

**Spring School 2017 “Perspectives on an age-friendly culture: Concepts and Methods”**  
**University of Heidelberg and Jawaharlal Nehru University**  
**Tuesday, 21st February, 2017, Day 2**

Lecture “Anthropological Methods for the Study of Ageing” – Professor William Sax

The second day of the Spring School, “Perspectives on an Age-Friendly Culture: Concepts and Methods” began with the lecture by Prof. William Sax (Department of Anthropology, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University). In his lecture, “Anthropological Methods in the Study of Ageing”, Prof. Sax explained about the two important ways the methods of anthropological research can be helpful in the study of ageing. Firstly, the discipline teaches its scholars to be skeptical about the categories that are used to define a particular phenomenon. For example, ‘mental illness’ could mean many things in different contexts. Hence, we should keep in mind the cultural context of the people we are studying, and never assume the universality of a particular concept. Secondly, the discipline also teaches its scholars to be epistemologically skeptical, that is, to be skeptical about what people say they do, as it might be different from what they actually do, especially in the context of very intimate subjects. Ethnography as a method can help the researcher in observing the small details by participating in the same activities as that of their research participants. But the researcher must be conscious of the fact that s/he cannot ever indulge in total participation.

His lecture also reminded us about the origins of the discipline of anthropology which was to study the ‘other’, in many cases the colonized other. Over the years the ‘other’ has changed and it is time to understand the cultural differences. The experience of ageing varies from context to context. He talked about his own research in the highlands of Uttarakhand, where people often talked about the good old days which have preceded the present (*kalyug*), where children do not look after their parents. According to the villagers, in the good old days the children took good care of their parents in their old age. What they forget to reflect on is that this care had largely depended on the exploitation of women’s labor within the private sphere.

Even though the term “Active Ageing” has gained precedence of late, Prof. Sax is critical of it, as it often means that individuals should take care of their own lives. It encourages voluntaristic activities, while also encouraging state withdrawal from ageing. This point seems to be irrelevant in the Indian context, where the state has never really made a concerted effort to engage with the ageing population of the country.

He also mentioned about how caring practices have changed over the years. While earlier it was the women’s labor that was exploited within the household, but recently with women entering the labor force, the trend has shifted to exploiting the labor of women from the poorer

countries/women from poor socio-economic backgrounds. In this way, according to Prof. Sax, commodification of intimacy has now expanded to the area of elder care. As a result of the economic basis of such a relationship, caregivers often neglect their own children and their families to look after their clients. The economic aspect of this relationship again comes to the fore at the time of death of the client, when the caregiver is not allowed to be a part of the grieving rites that the family of the deceased undergoes.

Following his talk, Professor Sax encouraged a – due to time restrictions rather short – discussion on Sarah Lamb's (2002) tale of a widowed Indian woman, with a focus on the relationship between these two women which is based on an atmosphere of trust and proximity, while at the same time only Lamb's own 'otherness' in the community made it possible for the widow to confide her story to her. Several comments were sparked by the mentioning of "electric shock treatment" (Lamb 2002, 65), discussing the adaptation of the Western conception of shock therapy and its penetration in India.

#### Screening and Discussion of "Longing" and "Astu – So be it" – Dr. Mohan Agashe,

##### Psychiatrist and Actor

As Dr. Mohan Agashe rightly calls it "the limitation lies in mental conditioning to think of a book as educative and expect but entertainment from Cinema. When one fails to put the educative lens while watching a film, one misses the subtext". In the above light, therefore it becomes very important to reflect upon the films shown i.e., 'Longing' and 'Astu: So be it'.

Instead of discussing some theories, Dr. Agashe suggested that we watch his film 'Longing' and then have a discussion on it, to reaffirm his belief that cinema is for education. The movie begins with the character of Dr. Agashe, who is retired from his job, and is living alone in the city, as his only daughter has moved abroad. He is waiting for a checkup at the nursing home in his neighborhood. After his checkup, he returns back home. He was anxious and restless, he was desperately waiting for a phone call about his medical test report. His anxiety is apparent in all the chores he performs at home. He gives a call to his daughter, but she does not have time to talk to her father, as she was busy disciplining her young son. He gives a call to his doctor, who tells him that his reports are normal. The old man is not happy with his report. He is struck by emptiness syndrome; he feels worthless, hopeless and depressed, which drive him to attempt suicide. Just as he was about to commit suicide by hanging by a fan, a phone call distracts him. The phone call was about his close friend, who was breathing his last. His dying friend tries to convince him to never give up on life. With persisting anxiety and hope to continue living, he accidentally meets a young couple while saving their child from a minor

accident. Expressing their gratitude, the young couple invites the old man to their home. The love and care shown by the family makes him uncomfortable and he breaks down in front of them. He pleads with them to not shower so much love on him, as he is not used to it anymore. The film left the audiences with heartache and in quest of questioning the miseries that the elderly suffer. However the discussion waited for '*Astu*', a full-fledged Indian feature film coming from the womb of alternative Marathi Cinema.

The post lunch session followed by screening of '*Astu: So be it*', a film by Dr. Agashe, which intrigues one's understanding on aging in India. The film has three central characters: Dr. Shashtri (played by Dr. Mohan Agashe), Ira (played by Iravati Harshe) and Dr. Madhav (played by Milind Soman). The film begins with Ira taking her father to her home with a minor detour to the marketplace to buy a piece of cloth for her daughter. She leaves her father behind in the car. Her father, Dr. Shashtri is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He sees an elephant in the market place, and somehow manages to get out of the car. Like a child he follows the elephant and its caretaker around. From here the film sets in and consciously builds two converging storyline, one inflicting on the wonderland of appa and another on the life of the Sanskrit scholar, Dr. Shastri, before he suffered from Alzheimer's. The story depicts the stages of Dr. Shastri's life and loss of memory. The film is filled with power pack performances of Dr. Mohan Agashe (Dr. Shastri), Iravati Harshe (Ira) and Milind Soman (Dr. Madhav, Ira's husband). For this feature film Amruta Subash has won the national award in best supporting actress. Amruta plays the role woman who takes care of child-like Dr. Shastri along with her on-screen husband Nachiket Purnapatre (the elephant's caretaker). The film also won national award for best screenplay.

*Astu* keeps the reality in check and works on a metaphorical level as well. Practically it traces Alzheimer's and its effects, especially within the family dynamics. The film portrays the complex web of relationship between a daughter, a father and all around it. It tries to address the intergenerational differences and physical dependency in old age. Metaphorically, with the chants of verses from 'Upanishads', repeatedly emphasizing on 'being in the moment' adds to spirituality and philosophy of life. An elephant as a symbol of the divine takes it to divinity. Interestingly the film establishes a contrast between an old man who lost his memory on the one hand and an animal known for his gigantic memory on the other. The film exemplifies the idea of god and equality. To god everyone is equal and thus lays the foundation of relationship between a caregiver and the elderly. Therefore it challenges the popular idea of caregiving to

aged which is inertly considered as a “burden” to society. Dr. Mohan Agashe in his own words says that ‘the story is about life, love and death’.

### *Discussion*

The two films are elegant and engaging as well as highly insightful. *Astu* deals with the cognitive decline of a father and the subsequent dynamics within the family. It makes observation of tensions between a sense of obligations and moral responsibilities within a social structure. Both the films embark upon the vicious life cycle where old age becomes equivalent to an age of child where the caregiver has to become motherly equally. It ultimately negates the negative stereotypes and emphasizes on providing an effective relationship of love and affection.

The films preset within the extended family and extended aged household. They speak of aging in contemporary cosmopolitan India. They are set amidst of middle and upper class Indian society which is experiencing profound shifts in family life and intergenerational differences (Lamb 2007). They also address the shift occurring around the globe in cosmopolitan circles, in which dual career nuclear families are becoming prevalent, and kin pursuing global professional markets are widely scattered across nation and world. These shifts are thus visible in India because of changing social and economic processes. Therefore aging itself takes profoundly new forms and meanings in contemporary India.

### *The elephant in the room*

Finally, the content and the characters compel us to ask some uncomfortable questions - Why is there a total ignorance towards the miseries of the aged? Why are their problems still undermined? How could such a large population be ignored? Keeping in mind the Indian context, why Indian gerontology is still in its infancy? While in some of the instances biological and psychological solutions are available, how come the sociological perspectives are missing? Why does the society consider the elderly population as a burden? How do we create an inclusive environment? Why the physical space is still a challenge to the aged?

### Reflections

During this second day of the Spring School, the topic of ageing and age-friendly culture was approached from two directions: From the anthropological one (In the talk of Professor Sax and the short discussion of Lamb’s (2002) Paper), as well as from the more practical, exemplified direction, visualized by the movies presented by Dr. Mohan Agashe. For us, this day very well

showed the strength of these approaches in particular, but even more the more general benefits of a program such as this. For the students of anthropology among us, many of the approaches or definitions discussed in Professor Sax's talk might not have been necessarily new (although you can hardly hear them too often), for some of us students from India, it might not have been the first time that we encountered some of the processes or interactions shown in Dr. Agashe's movies – But exchanging these views that might be familiar to one and new to the other is essential: the comments added, the questions asked, and the discussions initiated in this framework are what makes this form of exchange so rewarding and important.

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