



The perception of age causes ageing. And our perception is shaped by our mind. It is our inner world that has to be conquered

*Dr Shyam Bhat*

# Forever young

**M**y friend recently told me about his uncle who, at age 60, has begun a regular regimen of facials. Apparently, his aunt was in tears because her husband had spent more than Rs 15,000 on facial creams in a single day. The uncle is fighting a battle that will never be won, swimming upstream against the inexorable force of ageing, forgetting that nobody is exempt, not even the beautician who tends to his face.

People have always made attempts to slow down the signs of ageing. Some have been more creative than others. Cleopatra bathed in milk and honey, the Greek physician Archigenes of Apamea described the dyeing of hair, and family albums are replete with artful comb-overs of generations past. But ageing seems to be particularly difficult in contemporary India, where our culture is going through hypersonic change and the old are feeling more marginalised than ever before. Previously, the old were venerated – or maybe the respect was institutionalised and, therefore, mandatory.

But in today's world, the democratisation of knowledge by the internet has trivialised the wisdom of the old. The material success of the young (money being seen as a virtue in itself), has devalued the achievements of the older generation. And because much of popular media is run by the young for the young, the old have little influence on social discourse and norms.

The psychiatrist George Vaillant called those who were middle-aged and older, 'the keepers of meaning'. According to Vaillant, the older generation is charged with an important task – to pass on the traditions of the past to the future.

The situation is different in India: in a society where change is the only constant, the old are no longer the keepers of meaning. In our country, social norms are rapidly and parallelly created and destroyed by the

young, with little remaining to be preserved by way of tradition by the old. The balance of creation, destruction and preservation has become a vortex of creation and destruction.

But there is hope. In a now famously quoted research study, a group of 70-year-olds stayed in houses that were reminiscent of the environment of their younger selves. The furniture, the kind of food they ate, the newspapers they read, the music they listened to – all from 40 years in the past. To their astonishment, the researchers found that the subjects actually seemed to experience a reversal of age. They looked younger, felt younger and the objective measures of ageing – heart rate, blood pressure and so on – improved. The perception of age causes ageing. And our perception is shaped by our mind.

Attempts to slow down the external changes caused by ageing might be healthy – it can only help our bodies to eat in moderation and to get adequate physical exercise – but taken to extremes, these attempts will only deplete and demoralise us. Ultimately, it is our inner world that has to be conquered.

So, the uncle would do well to remember that the external battle is ultimately a losing battle. His desperate attempts to look young are imprisoning him, taking away from the freedom of living.

Instead of constantly assessing how old he is perceived to be, if he can merge with existence, he will be free of the anguish of ageing. His body might be old but he will know that his spirit is forever young.

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