Indian religious concepts on sexuality and marriage

Priyanka Thukral Mahajan, Priya Pimple, Delnaz Palsetia, Nahid Dave, Avinash De Sousa

Department of Psychiatry, Lokmanya Tilak Municipal Medical College and General Hospital, ‘Consultant Psychiatrist and Psychotherapist Founder Trustee - Desousa Foundation, Mumbai, India

ABSTRACT

Indian religions and cultures are diverse and have always influenced the way people live in this part of the world. Religion has been a very dominant influence in marriage, choice of marital partner and cohabitation. The present paper looks at various religions in India and their influence on sexual attitudes and the institution of marriage. Sikhism, Jainism and the Parsi faith with its influence on sexuality and marriage are reviewed. Christian values and the role they play in shaping sexual notions as well Christian marriage traditions are explored. The paper also looks at the influences Islam has had on marriage and sexuality and ends with a feminist perspective on women and sexual attitudes towards women.

Key words: Sexuality, marriage, Indian

INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research today indicates that religions play an important role in the economic, demographic, marital and sexual behavior of individuals and families, ranging from patterns of employment to fertility and marital stability.[1] Religion has been identified as a trait that is complementary in the context of marriage and for which positive assertive mating is optimal.[2] Religion has also been found to affect one’s choice of marital partner.[3] Religion is known to affect the pattern of sexual behavior one follows, attitudes towards pregnancy and premarital sex, desired fertility and the division of labor between partners across the life-cycle.[4] The present chapter aims to review the effects of various of Indian religious concepts on marriage and sexuality from an Indian perspective. In India, there are three major faiths viz. Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. The chapter shall focus on these major faiths while touching upon various other systems of faith that occur in India.

CHRISTIANITY: INFLUENCE ON SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

The Old Testament of the Bible speaks poetically of the earth being built upon pillars or foundations, as a way of saying it is stable, with a moral order that will in the end be upheld by its Creator. For example, in Hannah’s prayer (1 Samuel 2:1-10) her assertion that “the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s” is the basis for her confidence that right will be vindicated against wrong, that moral order will be upheld in the end. We see the same idea in Psalm 75:3-5, where holding the pillars of the earth steady is equivalent to humbling the arrogant and wicked. Again, moral order is upheld. Another way of speaking of this is to say that the world is built according to wisdom. In the imagery of the Old Testament, this wisdom means something like the architecture of the universe. “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens” (Proverbs 3:19). When God built the universe, like a building, he did so according to the blueprint called wisdom. Wisdom is the fundamental underlying order

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according to which the universe is constructed. Sometimes we speak of the architecture of a piece of hardware or software, by which we mean the underlying structure, such that, if we understand it, we shall grasp why it behaves and responds as it does. In the same way, to live wisely in the world we need some understanding of the blueprint or architecture upon which the world is built. Christians claim that part of this order is the proper guarding of sexual expression within the security of marriage.[9]

One argument often heard in debates is that changes in sexual behavior and family life are purely the results of cultural shifts and that there are no absolute standards or benchmarks against which to test culture. In particular, it is suggested that cultural conservatives are no more than that, indulging in nostalgia for a mythical bygone era of family stability. When Jesus and Paul spoke about marriage, they referred back to Genesis 2:24 as a foundational indication of the Creator’s definition: “For this reason a man will leave his father” Stephanie Coontz argued that family change is irreversible and we might as well go with the flow rather than hark back to a mythical imagining of 1950s marriage and family life. Against this, Christian people argue that we are under no illusions about some supposed magical ideal era of the past (be it the 1950s or whenever), but whatever the flows of culture, marriage is a creation ordinance, a way of life rooted in the way the world is and the way human beings are. This is the claim.[9]

Another way in which the Bible speaks of this is by calling marriage a covenant to which God is witness (Proverbs 2:17; Malachi 2:14). When a man and woman marry, God is always watching and listening (whether or not it is a church wedding), and he will hold each accountable before him for keeping their wedding promises. In my biblical and theological study of sexuality, I suggest the following working definition of marriage: Marriage is the voluntary sexual and public social union of one man and one woman from different families. This union is patterned upon the union of God with his people, his bride, the Christ with his church. Intrinsic to this union is God’s calling to lifelong exclusive sexual faithfulness. Any serious discussion of the future of marriage requires a clear understanding of how marriage evolved over the ages, along with the causes of its most-recent transformations. Many people who hope to “re-institutionalize” marriage misunderstand the reasons that marriage was once more stable and played a stronger role in regulating social life. The most problematic word for many 21st century people is the second word: “Is.” How can we say that marriage “is” in such a definite, institutional, and normative way? Surely, we ought rather to consider how marriage is evolving, the cultural and social pressures that have caused the marriage to change and be transformed, to continue changing in the years ahead, and to be different in different cultures.

If marriage is neither the result of a blind historical process nor the outcome of autonomous human construction, it follows that when a couple marry, they enter an institution whose terms are given to them. They neither invent the particular terms of their relationship nor gradually create their relationship as a project over time. Marriage is an institution within which a couple live, not an ideal to which they aspire. The difference between an ideal and an institution is important. A couple may have in their minds some ideal and strive to move towards that in their relationship. This is deceptively similar to marriage but actually radically different because to get married is to enter a status of relationship within which the growth and maturity are to develop. Marriage needs the security of being an institution with boundaries. Within this given order the relational dynamics can safely flourish. The marriage a couple enter has a moral structure within which the Creator calls them to live. To understand this is a necessary precursor to stability and security within marriage; the alternative is the terrifying possibility that each couple must generate the terms and qualities of their particular relationship as they see fit.[7]

So it is misleading to consider marriage simply or primarily in terms of the process of relational growth embarked upon by the couple, important though this is. To do this is to confuse living up to the calling of marriage with the given institution of marriage within which this divine calling is heard. Essentially it removes the security of entering the institution of marriage, within which we are called to live lives of mutual love and faithfulness, and replaces it with a terrifying concept of marriage as the project of each couple and their precarious process of growth in love. It is not a long step from this to being able to caricature a couple as reporting, “Our love is growing well; we are considerably more married this year than last” or “We are having relational problems and are rather less married now than we used to be.” And if our “coefficient of marriedness” falls below some critical benchmark, perhaps divorce proceedings may be expected. This is the logical consequence of confusing the status of being married with the quality of the married relationship. Both status and relationship are important, but if the latter is confused with the former, it removes the stability and the necessary foundation.[8]

When people through history have asked the question, “Why are human beings male and female, and why does sex exist?” they have, very broadly, given three kinds of answer.[8]

1. Procreation-First, they have said that the purpose of sex is to have children. This is, of course, the obvious biological answer – or it has been obvious through most of human history. At one level this does nothing to distinguish human sexual relations from animal (or plant) sexual relations. And it doesn’t explain why God should have chosen to make us sexual beings rather than beings who procreate asexually. [10]
2. Second, sex is for the purpose of deepening relationship, a vehicle for interpersonal intimacy. The purpose of sex may be seen, it is suggested, in its benefits to the couple. These benefits may include shared pleasure, mutual comfort and companionship, and the psychological benefits of mutual affirmation and unconditional acceptance. This kind of relationship, at its best, can meet deep felt needs. Some have gone further, perhaps taking their cue from Genesis 2:18 (“It is not good for the man to be alone”) and suggested that sex is a sign that human beings are social creatures in need of companionship, friendship, and close relationships. The relational nature of humankind is focused in some way on the man-woman encounter. Sex has a symbolic meaning signifying human existence as “being in fellow-humanity.” Some have gone much further than this and have seen in sexual intercourse a vehicle for access to the divine. It is, they say, a deeply religious experience, a sensuality that “is God’s invitation to reunion” of soul and body, and “in this reunion God is experienced, whether there is consciousness of the divine name or not.” This is much the same as the old sex and nature religions of ancient Canaan. Although the Bible abhors sex-mysticism of this kind and any incorporation of eros into the divine nature, it does speak of the relationship of husband and wife, or bridegroom and bride, as a significant image of the relationship of God with his people and Christ with his church (Ephesians 5:22-33).[11]

3. Public order: The third kind of answer is qualitatively different from the first two. Every stable society has had to say that sex needs to be controlled and contained in some way, and has recognized that this powerful drive in human beings can do great damage if it is allowed to be expressed with no restraint. Every society has some taboos, some regulatory mechanisms, some forms of sexual behavior that are allowed and others that are forbidden. These taboos vary (as social scientists and historians show us), but they always exist in some form or another. So in one form or another, people have said that sex exists in order to be expressed in some ways but not in others. There are safe and healthy contexts for sexual intimacy, and there are dangerous and chaotic contexts. It is a mistake to think that the emancipation of sex in western society since the 1960s has removed the existence of restraint; pedophilia and rape, for example, are still taboo. What has happened is that the boundaries of restraint have changed.[12]

**ISLAM: INFLUENCE ON SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE**

Set in the 7th century Arab traders did more than just trading of goods. They left behind a little bit of themselves, a culture, a belief, a way of life. Northern India was invaded by Moghul rulers in the 12th century marking the advent of swiftly spreading religious and cultural-revolution. Our present Indian scenario, Islam being the 2nd most practiced in the country comprising 13% of the Indian population.[13] The Moghul rulers used the unyielding poverty to their advantage. Fulfilment of basic necessities was a remote and far-fetched dream, the rulers brought about conversion using this as their bait. A very miniscule number were converted by a genuine change of heart enlightened by the saints. Talking of a Muslim woman brings to mind a Burqah clad, plainly dressed followed by an array of children. One also thinks of oppression and lack of rights.[6] From the Quran Surah an-Nisa’ 4:1 states that men and women are created from a single soul (nafs wahidah). One person does not come before the other, one is not superior to the other, and one is not the derivative of the other. A woman is not created for the purpose of a man.[14]

Rather, they are both created for the mutual benefit of each other (Quran 30:21). Islam defines a dress code for both men and women. For a woman the dress code is a way of protecting her modesty and privacy-the face and hand being the only uncovered part of her body. Sura 24:31, which says, “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their private parts and not to display their adornment except that which ordinarily appears there of and to draw their head covers over their chests and not to display their adornment except to their (maharim).” These rules of purdah are relaxed in presence of her husband, son, father, father-in-law, brother, brothers son, sisters son, other women and small children. A man is expected to keep the portion between his navel to knee covered. Woman has been awarded the liberty to work beyond the confines of her home as long as she does so with modesty, i.e., it doesn’t transgress the bounds of purdah. She must also prioritize her role as a wife and daughter and not neglect her primary duties. Her earnings are her personal asset and she need not contribute towards the expenses of the household. Marriage in Islam is endogamous, i.e., marriage to a non muslim or a non believer is considered void. Furthermore, if a Muslim spouse converts to another religion after marriage the marriage is again void.[15,16]

Polygamy being legalized by Islam is reason for tremendous debate and has raised many eyebrows in the world over. The Quran states, “do justice to them all, but you won’t be able to, so don’t fall for one totally while ignoring other wives.” At the time of marriage the husband is expected to give a nuptial gift (dowry) to his bride which is her personal asset. This is a very applauded and celebrated custom which safeguards the maintenance of a woman in the event of an unfortunate incident. Controversy surrounds the issue of contraception; it can be practiced when conception can be a risk to the health of the mother. Whether or not availability of resources to provide is a reason for considering contraception is an illusion. Some believe providing for a child is the responsibility of the Almighty, and one must produce as many children as possible.[17]
Talaq or divorce is based on a very stringent and rule bound format. Divorce or talaq to be proclaimed by the man on 3 separate occasions. Marriage is not dissolved the 1st two times. After the 3rd proclamation there is a waiting period of 3 months during which the maintenance of the wife and children is the responsibility of the husband. If the differences persist divorce may be finalized after 3 months. At the time of parting he has to give her the promised mehr or dowry and supplementary ways to support herself and children. After the third proclamation if the man wishes to marry the same woman again, it is permissible only after she has consummated a marriage with another man.\[18\]

Sodomy is strictly prohibited, the gravity of the situation lies in the fact that if a husband insists, woman can demand a talaq on these grounds. Also if a husband creates hindrances in a woman following her religious duties or believing in Allah, she can ask for divorce. Homosexuality is looked down upon and is strictly prohibited. If a sexual relationship has occurred beyond the set confines of marriage both the ones involved are to be given 100 lashes. No sexual intercourse permitted during fasting, menstruation, postpartum puerperal discharge and religious pilgrimage (haj and umrah).[19]

Women in Islam are given the liberty in the confines of the set Islamic rules (sharia). It is not for true believers men or women to take their choice in the affairs if God and His apostle decree otherwise. He that disobeys God and his apostle strays far indeed (Quran 33:36).[20]

**JAINISM: INFLUENCE ON SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE**

Jainism is an Indian religion that prescribes a path of non-violence towards all living beings. Its philosophy and practice emphasize the necessity of self-effort to move the soul toward divine consciousness and liberation. Moksha (liberation from an endless succession of lives through reincarnation) is achieved by enlightenment. This Moksha can be attained only through asceticism. Jainism is based on three general principles called the three Ratnas (jewels). They are viz. Right faith, right knowledge and right action. Jains are recommended to pass through four stages during their lifetime viz. Brahmacharya-ashrama, i.e., the life of a student, Gruhasth-ashrama, i.e., family life, Vanaprasth-ashrama, i.e., family and social services and Sanyast-ashrama, i.e., the life of a monk and a period of renunciation.[21]

Householders are encouraged to practice five cardinal principles which are non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy and non-possessiveness with their current practical limitations, while monks and nuns have to observe them very strictly. Unlike the Hindus who look upon marriage as a sacrament, Jains treat the institution as a contract.

Friendship and marriage is considered to be a worldly affair and marriage is recommended so that the children born to the couple would also follow the same dharma (religion). Its purpose is to make sex licit within a family. The role of sex between husband and wife is strictly procreative, so that its engagement is limited to the ovulation period.[22]

Like many other communities, Jains also prefer to get their sons and daughters married within the community so that the children thus produced would follow the same dharma. They criticize the practice of dowry. Jainism sets celibacy-chaste living (Brahmacharya) as the norm. The highest ideals of classical or traditional Jainism are represented by the ascetics-the members of the faith who devote their whole lives to living the Jain code of ethics in its strictest forms. Jain monks and nuns are expected to remain completely celibate in body and mind. Chaste living is important to Jains because sexual indulgence gets in the way of the road to liberation. Jain monks and nuns practice strict asceticism and strive to make their current birth their last, thus ending their cycle of transmigration. Sexual passion is so powerful that it can overcome rational thinking and ethically right behavior-thus producing bad karma (deeds). The basic intent of this vow is to conquer passion, thus preventing wastage of energy in the direction of pleasurable desires. The monks have a realistic understanding of the power of sex and are counseled against its indulgence through suggestive literature, sexual fantasies and intimacy. They do not think about sex and avoid remembering sexual incidents before they became monks. Jains must have sex only with the person they are married to. Jains must avoid sexual indulgence even with that person. Jains must give up sex, if possible, after the marriage has yielded a son. The householder must be content with his own wife and must consider all other women as his sisters, mothers and daughters. Some Jain writers suggest that even married people should not over-indulge in sexual activities, and have argued that the principle of chaste living will help in population control. Chaste living also requires Jains to avoid sex before marriage, and to avoid sexual thoughts. They should not look at pornography or sexually stimulating material, so that they can retain a clear mind, unclouded by desire. Sexual deviations are to be avoided, including contact with lower animals and inanimate objects.[23]

**THE PARSI FAITH: INFLUENCE ON SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE**

In Parsi community, there is a belief that God revealed to Zarathustra, the prophet, that not only is a marriage a righteous act, but it is also a commitment which makes even the earth rejoice. There is a strong awareness among the world’s 120000 Parsi Zoroastrian community about the threats against their religion and race. Many reformists believe changing the belief that one has to be born a Parsi to be considered a Parsi. The rule has been
relaxed for Parsi fathers and non-Parsi mothers but is rigid for the opposite that is Parsi mothers and non-Parsi fathers, whose children are not allowed or accepted into the faith. However according to 1945 Special Marriages Act it permits person marrying outside the community to continue practicing their religion. For e.g., a Parsi woman married to a Hindu Gujarati was refused to be given her last rites at the Tower of Silence unless an affidavit was signed by next of kin swearing that deceased had been practicing Zoroastrianism.[24]

In fact, the more orthodox members of the community like Dastur Peshton Peer state that marrying outside the community was like committing adultery. The reason for interfaith marriage being stated as lack of housing for young Parsi couples, Parsi boys not being adequately educated to the same extent as Parsi girls. Love is blind and it should not make any difference who marries whom specially in this day and age. Besides, Parsi women are financially and emotionally independent, well-educated and individualistic in their views. As per 2011 statistics 39% community members had interfaith marriages. These claims are, however, refuted stating lack of housing not only affects Parsis but other communities as well. In fact, 45% houses are allocated to engaged couples or waiting to get married couples already married and have one child or on child, wife is still in child-bearing age. A boy from another community is not in any way superior to a Parsi boy and that prime cause for interfaith marriages is the callous, irresponsible, indifferent attitude of some members of the community. On the other hand, city’s young Parsis are attending speed dating sessions and get together to meet prospective life partners. Other issues affecting Parsi marriages is Parsis marrying late, with drop in fertility rates. The average age for Parsi men being 31 and for women being 27. 1 in every 5 men and 1 in every 10 women are single and above 50 years of age. At the same time some Parsi couples marry in haste and separate early. Marrying within such a small community may result in genetic diseases like haemophilia, osteoporosis and cancer. Some orthodox views of Zoroastrianism on sexual orientation are that homosexuality is considered evil.[25,26]

SIKHISM: INFLUENCE ON MARRIAGE AND SEXUALITY

Sikhism, though a young religion, is currently the fifth largest religion in the world. Almost 30 million Sikhs (followers of Sikhism) constitute the community currently. The religion originated in undivided Punjab, in North India, founded by a visionary thought leader, Guru Nanak Dev in the fifteenth century. The religion believes in truthful living. He upheld the ideal of equality, preaching that all men are equal with no discrimination based on caste or gender, in an era when such inequalities were rampant in the society. Guru Nanak spread the message of love and understanding and was against the rituals that were being followed blindly by the Hindus and the Muslims. He was succeeded by nine more gurus over the next three centuries, the last being Guru Gobind Singh, who died in 1708.[27]

Sikhism believes in “Waheguru” the God, which is shapeless, timeless and sightless, and spreads the message of “Ek Onkar” i.e., all are one with one Creator of all creations. In Sikhism, God has no gender (though all the scriptures wrongly portray a male god), using the word “nirankar,” meaning “without form,” for God. Some of the popular teachings of Guru Nanak are: [28]

1. Nam Japna (getting up before sunrise, and meditating God’s name and reciting hymns to cleanse one’s mind each day and remember God’s name with every breath).
2. Dharam di Kirat Karni (working and earning by the sweat of the brow, to live a life and practice truthfulness, and honesty, in all dealings respectively).
3. Vand Ke Chhakna (To share the fruits of one’s labor with others, before considering oneself).

Rituals, religious ceremonies, fasting, idol worship, or going on pilgrimages, forceful conversion to Sikhism are discouraged in Sikhism. When a child is born in a Sikh family, it is named using the first letter of top left corner of the left page of the Guru Granth Sahib (the holy book of Sikhs) opened randomly. Generally, the last name of the Sikh boys is “Singh” whereas girls adopt the surname “Kaur.” Upholding the ideals propagated by Guru Nanak Dev, women have equal rights and are given as much respect as men, in Sikhism. In fact, Guru Nanak Dev fought fervently for women’s rights during his life time and proclaimed them to be equal to men using the following argument: “In a woman, a man is conceived; from a woman, he is born. With a woman, he is betrothed and married; with a woman, he contracts friendship. Why say she is inferior, the one from who even kings are born? Without woman, there would be no one at all.”[29]

Further, as per Sikh ideals, a woman is considered to be the other half of a man and the one who leads him to the doors of liberation. In accordance with his other teachings, Guru Nanak had also condemned various cultural practices, which were derogatory to the status of women in the society, such as Sati, Dowry System in Gurbani (a collection of Guru’s teachings).[30]

Historically, many Sikh women have fulfilled their moral responsibilities, sense of duty and have also served at various important and respectable positions in the army as well as in the society. Not only this, the Sikhs have also historically treated the women captured in battles with respect, considering them as their own sisters. Lending further testimony to the Sikhs attitude towards women is the Jangnama by Qazi Nur Muhammad, one of Sikhs’ sworn enemies of the day and the one who fought multiple
battles against them, wherein he mentions, “Really, these dogs have great respect for women.” Sikhism is one of the few religions in India where the customs that discriminate against women in the society are not a part of religious rituals or practices. As an example, the religion permits widow remarriage while does not permit other derogatory customs such as the dowry and the purdah systems. The Sikh scriptures refer to marriage as “Anand Karaj” which literally means “blissful union.” Given that this religion is one of the youngest, it allows for the decision about marriage to be taken by mutual consent of the families of the prospective bride and the groom, with explicit consent from both the individuals as well. The only prerequisite, however, is that both the partners have to be Sikhs. Other considerations, which are common across other religions and beliefs, such as the caste and the social status do not factor in the decision making process of this “Anand Karaj.” Further, the date of marriage is no subject to astrological calculations and mythological superstitions. The religion believes that all days are the same and are as holy and pious as any other day.[31]

The Sikh marriage ceremony typically takes place at the Gurudwara (the Sikh temple) or at bride’s home in front of the Holy Scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. The religion does not allow for the wedding to take place at a commercial location such as a hotel or a banquet hall. The Sikh marriage is a monogamous affair and separation per SE is not allowed. However, divorce can be obtained in civil court of law. The concept of “Anand Karaj” was introduced by Guru Ram Das, the fourth of the ten Sikh Gurus. The marriage process involves taking four revolutions around the Guru Granth Sahib with the recitation of laavan (hymns) in the background. The Guru Granth Sahib is representative of the Sikh Gurus. Hence, this ritual of revolving around the Granth signifies the newly wed couple making commitments in the presence of their Guru. In terms of law, the Sikh marriages are legalized by the Sikh Marriage Act of 1909, which has been amended in 2012 and passed in parliament. Under this Act, the marriages conducted through the “Anand Karaj” ritual have to be compulsorily registered with the Marriage Bureau/Local Authorities. To conclude, Sikhism, being the youngest religions, has a strong value system that believes in bringing reforms in the society by opposing all the malpractices and proclaiming equal rights for both the sexes as individuals as well as when in a wedlock.[32]

CRITICAL ASPECTS OF FEMININE SEXUALITY IN INDIA

Anthropological inquiries into the meaning of gender in India resulted in the realization that gender categories are constructed differently throughout this nation than in the Western World. The word gender in the scholarly community has become a politically correct synonym for the study of women. Gender, however, does not refer simply to the study of women, but to the manner in which male and female differences are socially constructed. In anthropological studies, there has been a general move away in anthropological studies from attempts to formulate universal categories of gender. The criteria for analyzing gendered categories and social status vary cross-culturally. Western definitions of gender tend to group humans into two distinct static categories based upon the physical appearance of genitalia. However, this construction is not universal. South Asian gender definitions emphasize the different essences or humor attributed to men and women as opposed to the overt physical emphasis of the western world. Humors are present more or less strongly in every food or body tissue.[33]

Humors include hotness (as associated with fire) phlegm, bile, ether, gross body, subtle body. Women are seen to possess different proportions of these humors than men. These humors are combined through the process of mixing. Mixing occurs most frequently in bodies that are more open and less closed-off to the intrusion of other elements and humors. It is better to be more closed, for this limit the effects of pollution upon the body. Women are possessing the humor of hotness, more so than men, and they are also defined as more open. It is this combination of essences that is linked to their reproductive ability. These essences, however, are not static categories but change over the course of a life-time there-by changing an individual's status as a gendering being. Despite the acknowledgment of that gender is constructed differently in South Asia than in the West, there has been little analysis of the variations in gender definitions within South Asia. In Indian culture according to anthropological gender scholars the experience of women within gender definitions has generated a universal picture of the Indian woman. The portrait of the Indian woman is typically based upon the experience of upper-class women in more Northern regions of India.[34]

A variety of theoretical models have been utilized as lenses through which to view the study of gender in India. Wadley, positions the meaning of gender in India within a paradigm of order and disorder. Women as a gender must be controlled because of their capacity to create disorder within society. Influenced by Sanskrit texts, many Brahmans feel that women lack wisdom and are born with many demerits, however, women also have great power. They have power both to give life as well as a great capacity for destruction. Women’s resistance has the power to disrupt the patriarchal order of the society. The power of women is strongly linked to sexuality. Women, as objects of sexual attraction that are attributed a much higher capacity and desire for sexual relations than men, have the power to influence and dissuade men from a higher purpose. Inappropriate sexual relations can create dire consequences for men. Therefore, to perpetuate order and merit within society, it is necessary to reign and
control the power of women through restrictions on her sexuality. This model shows that women are not simply silent victims of an oppressive gender system, but are afforded a certain amount of power in society. Their power is derived from their capacity to resist the prescribed social order of Brahmanical traditions and patriarchal hierarchy. Such constructions of gender and sexuality as potential disruptions to a patriarchal framework become problematic when applied to groups without such a strict patriarchal framework. In Kerala, the social hierarchy is not formed upon strict patriarchal schemes. Many castes are in fact matrilineal, in which women become binding forces within society. Women play a pivotal role in creating social order, not simply disrupting it.[33]

The nature of women is perceived as more open and hot than men; as such they are more vulnerable to pollution during their married years. Women, however, are not simply defined by their gender as women, but also by their age. What it means to be female changes over time, as the body of a woman changes over time. During her reproductive years, women are particularly vulnerable to pollution and must therefore be protected and often confined in Brahman families. As women, age however, their bodies “cool” and “dry.” In part because of these humoral changes, as they age, women are granted more freedom within the community. A woman’s status in Bengal is directly linked to her position within the reproductive cycle, and is tied to the bodily changes of puberty, menstruation and menopause. Once a woman has passed her sexually active years, she no longer has to be regulated to a great extent. In essence, she becomes more like a man and does not need to be protected from pollution.

A women’s capacity for creating disorder is linked in large part to their reproductive capacity and her nature as a sexualized being. A woman derives power, both creative and destructive from her reproductive capacity. As such, it is during this time that she faces regulations governing her sexual behavior. The status of women, however is not a strict gender formation, but a fluid category, which alters with age as well as caste status. The changes in gender status throughout age are strongly linked to changes in her reproductive capacity and depiction as a sexualized being.[36]

CONCLUSIONS

Thus India, with its diverse religions and cultures have defined feminine roles, marriage and sexuality in various ways. Today though with modernism and newer view-points a large number of older views are dwindling away and a modern and flexible outlook over sexuality has taken over.

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