18.4 Inter-generational Relations


Based on an ethnographic study of intergenerational relations in Chakkliyar (Scheduled Caste) families in two villages in rural Tamilnadu, South India, this article considers the cultural significance of age as a determinant of personhood and its material impact on older people’s access to family resources. While the two study villages are economically contrasted, largely due to different endowments in water resources, in either case, it appears that post-1991 economic changes, together with longer-term changes in the rural economy and state policies, have significantly widened the customary ‘need gap’ between younger and older generations, expanding the needs and aspirations of younger generations, both absolutely and in comparison to the perceived needs of older people, whilst not providing them with the means to meet those needs. In particular, the declining demand for agricultural labour has not only constrained sons’ capacities to meet the needs of both their conjugal and natal families, but also severely undermined older people’s livelihoods as they compete with younger people for agricultural work. In fact, the author finds a negligible transfer of resources from sons to parents in the context of extreme poverty.

In Indian culture in general, including in the poor, erstwhile ‘Untouchable’ communities under consideration, ageing parents are considered to have limited financial needs as compared with younger generations. Both custom and law position filial support as secondary to a son’s need to support his marital family. Therefore, if expansion in the younger generations’ needs is not matched by expansion in means, this will inevitably result in increased vulnerability for the aged. While the study was conducted among the rural poor, the author concludes that it is precisely because of the notion that younger people have greater needs than the aged that the potential exists in every family, irrespective of caste and class, for ageing parents to receive inadequate filial support.

18.5 Sociology of Death