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DEBATE

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and 'Desirable' Aging?**

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Introduction

Technology is often thought of as stifling creativity, and kinship. For instance, the British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern argues that despite its scope for innovative thinking about the future, creativity seems to be trapped by technological advancements. She observes this in the context of the public debate in Britain in the 1990s surrounding the role and implications of assisted reproductive technology (artifice) for future kinship relations. She writes, "Technological *encroachment* (emphasis added) is exactly what the twentieth century Europeans see as the future" (Strathern 1992, 58-59). Thus, Strathern observes a climate of fear along with hope among Euro-Americans. As a result, the relation between creativity and artifice is seen as not one of mutual reinforcement but of encroachment, according to Strathern. However, based on my ethnographic fieldwork with older adults in South Asia, I argue that this need not always be the case. In the following sections, I will demonstrate how technology can be a co-actor and enhance the creative capacity of older adults in ways that make the latter agents of their own happiness and contribute to the health of the larger population. To that end, I first revisit existing linkages between aging, technology, and kinship.

Aging, technology, and kinship

Technology, especially biological and digital technology, have increasingly become part of the lives of humans today. This is more so among older adults living away from their kin in a rapidly urbanizing world characterised by multiple socio-environmental problems such as pollution, habitat loss, food safety, waste management, and so on. In this context, the role of technology in kinship in general, and in creating desirable aging futures in particular, can be answered only by exploring what kinship and aging means for various cultures across the world. Is kinship mere procreation, or is it a matter of being there for each other, humans and/or non-humans? Is aging just a bio-social fag end of life or a meaningful, creative co-existence?

Posthumanists and feminist scholars of the Anthropocene such as Donna Haraway point out how "becoming is always becoming with" (Haraway 2008, 244) other species. Likewise, becoming old could be becoming old 'with' beings other-than-humans. Further, as aging and health scholar Jason Powell (2006) points out, most biomedical theories on aging look at it as a declining phase and as an individualistic experience. Consequently, technology driven by this assumption takes forms of human centric products that aim to enhance individual physical and mental capacities as one ages, and hence both reinforce and stigmatize the link between aging and degeneration. Such a perspective ignores the social dimensions of aging. The life course perspective on aging, in contrast, points out that aging is neither a downward phase nor uniform across the world; instead, it is a result of a collection of social experiences (positive or negative) brought about by a changing social world to an individual

throughout their lifetime (Karalay 2024). Regardless of the variety in people's experiences and circumstances, the premise remains that everyone desires to age healthily and successfully. When it comes to South Asia, author and rural development practitioner Gangadhar Karalay (2024) argues that there is a need to explore the ways in which active and successful aging is achieved. In the current technosocial milieu, the sociality of active aging goes beyond improving access to assistive biomedical technology for maintaining one's physical health or using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to connect with one's immediate blood kins separated by place and time, as revealed by the following ethnographic example.

Ethnographic case

Ethnographic studies examining everyday life of elderly can help in understanding the complex interactions at the grassroot level between technology (artifice), creativity, and kinship. For instance, anthropologist Tanja Ahlin (2017) highlights the role of Information and Communication Technologies in shaping transnational care among elderly parents and their daughters who work abroad as nurses. In another study, the sociologist Jagriti Gangopadhyay (2021) points out how the emerging start-up market offering assisted health care, entertainment, and digital educational services plays an important role in self-care among the middle-class elderly population in urban India. In my study in South Asia, I observed how older adults engaged in home gardening with the help of bio and digital technology to make more-than-human kins for a healthy, happy aging. The study was conducted for ten months and the method of in-person interviews was used. I chose the south Indian city of Thiruvananthapuram, in Kerala, the state with the highest proportion of elderly to its population (Elderly in India Report 2016). In order to solve the twin problems of urban waste management and food safety, the State has been actively promoting roof top organic vegetable gardening in this location. To facilitate the process, UV fertilized growbags, disease resistant and high yielding seeds, lab cultured micro-organisms as bio-fertilisers and biopesticides, and drip irrigation tubes are developed and supplied to households at subsidized rates. My research focus was on the practice of urban rooftop organic food gardening and perspectives of older practitioners involved in this practice.

As I engaged with the elderly gardeners, I found that beyond the goals of self-sufficiency, waste management, and food safety, these older adults reported such technologically assisted rooftop gardening as contributing primarily to experiences of healthy and happy aging process. They witnessed it as an opportunity for them to make kin through becoming parents to their plant children. In the words of one of the study respondents:

> "Gardening keeps me happy and healthy as I get old. These plants are my babies. I plant them with great care. I soak the seeds in pseudomonas [biotechnological bacterial solution to prevent root rot] as suggested by the agricultural scientists before sowing them." (interview with Susan, July 2019)

Further, the gardeners used digital technologies such as Facebook and YouTube to learn to grow exotic varieties beyond the seeds supplied by the government. This openness and enthusiasm to learn something new with the help of technology challenges the popular notion that older people are tech-averse. Moreover, thanks to technology, many elderly gardeners could bond over shared pursuits and come up with creative solutions to some of the socio-environmental crises of our times. Through the help of social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook, urban gardeners connected with each other forming online gardening communities, sharing knowledge and tips on gardening. The members of one such group met in person and went on to create a weekly organic market to sell their 'safe,' home-grown vegetables in the city. The name of their group is *Krishi kutumbam* – meaning gardening family. The

gardeners in the group recalled attending and participating in fellow gardener's intimate family events such as death, marriage, and so on, just as they would for their own blood relatives. As one respondent stated:

> "Post-retirement, we are mostly at home. This is not a market, rather an occasion for meeting with friends brought together by love of plants. We are a gardening family" (interview with Krishnakumar, December 2019)

Such statements reflect the desire for an active social life as part of healthy aging. And digital technology helps them connect to like-minded people in this regard. As mentioned earlier, in a rapidly urbanizing South Asia characterized by emigration of youth for education and employment, older adults have to take care of themselves as they age (Ahlin 2017; Gangopadhyay 2021; Srinivasan 2015). Everyday practices such as home gardening brings these aging humans, technology, and non-humans (plants, microorganisms, and so on) into assemblages that care and nurture each other for happy and a healthy future. This is a case of creative deployment of technology such that it fosters life, and kinship with fellow humans and more-than-humans.

Conclusion

Strathern's observations may be valid for twentieth century Britain, but in the twenty first century, older adults elsewhere have made creative use of technology for desirable healthy future not just for themselves but also others. As the ethnographic case demonstrates, successful aging with technology goes beyond use of assistive technology for physical health. Social health is equally important. To keep their social selves active and healthy, the elderly urbaners, with the help of bio and digital technology, are growing 'safe, home-grown food' for themselves and for other urbaners facing collective health precarity due to issues of food safety in the city. Thus, contrary to what Strathern fears, I believe technology can be a co-actor in designing desirable aging futures. In other words, creativity and artifice can mutually reinforce each other.

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