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The elusive eternal youth: Feasible or just fantasy

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Abstract

The Indian Mythology, let alone the world literature is replete with search for, and sometimes even claims of eternal youth. Some claimed there is an island bubbling with sacred mystical waters that could make the old and infirm youthful. Even the motive behind the voyages undertaken by explorers such as Columbus was said to have been in part, to locate the Garden of Eden and/or the Fountain of Youth. Buddhist mythology's claim of Shambhāla somewhere deep in Himalayas also inspired the western explorers, particularly after the publication of the novel titled *The Lost Horizon* by James Hilton which talked about the people who live at Shangri-La as almost immortal, living years beyond the normal lifespan and only very slowly aging in appearance. There is also this interesting claim of seven *Ciranjeevs* like *Aswathāma* who are supposed to have been living eternally defying death, and there are even many claims of sighting them in Satpuda mountain ranges of western and central India as well as in Himalayas. What's more! Bhāgavata talks about even transference of youth between king Yayāti and his son Puru! There are several accounts in India, of Yogis who were said to have lived 250-300 years and even more. The longest life expectancy can be found in the Amami Islands of Japan where the signs of old age appear very late. Scientists claim Easter Islands in the south-eastern Pacific Ocean has the key for everlasting youth. A news item in Times of India on 13th July 2012 suggests that liver transplantation has rendered an old man to grow young by losing all sign of old age! Prahlad Jani of Gujarat baffled the scientific community with his claim that was partly verified, that he has not been eating for over seventy years and that he could live as long as he liked that might extend to even thousands of years!

This paper intends to examine whether there is any validity in these claims and whether the ancient system of Yoga has any clue concerning eternal youth.

Keywords: Eternal Youth, Yoga, Ciranjeev, Immortal, life-span, longevity

Introduction

Mythology and folklore across the world is replete with search for, and sometimes even claims of eternal youth. The belief that youth can be preserved or maintained for a very long span of time or even for eternity seems to have gained strong ground in many civilizations of the yore. So prevalent is this notion across the continents in various religions and civilizations that even a casual glance at the world literature reveals many such apparently unbelievable anecdotes.

Christian and Pre-Christian mythology has prolific accounts of an island bubbling with sacred mystical waters that could make the old and infirm youthful. In Irish mythology, for example, there is a mention of an island by name Tír na nÓg which was considered a place of eternal youth and beauty, beyond the boundaries, far to the west. Tír na nÓg was described an earthly paradise populated by supernatural beings, which a few sailors and adventurers were fortunate enough to happen upon during their journeys. Locating it was not easy; it involved an arduous voyage that culminated into finding it only in case of those who were lucky and destined. Or alternatively, an invitation from one of its fairy residents could grant the 'visa' for entry into that place where sickness and death did not exist. During the Middle Ages, several voyage tales and adventure fables revolved round this utopian island which claimed that several Irish heroes and monks visited it where music, strength, life, and all pleasurable pursuits were abundant. Here happiness lasted forever; no one required food or drink¹.

In the similar vein, there is this belief in the Fountain of Youth in Greek and Roman Mythology which is a legendary spring that reputedly restores the youth of anyone who drinks of its waters. The period between the early 15th century and early 17th century, is known as the Age of Exploration or Age of Discovery during which European ships travelled around the

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world searching for new trading routes and partners. This Age was also marked by the tales of similar waters among the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean who also believed that a mythical land called Bimini contained waters with restorative powers. Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León, who became the first Governor of Puerto Rico was said to have involved in the search for the Fountain of Youth and in 1513, finally reached what is now known Florida. Since then, the fountain has been frequently associated with Florida in St. Augustine². Tales of such a fountain have been recounted across the world for thousands of years, appearing in writings by Herodotus, the Alexander romance, and the stories of Prester John. Andes mountains of South America which saw the flourishing of Maya, Aztec and Inca empires bore witness to several accounts of magical islands and waters. During the Inca regime the Sun Island, on the Bolivian side of Lake Titicaca was famed as a magical island. These ancient cultures had much in common with the Vedic tradition of India, even though they were separated by thousands of kilometers. According to the Andes cultures mythology, the Sun God Viracocha (Vedic culture calls the Sun God Virocana) sent his son and daughter to earth, to found the Inca Empire. By tasting the waters of the Sacred Fountain in the Sun Island, one is believed to be granted with eternal youth and happiness. According to the Indian Mythology the Sun God also bore a son and a daughter by the name Yama and Yamuna, Yamuna being a sacred river of India, next only to the sacred Ganges. Interestingly Yama is the god of death and Yamuna is absolver of sin. Sin (*pāpa*) is the cause of death and old age. He who takes a dip in Yamuna is released from the shackles of demerit.

The Kālacakra Tantra of Vajrayāna Buddhism of Tibet is also believed to have a best kept secret in respect of Shambhāla or Shambhāla, a mystical and sacred place somewhere in inner Asia among Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang, and Manchu lands. So prevalent is this belief in the native people of these countries that Bon religion, a religion that was in vogue much before the advent of Buddhism in these lands, also has similar testimonies in its literature. This utopian land caught the imagination of people at large, particularly of the western audience when James Hilton published his best seller *The Lost Horizon* in the early thirties of twentieth century, where he spoke of the land as inhabited by people who are eternally youthful as well as immortal.

India, the bedrock of many civilizations across the globe, has been a land that blended wisdom with mythology. It employed what is known as *sandhyā bhāsha* or twilight language that expeditiously conveyed the eternal truths and secrets in the form of anecdotes. Some of the popular Indian accounts on the question of eternal youth are so strongly imbued into the psyche of this nation that a large section of populace still believes in the yogis living 'out there in *Himālayas*' for thousands of years! Purāṇas and Itihāsas such as Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa claim there are seven immortals who are

believed to be alive throughout the Kali Yuga until the onset of future Satya Yuga. "*Ashwaththāma Balir Vyāso Hanumānas ca Vibhishāṇa Krupācārya ca Parāśurāmam Saptaitā Ciraṅjeevanam*". There are even many claims of sighting them in Sātpuda mountain ranges of western and central India and in Himalayas. In early twenties of the last century, a group of Sanskrit scholars, some with affiliation to the Theosophical Society of India, like Srinivasa Iyer, Pandit Subbaraya Śāstri, *et al* published some interesting works such as *Gobhila Samhita* and *Praṇava Vāda* of Gārgyāyana in

which there is this description of *Suddha Dharma Mandalam* somewhere deep in Himalayas probably bordering Nepal and Tibet where Siddhas of eminence having conquered old age and death dwell. Mahābhārata describes an interesting anecdote where Bhima was commissioned by Lord Krishna to bring a Himalayan creature to take care of the housekeeping of the Yagña vātika during the Rājasuya Yagña. The description of the place of dwelling of this mysterious creature, which is supposed to be almost immortal, matches with that of the *Suddha Dharma Mandalam* and purported Shambhāla. Even the Uttaramegha of the much famed Meghadoot of Kalidasa also has a description of similar abode near Kailash Mountain.

Interestingly, bringing a more curious case, Bhāgavata, one of the eighteen principal *purāṇas*, talks about even transference of youth between king Yayāti and his son and records that one could be affected with premature old age (owing to a curse), that fits the medical description of a genetic disorder known by the name Hutchinson-Gilford Progerias Syndrome. There are several accounts in India, of Yogis such as Trilinga Swami, Babaji, Changdev who were said to have lived 250-300 years or even more!

But are these anecdotes just stories of fantasy? Or are they based on some real accounts? Does Yoga or any such other system contain any such not-well-known secrets that hold the secret of literally extending the life span to such incredible lengths of time? For us to attempt understand the veracity of these accounts and form a justified belief on the truth or falsity of these claims, it is important that we first examine what the recent discoveries as well as ancient Yoga, Siddha and other medical systems have to say in this regard.

Discussion

A recent discovery of an interesting chemical found in the soils of Easter Island has been shown to have the potential to slow down the aging process and extend human lifespan, the Telegraph reported, quoting the scientists. The drug Rapamycin, nicknamed the "forever young" drug, has been shown in experiments to counteract the effects of Hutchinson-Gilford Progerias Syndrome (HGPS) — a rare genetic disease that causes children to age at a greatly exaggerated rate, dying of "old age" by around 12. Though the exact cause of this premature aging is not completely known, scientists discovered that a protein known by the name Progerin clogs the cells causing them to age prematurely. By purging this protein from the cells this aging process can be thwarted. It is interesting to note that normal aging works in much the same way as HGPS, so now US researchers are expected to look into Rapamycin's ability to stem it, too. Scientists associated with this study are hopeful that even a small activation of this 'debris removal' system would extend the health and life-span of cells and organs of the body⁴.

The longest life expectancy can be found in the Amami Islands of Japan where the signs of old age appear very late. While the average life expectancy of even the most developed countries and regions is below 90 years, people of these islands are known to surpass 103 years on an average! It is found that their very genetic structure has mutated over the years to allow such significant lifespan to all those inhabitants of these islands.

A news item that appeared recently in newspapers suggests that liver transplantation has caused an old man to grow young by losing all sign of old age! The liver of the young man, who died in an accident, has miraculously reversed aging process of an old recipient of that liver. The recipient's

hairs have turned from grey to black, his wrinkles are gone and he is no longer dependent on diabetes drugs. Doctors say that the blackening of hair and renewed energy experienced can be attributed to availability of nutrition to the body as liver functions have normalized⁵.

The above three examples seem to point out that by bringing in certain changes in the cell metabolic activity or by rejuvenating certain vital organs, the aging process could be retarded or even halted. Hence if the ancients happened to chance upon such naturally occurring drug in certain island or had developed a technique through time tested systems like Yoga, Siddha or Ayurveda, medicine it could have been possible to prolong the aging process. Now let us see what ancient texts of Yoga have to say about the technique.

Ancient texts of East claim that anything can be attained with the right administration of yantra, tantra, mantra, mañi or aushadhi. Haṭa Yoga Pradipika, the oldest surviving text on haṭa yoga claims that by indulging in *Gomukha Bhakshanam*, *Surā Pānam* a yogi would conquer death and old age. Written by Swāmi Svātmārāma, a disciple of Swami Gorakhnath this apparent enigma presented in the text which recommends the consumption of tabooed substances, is solved in the next two *slokas* where Gomukha Bhakshanam and Sura panam are explained. It is stated that there is a triangle shaped bone structure in the inner regions of the human skull which can be reached by the tongue through the cavity behind the uvula. When this region of the brain is titillated by the tip of the tongue which smacks eating the cow head, a unique fluid, probably a neurotransmitter, oozes out and trickles down the tongue, which upon absorption causes the body to rejuvenate. Such a Yogi is stated to stay eternally youthful and never fall prey to death and old age. Human anatomy tells us that a great number of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin etc., which are most essential to the human survival are secreted by an almond shaped structure in the brain known as Amygdala. Another structure in the brain called pineal gland is thought to be the seat of the soul by many medieval philosophers. Excitation of any of these regions either by mental concentration or by yogic exercises such as the one mentioned above is claimed to release certain amino acid secretions that are the building blocks of proteins, which in turn make up our body organs. The new release of these secretions could probably recreate the cells and tissues of the human body. In the recent times, one saintly figure from Ahmadabad in Gujarat in western India, known by the name Mataji whose original name is Prahlad Jani, baffled the scientific community by his claims that he lived without food and water since 1940, and that the goddess Amba sustains him. He also claims that there is an orifice in his soft palate through which he constantly receives a sticky substance or amrita that sustains his life and also claims this elixir of life would allow him to arrest any further deterioration of his body and if he wishes, he could live in this body for another five thousand years! Rambahadur Bomjan, an eighteen year old man from Nepal also shocked the whole world when Discovery channel telecast a video titled 'the boy with divine powers' wherein it was shown that the boy does not take anything in - including water, and yet manages to show supreme control of his body's metabolic activity.

Similarly, Haṭa Yoga Pradipika also extols *Uddiyān Bandha*, one of the three *bandhās* as the guarantor of ensuring eternal youth. Constant practice of this *bandha* is said to allow a Yogi to defy the death and old age⁺.

Dnyāneṣwari a commentary on Bhagavat Gita by world renowned saint Dnyāneṣwar describes the process of

rejuvenation of entire human organs through yogic practices in the sixth chapter 'Atma samyamana Yoga'. It claims that such a Yogi's body would shed grey hair, wrinkled skin and old teeth which are replaced by new ones. This rejuvenated body attains Kāya siddhi and is impervious to the vagaries of old age.

The gTummo technique of Tibet, which in Indian yogic parlance is known as *Cāndāli*, is an ancient secret yogic practice which enables the practitioner to not only control the body temperature but subdue completely hunger and thirst. Prolonged practice of this technique is stated to enable the practitioner to live as long as he likes.

Cavan rishi made a preparation in the ancient times known by the name Cyavan Prāsh, which if properly prepared and taken daily is said to surely arrest the aging process considerably.

Conclusion

The above discussions are ample proof to show that it is not altogether impossible to defy death and old age, but rather, well within the human reach. But for obvious reasons, these methods and techniques are kept as secrets, lest they should fall in the wrong hands. It is very likely that the ancient civilizations have certainly come across or developed such systems which would guarantee a very long life span and youth if not eternal life and youth. It is time Indologists and scientist take serious interest and unravel these secrets for the benefit of one and all.

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