

CHAPTER 7. SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY: INDIA'S SEXUAL AND SPIRITUAL PARADOX

7.1. INTRODUCTION

The central theme of this doctoral thesis incorporates sexuality and spirituality. Hence, it becomes a rational obligation to compare ancient Indian culture and customs of sexuality and spirituality with current society. But, research publications on the subject of India's spirituality and sexuality in social science literature are limited. For example, a quick search of the keywords "India, spirituality and sexuality" in the Web of Science database resulted in only four papers between 2004 and 2024 and one of them derived from this doctoral thesis. This indicates the ground reality of the least debated nature of the subject. Therefore, this chapter provides an insight into India's sexual and spiritual perspectives against the backdrop of Hindu scriptural revelations including the existing contemporary practices in society.

7.2. HINDU RELIGIOUS PORTRAYAL OF SEXUALITY

Being a land of faiths, India consents diverse religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Zoroastrianism as they coexist and prosper over centuries with less conflict of interest. The world religions place an emphasis on sexuality and sexual morality by enforcing values through theology, customs, traditions and public opinions. Christianity, for example shows sacred antipathies towards sex since their sacred saints were mostly virgins while others publicly relinquished sex. The resentful attitude of early Christianity to sex was exemplified by the expression of St. Paul who preferred celibacy over sex (Walls, 1973). But, the Hinduism considers sex to be genuine delight within the pretext of marriage while it prohibits infidelity and non-marital sex (Selwyn, 1979).

Hindus worship about 330 million gods and goddesses that are scripturally prescribed in the Vedas, Upanishads, Agamas, Puranas and Epics. The Hindu trinity of gods represents the creator Brahma, protector Vishnu and destroyer Shiva (Agoramoorthy, 2014). Hindu mythology considers female and male are two halves of a whole displaying gender neutrality. Besides, Hinduism recognizes the identities of transgender and homosexuality in society through puranic legends. For example, the warrior king Arjuna, an influential character in the epic, Mahabharata had a brief transgender role. The popular deity Ayyappa resulted from a homosexual union between Shiva and Vishnu (Agoramoorthy and Hsu, 2015).



Figure 1. Elegance of romantic love display of deities worshipped in Tamil Nadu temples (Photos by Anastasia Mikheeva)

Hinduism recognizes the worship of various feminine deities, represented in three major forms namely Saraswati for knowledge, Lakshmi for wealth and Shakti for power. They concurrently serve as the consorts of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, respectively. Some of the Hindu temple

deities stunningly display of romantic love and affection as couples as shown in Figure 1. Hindus specifically venerate the feminine spiritual and sexual energy through its personification linked to their favorite idols (Kinsley, 1998). Popular festivals such as Kali or Durga Puja (Ghosha, 1874), Navratri (Ahuja, 2013) and Vijayadashami (Mallik et al., 2017) are devoted to goddesses.

A more thrilling vision of sexuality can be found in the often misconstrued Tantric tradition as it promotes abandoning all societal rubrics to transcend sexual desires (Olesen, 2015). In tantra sastras, Kali is revered as the goddess of sex, sexual strength and sexual union (Biernacki, 2007). The tantric dogma dictates that humans are entangled by eroticism and consequently the passionate sex energy can be transformed to tranquility conquering eternal bliss (Flood, 2005). However, some may brand the tantric path as spiritually precarious, so some Hindu monks are primarily trained to control sex either through deliberate subdual or through austere celibacy (Lochtefeld, 2001). But, followers of tantric path of spirituality attempt to face the natural sex energy head-on through constantly engaging in it rather audaciously. In other words, scientists consider worldly attachments, be it sex or any other desire can be overpowered by engrossing in them daringly (White, 2000).

7.3. SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN ANCIENT HINDU SOCIETY

Women in ancient India played a strategic role in spiritual pursuit (Leslie, 2014). Four Vedas namely *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva* form a collection of Sanskrit intonations to be chanted by priests during rituals and they were compiled during the 2nd millennium BCE (Staal, 2008). Some of the hymns of the oldest Rig Veda were composed by women sages namely Lopamudra and Maitreyi (Bharucha, 2023). The knowledge part of the Vedas is called *Upanishads*. They

highlight the absolute wisdom resulting from deepest contemplations of renowned sages. Brihadaranyaka Upanishad states that a female sage named Gargi asked illuminating queries to sage Yajnavalkya on the subject of soul while her male counterparts were unable to comprehend the inquest (Borah, 2012).

Furthermore, epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata idolize women namely Sita, the wife of Prince Rama and Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava princes. Besides, stories appear in Puranas to glorify feminine divinity (Brown, 1990). Likewise, the growth of devotional movement of medieval India showed that women played an active role in spirituality. Anthropologists consider the period between 6th and 9th century AD as the devotional era that occurred largely in the Tamil speaking parts of southern India. Among the notable 63 Nayanmars devoted to Shiva worship (Thallam, 2013) and 12 Alvars devoted to Vishnu worship (Somasundaram and Murthy, 2017), three were female Shiva saints and one Vishnu saint (Pande, 2010). The devotion was intertwined with compassion, divine love, morality and above all spirituality regulated by righteousness.

Irrespective of the above quoted progressive views on sexuality, the epic Ramayana narrates a story of expressing sexual desire of women leading to abuse. When Surpanakha, the sister of the demon king Ravana expressed her sexual desire towards the already married prince Rama (reincarnation of the protector, Vishnu), he directed her towards his unmarried brother, Lakshmana who in turn abused her by cutting her nose and ear with a sword (Krishnamacharya, 2017). Some versions state that one of her breasts was cut (Menon and Singh, 2014). The moral of the story appears to depict that woman should refrain from expressing sexual desire publicly otherwise punishment may follow and social scientists portray Surpanakha as a dynamic and progressive feminist who expressed her individuality openly by expressing her sexual desire

towards a man and was punished harshly for her actions influenced by the masculine social norms of ancient times for the presumed misdemeanor. (Brown et al., 2014; Kane, 2017; Dirghangi, 2019).

When women are forced to refrain from expressing the natural sex energy, they may become diabolical as the blood-soaked Surpanakha rushed towards the king's court and asked for justice. Subsequently, her brother Ravana kidnapped Rama's wife that ended up eventually in a full-fledged war. Similarly, the popular scripture *Manu Smirti* (Laws of Manu) shows evidence of treating women hierarchically inferior as it states that girls must get protection from their fathers, married women from their husbands and widows from their sons (Panda, 2014). So, the question is, are women treated equally in contemporary India society? A closer look at the ground reality may reveal some prevailing social facts.

The wider aspects of Kama Shastras in literature covers ancient texts such as *Ratirahasya* written by Kokkoka, *Ananga-Ranga* or *Kamaledhiplava* written by Kalyanamalla, *Jayamangala* of Yashodhara's commentary of *Kamasutra*, *Smara Pradipa* or *light of love* written by Gunakara. They all tend to address greatly on love, respect, romantic interactions, collective pleasure, erotic aspiration, intimate behavior and passionate care complementing the *Kamasutra* by Vatsyayana and also presenting philosophical and practical insights into nurturing psychologically healthy relationships among couples. These texts promote everlasting romantic and lovely relations among couples that open up compassionate interchanges that heighten physical, psychological and emotive intimacy (Doniger & Kakar, 2002), which promotes relationship satisfaction according to modern literature (Nagel, 2019).

7.4. GENDER CONTRASTS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The latest gender inequality index has ranked India 122nd place out of 191 that shows the lingering women social inequality (Frontline, 2023). Crime against women is also on the rise (Lolayekar et al., 2022). The government states that it received over 28,000 complaints of crimes against women in 2023 (PTI, 2024). Besides, social workers and public health workers grumble that women have less access to reproductive health, education and participation in public and political positions (Sanneving et al., 2013). For instance, India has over 1,000 universities and only 70 women leaders hold the position of vice-chancellor and that too in women-only universities where hiring them is mandatory (AIU, 2023). Although women contesting in local elections have increased nearly seven times since the 1950s, many often fail to win as they contest independently without backing from state-level or national-level political party affiliation. India had only one woman Prime Minister, two women Presidents and 17 women Chief Ministers since its independence in 1947. Nevertheless, the government now has seriously committed to increase women leadership in politics.

India has recorded about 950 million registered voters and among them half represent women (George, 2024). But, they make up only 15% of lawmakers in the lower house of parliament, which is comparable to the US House of Representatives, and only 10% in state legislative assemblies. However, on 21 September 2023, India's parliament passed a new bill prioritizing 33% seat allocation for women in the lower house and state legislature, which is a landmark political decision and a pleasant perspective of gender prosperity. Although India lacks transgender political representative in parliament and in the state legislature, the federal and state governments are working hard to prioritize political recognition for the third gender.

The transgender people are predominately uneducated as they are often abandoned by families. Subsequently, they end up in street corners to engage in sex work, begging and selling cheap merchandise along roadsides with minimal social support network (Agoramoorthy and Hsu, 2015). Although the government tries to prioritize their protection and welfare lately, they continue to suffer from HIV vulnerability, sexual violence and stigma (Ganju and Saggurti, 2017). The 2011 census showed only five million transgender citizens in records, but experts estimate their population may go up over ten million (Verma, 2022). India's Supreme Court recognized them as third gender with equal rights only a decade ago that paved the way for them to get legal recognition as people with dignity at last (Kumar, 2014).

Hindu women in general are usually barred from holding priest positions in ancient temples as they are depicted as impure due to menstruation that still remains a taboo. As a result, menstruating women are unwelcome to offer prayers, touch scriptures and join socio-cultural ceremonies. India has one the oldest and most revered shrines for Tantric practices is located in Assam state where the goddess Kamakhya deity interestingly goes through a menstrual period yearly in the month of June (Singh, 2009). Even that temple dedicated to feminism and female sexual energy does not have female priests. However, a Shakti devotee named Bangaru Adigalar, a married schoolteacher with four children renovated his family goddess temple few decades ago at Melmaruvathur, near Chennai city (Tamil Nadu), started to allow all caste women to perform puja and fire rituals at the temple a few decades ago (Narayanan, 2005; Spina, 2024). He was recognized as a spiritual revolutionary in south India who broke the societal taboos and allowed menstruating women and widows to perform rituals as a priest in the Sakthi goddess temple's sanctum sanctorum (David, 2009).

7.5. CONCLUSION

India is a spiritually famous nation where millions of pilgrims visit numerous holy shrines in search of gurus and wisdom through yoga, tantra and other mystical approaches. India's spiritual industry ranks among one of the wealthiest conglomerates. India's popular gurus have enormous wealth and social influence because millions follow them in search of divine directions (Mukherjea, 2015; Mahoney, 2019; TOI, 2023). They certainly have a societal obligation to endorse female equality since people need to uphold scriptural interpretations of feminine rights in the Hindu-dominated landscape. If scriptures have a specific sanction that goes against the integrity of women, those messages must be decoded correctly fitting current societal contexts to benefit society. Women need to be informed about their spiritual, legal and political rights on gender equality across India's intricate social strata. To end sexuality repression through gender, spiritualizing society is essential that may have the potential to dismantle the disparity by caste, faith, social status and gender, first at local level, then at national level. When people are spirituality-reinforced on scriptural portrayal of goddesses equal to gods, gender equality will eventually prevail in society.