When the parents felt thirsty, Śravaṇa went to look for a riverbank and filled water in his vessel. During this time, Daśaratha, the king of Ayodhya, was hunting in the nearby forest. He thought it is an animal drinking water. With his bow he shot Śravaṇa in the chest and killed him, but before his death, Śravaṇa told the king that his thirsty parents were waiting for him. Daśaratha was shocked by his mistake. He looked for Śravaṇa’s parents and when he reached them and told them of his mistake they cried out in despair. They cursed Daśaratha that just like them he would also die of the sorrows caused by his son’s separation. In this way Daśaratha gave up his life, unable to bear the sorrows of separation from his son Rāma. When he died, he pronounced Rāma’s name six times. Soon after Daśaratha’s death, a deep sorrow gripped all the subjects of Ayodhya (Summary of *Rāmāyaṇa* 2.63-4; cf. Sand 2008, 139).

In other Sanskrit texts as well, one finds plenty of examples of honour and respect for one’s parents, and the filial piety of sons:

When someone is conscientious about greeting and always renders assistance to the elderly, he obtains an increase in these four: life span, wisdom, fame, and power (Manu II.121).

There are many similar verses praising the wisdom of old people to whom one had to show reverence and respect, but this wisdom is connected to

authority, learnedness, life experience, etc. Even though age alone is not enough to gain this form of respect,

Hindus treat old age with a show of respect everywhere, and elderly members in the family and the community are held in high esteem. Like austerity, renunciation or educational attainment, old age is recognised as a virtue in a person. Deference to old age is a basis on which Hindu society in Nepal has sought to build up a social order with its characteristic patterns of values, discipline and social organisation of the family (Sharma 2004, 272).

In Nepal, this respect for elderly people is evident among the Newars by their respect for the *guthis*, an institution ensuring the organization and the social and cultural life of local communities in which leadership rests with the eldest male (Nep. *thakālī*). One of the most impressive rituals depicting this respect for the aged are the *gyā jaṃku* rituals in Nepal, celebrated by Newars at the age of seventy-seven years, seven months, seven days, seven *ghaṭis* (of twenty-four minutes each) and seven *palas* (of twenty-four seconds each), or eighty-eight years, eight months, eight days, etc., or ninety-nine years, nine months, nine days, etc., or, according to some accounts, one-hundred-and-ten years, ten months, ten days, etc. In these rituals, the elderly are worshipped extensively and then carried around their quarter and to various shrines in a palanquin.<sup>15</sup> Nowadays, this ritual is more and more seen as an example of respect for elders among the Newars.

However, there are many complaints about the lack of respect for and care of old and disabled persons. In the *Manusmṛti*, for instance, old people, especially when they are senile, are sometimes equated with children and disabled persons whom one should avoid in certain situations:

Idiots, the dumb, the blind, the deaf, animals, old people, women, foreigners, the sick, and the crippled—he should have these removed when he confers with his counselors (Manu VII. 149).

Transactions carried out by persons who are intoxicated, insane, distressed, or totally subservient, by children or the aged, or by unauthorized persons, are invalid (Manu VIII.163).

Different from the ritual transfer of father to son and its social consequences, the respect or lack of respect for old people has much more to do with morality, and the guilt of not fulfilling the duty to care for the elderly. That is why quite often their revenge is feared; people fear being cursed by the neglected aged, both living and dead, via the ancestors. "This was a continuous topic at the Paśupatiṅātha Vṛddhāśrama: the residents repeatedly expressed their fears about being cursed by co-residents." When

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15 For a detailed study see von Rospatt (2014).

asked, an old lady from the Paśupati Vṛddhāśrama told us how she had come to live in this institution:

- ANSWER: *All of them here are boksis [witches], ... these women. The whole twenty-four hours, the boksi remains in effect.*
- QUESTION: *Which one?*
- ANSWER: *It's inconceivable to recognize or identify. They argue. I only have the mouth; I don't know anything [how to do witchcraft]. The boksi just remains in effect all the time. [...]*
- QUESTION: *Did someone bring you here?*
- ANSWER: *No. I came on my own. [Looking around and talking to herself] If only that old man would just perform phuknu<sup>16</sup> on me! Don't know where he's gone. The boksi takes charge with just moments apart.*
- QUESTION: *Don't you have any children?*
- ANSWER: *No. I don't have anyone, son. I'm all alone.*
- QUESTION: *Did you not marry?*
- ANSWER: *I did. I have children from my sautā.<sup>17</sup> But I don't have any myself. All have made houses in Kathmandu. Some are in Banasthali, some in other places. They are six brothers.*
- QUESTION: *What about your husband?*
- ANSWER: *He died long ago.*
- QUESTION: *I guess, the sons from your sautā don't look after you, right?*
- ANSWER: *They'll kill me if they get a chance when I argue with them. I had called my lawyer. He hasn't got here yet.*
- QUESTION: *So you are troubled by boksis?*
- ANSWER: *Just after he [the lawyer?] performs phuknu on me, I'm able to walk for a while. Then, again, [the boksi] doesn't let me even raise my head straight. I had a fight with that prostitute (rāṃdi). That lady named Bidya is really a dangerous one.*
- QUESTION: *Does she live here too?*
- ANSWER: *Yes, she lives here. She hit me thrice; I hit her once in the bathroom. Since then, she doesn't let me even raise my head straight. I don't know what she applies to me. That's it. I don't know [the witchcraft]; I can only shout.*

This lady was apparently mentally impaired. However, her worries express the widespread fear of being cursed by fellow members of this old-people's home.

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16 Persons believed to have special powers silently recite mantras, and then gently blow air on the ailing person.

17 A woman who marries a married man.



## Conclusion

There are many ruptures in the notions that go along with what I have called the joint family glorification package. The joint family is not as "holy" as is often said. Its cohesion and solidarity were not always as strong as proclaimed. There is some evidence of abandonment of old people even if the joint family still exists. It is crucial to understand that it is not just modernity or Westernization that have led to this practice, as this chapter has aptly illustrated. It is also rooted in a structural ritual separation or, in some cases, even exiling of old people due to the traditional *āśrama* system—one of the strong spiritual pillars of Hinduism.

With this deconstruction of the "holy" joint family, several other aspects related to the treatment of old people can no longer be easily idealized. I had mentioned the notion of respect and care (*sevā*) for elders, but I could show the same result for what Sarah Lamb called "'traditionally' Indian characteristics: family bonds, intimacy, plentiful time, spirituality, large houses and families." (Lamb 2009, 71)

Now, if the ideal of the joint family glorification package breaks down, the causes for the presumed decline in the care of old people must be sought elsewhere. My suggestion is that the emergence and gradual acceptance of old-age homes have little to do with the decline of the joint family, but with the propagation and ready acceptance of another package, the gerontological initiative package: the provision of health services, old-age homes, clubs, day-care centres, homemaker services, meals-on-wheels, and "friendly visits."

Lawrence Cohen (1992, 135) rightly says that by

closing enquiry to the richness and complexity of ritual and text as responses to, rather than merely injunctions about, aging and to the history of the family as more than a process of decline, gerontology denies itself the use of this history in its own creation. With the sealing off of the past, the discipline appears to have recourse only to the West for models to interpret a fallen present.

It seems that some cultural studies on ageing in South Asia are still clinging to the romanticized ideal of village India where the joint family was the ideal basic social structure—neglecting the hierarchical, patriarchal, caste-driven structures of the village:

The family's internal relations are constituted not as rigid, fractious and cold but as fluid, stable and warm. The joint family signifies a powerful alternative to the inferiorized self Ashis Nandy posits as the enduring legacy of colonialism (1983). Its elaboration sustains the maintenance of an oppositional self and allows for the recovery of the experiencing of this self as authentic. That the essential Indian self identified with the ideal Joint Family is "lost" within the



Figure 1: Old-people's bench at Patan Durbar Square.

temporal sequence of the narrative is not a challenge to its authenticity. Even as the narrative charts this loss it affirms—through continual reiteration—the ultimate equation of the Indian self with the Joint Family. The Decline is less a loss than a superimposition of inauthentic otherness (Cohen 1992, 137).

In Indian gerontology, as far as I can see, the “disadvantaged elder”—the disciplinary icon” (Cohen 1992, 124) is taken for granted. Old age is a problem—*per definitionem*—because only “the disadvantaged elder legitimates the universality of the discipline and claims for patronage” (Cohen 1992, 124). Through the fall of the ‘holy joint family’, the disadvantaged elder is presented as an urgent problem. However, I hope to have demonstrated that the disadvantaged elder is not a recent phenomenon; rather, it has been evident since the “golden past” and is a structurally given in the soteriologically based *āśrama* system.

What could be the solution then? In gero-anthropology, the trope of moral indignation and the wish to help underlies many studies. I do not want to follow this route, and that is why I will give the last word to Kali Raj (Joshi), 81, the retired government officer whom I met at the old-people's bench at Patan's Durbar Square (Fig. 1):

So we need to change as per the time. Same is the case with ageing, if one changes as per the situation and adapts to the newer

situations, there will be longevity and health as well. So you have to come forward to deal with the problems positively and make it a pleasant act. If one can practice such conversion, you will be very happy, even happier than the younger people. There are a lot of curiosities during the younger age. In old age, there are no curiosities. So the attitude has to be changed. Such changes cannot be trained by any institutions. Maybe to some extent, it can be but mostly, it's the individual himself who has to train himself. Okay, I'll leave now. I'll be back later for gossiping. [*Laughs*]

## Figure

Fig. 1: Photo by Rajendra Shakya. Patan, Nepal, March 2015.

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