

Indian concepts on sexuality

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ABSTRACT

India is a vast country depicting wide social, cultural and sexual variations. Indian concept of sexuality has evolved over time and has been immensely influenced by various rulers and religions. Indian sexuality is manifested in our attire, behavior, recreation, literature, sculptures, scriptures, religion and sports. It has influenced the way we perceive our health, disease and device remedies for the same. In modern era, with rapid globalization the unique Indian sexuality is getting diffused. The time has come to rediscover ourselves in terms of sexuality to attain individual freedom and to reinvest our energy to social issues related to sexuality.

Key words: Concepts, Indian, kamasutra, manusmriti, sexuality, vajikarana

INTRODUCTION

Modern India is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. Excavations in the Indus Valley trace civilization there back for at least 5,000 years. India's cultural history includes prehistoric mountain cave paintings in Ajanta, the exquisite beauty of the Taj Mahal in Agra, the rare sensitivity and warm emotions of the erotic Hindu temple sculptures of the 9th-century Chandella rulers, and the Kutab Minar in Delhi. The seeming contradictions of Indian attitudes towards sex can be best explained through the context of history. India played a significant role in the history of sex, from writing the first literature that treated sexual intercourse as a science, to in modern times being the origin of the philosophical focus of new-age groups' attitudes on sex. It may be argued that India pioneered the use of sexual education through art and literature. As in all societies, there was a difference in sexual practices in India between common people and powerful rulers, with people in power often indulging in hedonistic lifestyles that were not representative of common moral attitudes. India is a multiethnic and multilingual society with wide variations in demographic situations and socioeconomic conditions. In a nation as religiously and ethnically diverse

as India-the nation is commonly described as "a jumble of possibilities" -the people follow a wide variety of customs, and have varied beliefs that ultimately mold their lifestyles and sexuality. Sexuality means different things to different people. For some people, it could mean the act of sex and sexual practices, for others it could mean sexual orientation or identity and/or preference and yet for others it could mean desire and eroticism. Sexuality encompasses many ideas and has many facets. The definition of sexuality has been evolving along with our understanding of it. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships.

SEXUALITY IN ANCIENT TIMES

The first evidence of attitudes towards sex comes from the ancient texts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, the first of which are perhaps the oldest surviving literature in the world. These most ancient texts, the Vedas, reveal moral perspectives on sexuality, marriage and fertility prayers. It seems that polygamy was allowed during ancient times. In

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practice, this seems to have only been practiced by rulers, with common people maintaining a monogamous marriage. It is common in many cultures for a ruling class to practice both polyandry and polygamy as a way of preserving dynastic succession. Nudity in art was considered acceptable in southern India, as shown by the paintings at Ajanta and the sculptures of the time. It is likely that as in most countries with tropical climates, Indians from some regions did not need to wear clothes, and other than for fashion, there was no practical need to cover the upper half of the body. This is supported by historical evidence, which shows that men in many parts of ancient India mostly dressed only the lower half of their bodies with clothes and upper part of the body was covered by gold and precious stones, jewellery, while women used to wear traditional sarees made of silk and expensive clothes as a symbol of their wealth. Vatsyayana's classic work "Kamasutra" (Aphorisms of love) written somewhere between the 1st and 6th centuries includes the three pillars of the Hindu religion "Dharma," "Artha" and "Kama" representing religious duty, worldly welfare and sensual aspects of life respectively. The main theme here appears to be the expression of Indian attitude toward sex as a central and natural component of Indian psyche and life.^[1] The Panchatantra states that shyness, friendship, melodious voice, intellect, brilliance of youth, *enjoying the sensuality of women*, equanimity within the species, absence of sorrow/misery, *carnal pleasure*, religion, scriptures, intelligence of Brihaspathi (the teacher of Gods/Devathas), hygiene, concern about good behavior – *all these occur only when the creatures' stomach is full*. This elegant *Subhashitha* from Vishnusharma's Panchathantra clearly indicates the necessity of appropriate and adequate food/nutrition, a requisite for having the right mindset and power for optimum sexual performance. During 10th century to 12th century, some of India's most famous ancient works of art were produced, often freely depicting romantic themes and situations [Figure 1]. Examples of this include the depiction of Apsaras, roughly equivalent to nymphs or sirens in European and Arabic mythology, on some ancient temples. The best and most famous example of this can be seen at the Khajuraho complex in central India built around 9th to 12th century. "The Perfumed Garden," by Sheikh Nafzawi, is the best known example of a classic Islamic sex manual. In this 16th century guide, what people of that time thought were the most satisfactory characteristics of lovers and love making, have been poetically and colorfully described.^[2]

SEXUALITY DURING COLONIAL ERA

At the end of the medieval period in India and Europe, colonial powers such as the Portuguese, British and French were seeking ways of circumventing the Muslim controlled lands of western Asia, and re-opening ancient Greek and Roman trade routes with the fabled rich lands of India, resulting in the first attempts to sail around Africa, and circumnavigate the globe. The Indian Rebellion of

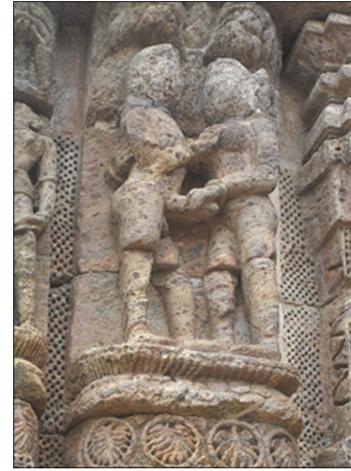


Figure 1: Sculpture at Ajanta Caves

1857 caused widespread condemnation of the East India Company's alleged shortcomings and the Government of India Act 1858 completely did away with the Company's intermediary role, ushering in the British Raj era of direct rule. This put India much more at the mercy of Britain's official guardians of morality. Victorian values stigmatized Indian sexual liberalism. The pluralism of Hinduism, and its liberal attitudes were condemned as "barbaric" and proof of inferiority of the East. A number of movements were set up by prominent citizens, such as the Brahma Samaj in Bengal and the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay Presidency, to work for the "reform" of Indian private and public life. Paradoxically, while this new consciousness led to the promotion of education for women and (eventually) a raise in the age of consent and reluctant acceptance of remarriage for widows, it also produced a puritanical attitude to sex even within marriage and the home.

WOMEN IN INDIA OVER THE AGES

The historical analysis of the status of women shows that in Vedic India, as revealed by its literature, women were treated with grace and consideration. However, in the post-vedic age, there was a slow but steady decline of their importance in the home and society. A decline, indeed a distinct degeneration in their status, is visible in medieval India. The purdah system of female seclusion, the sati tradition of immolating the widow on the husband pyre, dowry, and child marriages were obvious in the pre independence period. The family in Indian society provides for the satisfaction of the fundamental biopsychic drives of hunger and sex, and makes it possible to perpetuate the species through reproduction and the social heritage through the handing down of traditions from generation to generation. The function of preserving language, customs, and traditions is normally performed in collaboration with other social groups. Husband and wife, though, contribute to the maintenance of the family, there is a clear division of labor based on sex. The sex roles of a person consist of

the behavior that is socially defined and expected of that person because of his or her role as a male or female. In India's male-dominated tradition, and everywhere in Vedic, classical, medieval, and modern Hinduism, the paradigms in myths, rituals, doctrines, and symbols are masculine. However, just as goddess traditions encroached successfully on the territory of masculine deities, so too has the impact of women's religious activity, the ritual life, in particular, been of increasing significance in the overall scale of Hindu tradition.^[3]

TRADITION OF MARRIAGE IN INDIA

Adult marriage is generally the rule in India. Usually it is expected that a husband must be in a position to earn a living and his wife must be able to run the home, which they set up after marriage. The influence of the Hindu religion has resulted in some pre-puberty marriages. The vast majority of regular marriages are still parent-made, arranged marriages. In one form of irregular marriage, the two lovers run away and stay away until they are accepted by their family, which is done as a matter of course. In a second form, known as "Intrusion," a girl confronts her chosen husband and his parents and presses their acceptance of her by living in the house. A third form involves "forcible application of vermilion" when a young man takes the opportunity at some fair or festival to place a vermilion scarf on his chosen girl's head. Sometimes a betrothal ceremony takes place before the marriage proper is solemnized. Legally, marriage takes place only between those who have passed the puberty stage. At the marriage ceremony, the local priest is required to officiate prayers and offerings are made to the gods.

In Indian folklore, Shiva and Parvati argue interminably about who is the better dancer, while Vishnu and Lakshmi are constantly debating which the greater divinity is. The social context determines whether the woman is viewed as a divine, good, or bad-as partners in ritual, as mother, or as an object of sensuality. Faced with this perennial conflict between husband and wife, the object of the wife's affectional and sensual currents traditionally has been the husband's younger brother in the joint or extended Indian family. For a time in Indian social history, the custom of *niyoga* officially recognized the erotic importance of the brother-in-law-in the sense that he would or could have sexual relations with his elder's brother's widow. The *niyoga* custom has been traced back to the times of the Rig-veda where a man, identified by the commentators as the brother-in-law, is described as extending his hand in promise of marriage to a widow inclined to share her husband's funeral pyre.

The fate of sexuality within marriage is likely to come under an evil constellation of stars. Physical love will tend to be a shame-ridden affair, a sharp stabbing of lust with little love and even less passion. Indeed, the code of sexual

conduct for the householder-husband fully endorses this expectation. Stated concisely in the *smritis* (the law codes), elaborated in the *puranas* which are not only collections of myths, but also contain chapters on the correct conducts of daily life), modified for local usage by the various kinds of religious leaders, the thrust of the message seems to be "no sex in marriage, we are Indian."^[4]

In the life of a Hindu male, for instance, marriage is regarded as necessary, because without a wife, he cannot enter the *Grihasth ashrama* (the life stage of a householder). In addition, without marriage there can be no offspring, and without a son, no release from the chain of reincarnation in birth-death-rebirth. According to Hindu custom, which still prevails in most families, marriage must take place within one's caste or *Varna*, although marriages between members of different castes and communities are gaining acceptance. Hindu marriage, being a religious sacrament, is indissoluble.

According to Hindu tradition, a husband should only approach his wife sexually during her *ritu* (season), a period of sixteen days within the menstrual cycle. However, intercourse is forbidden on 6 of these 16 days, the first 4 days, and the 11th and 13th. This leaves only ten days for conjugal relations, but since the all-important sons are conceived only on even nights and daughters on uneven nights, the days for conjugal relations shrinks to five. Then there are the *parvas*, the moonless nights and those of the full moon when sexual relations lead either to the birth of atheist sons (*Brahma Purana*) or the "hell of feces and urine" (*Vishnu Purana*). Add to these taboos, the many festival days for gods and ancestors when erotic pleasures are forbidden. Sex is also beyond the pale during the day.

After the foundation of the Delhi Sultanates and the set-up of several Muslim states in the 14th-15th centuries in India, Islamic customs of the complete covering up of women changed the approach that once existed in India. It is not to say that the "Purdah" system became prevalent or was enforced in this period, because there were several Hindu customs, which had the same principles-such as the "Ghungat" of the Marwaris of Rajputana. However, it came to be followed more like a staunch rule than a tradition, and of course, it must be remembered that this was not an indigenous custom, being, in fact, imported from areas in the Persian sphere of influence in South Asia such as Rajasthan or under Turkic-Mongol Muslim conquerors. The *purdah* system still prevails in the Muslim northern region of the country, where a female has to cover her face in front of other males and elders, but this custom is also slowly fading out. A Muslim marriage is solemnized by signing a legal document and can be dissolved. Divorce is almost exclusively the husband's privilege, although a divorcing husband has to pay the "Dower," a settlement made to the wife out of her husband's property to compensate her in the event of death and divorce.

SEXUALITY IN ADOLESCENCE AND YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Indian children are pampered as much as possible, often until age 6 or 7. Before puberty, a natural approach to sexuality and nudity prevails, especially in rural areas. Daughters and sons are carefully prepared for their future domestic roles as mothers and fathers. Women are considered to be much more skilled than males in love and sexual pleasures. At puberty, most boys and girls are segregated. In some regions of India, pubescent girls are not even allowed to enter a house where a single young man is present.^[5] Masturbation is generally unacceptable among girls. For boys however, it is considered a preparation for mature sex life. Though boys at the younger ages may masturbate together without shame, at little more mature ages, they all give it up.

Among adolescents, Reddy *et al.*, in a 1983 study found that the sample youth had their first sexual experience between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Homosexual activities were also reported in this study: 38% of women in the sample reported that their first sexual activity had been with a partner of the same sex.^[6]

Traditionally, premarital sex activity was controlled in India. As the marriages were mostly arranged by elders, premarital sex was not the accepted practice. Although premarital sex among the tribal societies of India has been widely reported, there is very little if any reliable data on this topic in either the rural or urban areas. A study by Savara and Sridhar in 1992 showed that 30% of the respondents had experienced premarital sex, while 41% of unmarried men and 33% of married men had their first intercourse before attaining 20 years.^[7]

HOMOSEXUAL AND AMBISEXUAL BEHAVIOURS

Heterosexual acts, the only socially acceptable sexual expression, are based primarily on the much wider contact and more common relationships between males and females in society. The family is promoted as the early valid social unit. Although homosexuals existed even in ancient India, they never attained social approval in any section of the Indian population. Early Buddhist and Hindu periods covered in ancient texts such as Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and Kamasutra refer to same-sex attraction and behavior. The Buddhist tradition, as indicated in the pillar caves of Karle (50-75 CE), shows two bare breasted women embracing each other. In Hindu scriptures, for example, Bhagiratha is born from the union of two women. Shikhandi in Mahabharata and Ardhanarishwar have also been described. Ayyappa (dual gendered god) is worshiped by hijras. Several sculptures and carvings in Khajuraho and Sun temple of Konarak depict same-sex behavior including, mutual fellatio and orgiastic scenes.^[8] Parasuraman *et al.* found that, 3% of the homosexuals earned their livings as dancers and/or sex workers. It is further

reported in this study that most of the men were between the ages of 21 and 30, and took both active and passive roles in unprotected anal and oral intercourse.^[9] Very little is known about the current practice of male or female homosexuality in India. Homosexuality is slowly gaining acceptance, in part due to the efforts of one or two organized groups in metro cities that are affiliated with a couple of activist homosexual groups connected to international bodies of gays. A regular voice of one organization, and of its homosexual members, is published in Bombay, titled *Bombay Dost*, or "Bombay Friend."

It is highly interesting to note cross-gender and cross-gender behavior in the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Arjuna in the gesture of Birhannala fought with Kaurava on behalf of Prince Uttara -"Arriving in front of the Kauravas, he got down, prayed to God, removed the conch bangles from his hands, and put on leather gauntlets. He then tied a cloth on his flowing hair, stood facing the east, meditated on his armor, got into the chariot and gloried in the familiar feel of his famous Gandiva bow. In the ensuing battle, he defeated Kauravas."

The Hijras -an Urdu word for eunuchs-are the most notable examples of gender variance in India. Hijra, who live predominantly in the larger cities, belongs to a Hindu caste of males who dress as females. Their religious role is to perform as mediums for female goddesses, hence their role at weddings. Usually, they leave their families in their teen years to join adult Hijras in large city. Some may finalize their gender status by castration. Their societal role, and means of making a livelihood, involves providing entertainment at weddings and other festivals, sometimes uninvited but always expecting to be paid. They may also engage in sexual activity with men for money or to satisfy their own sexual desires.^[10]

REPRESSED SEXUALITY

Repressed sexuality has also been a factor in what in the West might be considered widespread incest. In India's extended family system, sex between brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law for e.g., or between cousins; or uncles and nieces; or aunts and nephews are common, although hard statistics are not available. As per the Manu Dharma Sastram (applicable to the Treta Yuga and Dwapara Yuga), if a lady is widowed without having any sons; then she could have a son through her dead husband's brother. So, when Vichitravirya died without any sons, his mother Satyawati approached Vichitravirya's half-brothers to co-habit with Ambalika and Ambika to bless them with a son each. Bhishma, Santanu's son, refused on account of his vow of brahmacharya. Then she asked her own son Veda Vyasa and he obliged. It is very clear that in this case Ambika and Ambalika were obedient but unhappy to go through this process. It was also legal for a man to approach a brahman or a deva to give him a son through his wife. When Pandu

was cursed that he would die if he approached his wives, he left for the Himalayas with them.

PROSTITUTION AND PORNOGRAPHY

Prostitution, the indulgence in promiscuous sexual relations for money or other favors, is an age-old institution in India. Purchasing young girls and dedicating them to temples, the Devadasi system; was an established custom in India by 300 C.E. These girls often served as objects of sexual pleasure to the temple priests and pilgrims. Generally, prostitutes tend to come from the less-educated class of women, including single abandoned girls, and economically distressed women. Most of these women were either forced by gang members and others to take up this profession or were betrayed with false promises of a job. According to investigative reporter Robert I. Friedman, there are more than 100,000 female commercial sex workers in Bombay, which he describes as "Asia's largest sex bazaar." In all of India, there are as many as 10 million commercial sex workers.^[11]

All forms of sexually oriented publications are illegal in India. The government-appointed Central Board has the power to make cuts or ban the indecent or obscene scenes in films. Although, pornographic books, magazines, and videos are illegal, their display and sales are casually noticed in urban areas, especially in the major cities.

CONCEPT OF SEXUALITY INFLUENCING DISEASE PROCESS AND HEALING

The concept of sexual dysfunction in Indian context is defined differently with reference to the person's socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds. Generally, it is differentiated on the basis of men and women, young and old, rich and poor, and able-bodied and disabled persons. Dhat Syndrome is commonly reported in the Indian sub-continent. In Indian mythology and Ayurveda, there are seven bodily fluids (called Dhatus), each of which is a refinement of the previous one, i.e., Chyle is concentrated into blood, blood into flesh, flesh into fat, fat into bone, bone into marrow and marrow into semen. Semen is taken as elixir, and it is believed that it takes 40 days and 40 drops of blood to form one drop of semen and semen has a capacity of 20 tolas (6.8 ounces).^[12,13] Similar beliefs are held in Sri Lanka, and Unani (Greek) medicine, where also it is believed that 40 drops of blood produce one drop of semen.^[14-16] For the first time, the term "Dhat Syndrome" was formally used by Wig.^[17] Semen loss anxiety also known as Dhat Syndrome is common in India and China.^[18,19] It is a culture bound syndrome and is related to beliefs about the relationship of semen to spiritual and physical health. Passing of semen in urine is called Dhat or "Dhatu Rog" and in some parts of India and Pakistan, it is also known as "Jiryana." Ayurvedic professionals consider semen loss as a serious illness, which can lead to physical weakness and they promote herbal and

dietary treatment.^[20] Another interesting observation, which was evident in sexuality research was presence of guilt associated with masturbatory practices. Nakra *et al.* found that, nearly 75% of the patients had practiced masturbation before developing potency disorders and nearly 43% had guilt associated with masturbation.^[21]

In Aurveda, there is a systematic description of medicine or therapy called "Vajikarana" or "Virility Therapy" by which the man becomes capable of copulating with the woman. It also aids in nourishing the body of the person. According to Charaka (author of "Charaka Samhitha," an ancient ayurvedic text on internal medicine), one of the principal contributors to the art and science of Ayurveda, these medicines are said to give one the strength and potency of a horse by increasing the quantity and quality of semen, sperm count and sperm motility. The person who takes these aphrodisiacs is claimed to get erection for a longer duration. Charaka contends that the possible causes of decreased libido are (a) impotency by birth, (b) *Veeryavarodha*-obstruction of semen as a consequence of controlling sexual urges for longer duration (c) *Shukra kshaya*- decrease in quantity of semen due to overindulgence in sexual activities. This may eventually lead to *Clibya* (impotency) if *Vajikara dravyas* (Libido enhancers) are not consumed by such persons regularly and (d) consumption of spicy, salty and hot food that increase *pitta* and destroys *Shukra* (semen). Vajikarana includes oleation, purification, decoction enema and lubricating enema. Foods suggested, which facilitate this therapy are milk, meat soup and boiled rice along with ghee, oil, meat juice, sugar and honey. Emphasis is placed on relaxed, cheerful, contented mindset.^[22,23]

FUTURE OF INDIAN SEXUALITY

The famous Indian sensuality, quoted incessantly in the world, by mentions of Tantric life styles, Kamasutras and erotic arts will change the face of the world again in coming decades when Indian people find themselves again. A cross-section of Indian people who are adjusted in the less dogmatic and prosperous Western societies and their behavior patterns and views - reflect that a healthier sexual approach to our lives is eventually healthier for our well-being, our over all progress and of course a new awakening on personal level. The newer generations of India and Indian people worldwide have been trying to define the sexual and sensual vocabulary on their own; rather than being influenced by external and foreign influences. In fact, it is a healthier approach and eventually when Indian people in India in 1 or 2 decades-when they become all formally educated and emancipated socially, and have rather more space and time at their discretion; will find that an open dialogue about sex matters is normal and acceptable. We should start talking about issues and focus light on dark areas, which create ignorance, ill-health and many social evils like failed marriages, rapes, divorces,

disrespect to women, abuse of children and in general an unhappy people.

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