



Review Article

India's sexuality and spirituality paradox

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Abstract

Hindu religion generally portrays their goddesses as equal to gods with a unique perception of gender balance and equality. The neutral concept is also reflected in popular dialogues of common people who proudly chant “Mother India” with a reverence to feminist ideology strongly grounded in nationalistic and socialistic prospects. However, very little is known in the social science literature on India's sexual and spiritual paradox. This article provides an insight into the ancient Hindu scriptural revelations and contemporary practices about sexuality and spirituality.

Introduction

India is a land of faith where diverse religions have prospered for centuries. It's the most populated nation on earth inhabited by over 1.4 billion people and the vast majority (nearly 80%) of them belongs to Hinduism. Generally, most world religions place an emphasis on sexuality and sexual morality by enforcing strict norms and values through theology, customs, traditions and public opinions. The Christian religion for example shows sacred antipathies towards sex since their revered saints were mostly virgins while others had publicly

relinquished sex. The resentful attitude of early Christianity towards the subject of sex was exemplified by the expression of St. Paul, who preferred celibacy over sex.^[1] Hinduism considers sex to be a genuine delight within the pretext of marriage, while it prohibits infidelity and non-marital sex.^[2] Nonetheless, social science publications on the topic of India's spirituality and sexuality are rarely discussed in scientific forums. A quick search of the title keywords “India, spirituality and sexuality” in the world's largest scientific database, Web of Science, resulted in no papers between January 1987 and May 2024 that showed the ground reality of the least debated nature of the thorny subject. Therefore, this article provides insight into India's sexual and spiritual perspectives against the backdrop of the ancient Hindu scriptural revelations and conflicting practices.

Hindu religious portrayal of sexuality

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions that came into existence a few millennia ago. Hindus, on the whole, recognize about 330 million Gods and Goddesses that are scripturally prescribed in

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various sacred texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Agamas, Puranas and Epics. The Hindu trinity of gods represents the creator Brahma, protector Vishnu and destroyer Shiva.^[3] In Hindu mythology, females and males are considered the two halves of a whole displaying gender neutrality. Besides, Hinduism recognizes the identities of transgender and homosexuality as part of society. For example, the warrior king Arjuna, an influential character in the epic Mahabharata, had a brief transgender role. Even the popular deity Ayyappa, which attracts millions of disciples each year to the Sabarimala shrine in southern India, is considered to be a mythological result of a homosexual union between the Lords Shiva and Vishnu.^[4]

The Hindu religion largely recognizes the worship of various feminine deities, represented in three major forms: Saraswati for knowledge, Lakshmi for wealth, and Shakti for power. They concurrently serve as the consorts of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, respectively. Hindus at large venerate the feminine spiritual energy through its personification linked to their favorite idols.^[5] Popular festivals such as Kali Puja, Navratri and Vijayadashami are devoted to goddesses. A more thrilling vision of sexuality can be found in the often misconstrued spiritual tradition of Tantra, as it promotes abandoning all societal rubrics to transcend deeper into sexual desires. The tantric dogma dictates that humans are entangled by eroticism, and the passionate sex energy can be transformed into tranquillity, conquering eternal bliss.^[6] However, some may brand the sexual energy-based tantric pathas spiritually precarious. Hence, the Hindu monks in some sects are primarily trained to control sex either through deliberate subdual or through austere celibacy.^[7] But, the followers of the tantric path need to face the natural sex energy conquest by engaging in it boldly.^[8,9] In other words, worldly attachments, be it sex or any other hidden desire, can be overpowered by engrossing in them daringly.^[10]

Sexuality and spirituality in ancient Hindu society

Women in ancient India played a strategic role in spiritual pursuit. Four Vedas, namely Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva, form a collection of Sanskrit holly writ to be chanted by priests during rituals, and they were compiled during the 2nd millennium

BCE. Some of the hymns of the oldest Rig Veda were reported to have been composed by women sages, namely Lopamudra and Maitreyi.^[11] The final knowledge part of the Vedas is called Upanishads, highlighting the absolute wisdom resulting from the deepest contemplations of renowned sages. The largest among them is Brihadaranyaka Upanishads, which states that a female sage named Gargi asked some illuminating queries to the sage Yajnavalkya on the subject of soul while her male counterparts were unable to comprehend the inquest.^[12] Furthermore, popular epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata tend to idolize women, namely Sita, the wife of Prince Rama and Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava princes. Besides, stories appear in the Puranas, glorifying the feminine divinity.

The growth of the devotional movement of medieval India showed that women played an active role in spirituality. Anthropologists consider the period between the 6th and 9th century as the devotional era that occurred largely in the Tamil speaking parts of southern India. Among them were the notable 63 Nayanmars devoted to Shiva and 12 Alvars devoted to Vishnu. Among them, three were female Shiva saints and one Vishnu saint.^[13] The devotion was intertwined with compassion, 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 the 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, the reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, he directed her towards his unmarried brother, Lakshmana, who in turn abused her by cutting her nose and ear. Some versions state that one of her breasts was also cut.^[14] The moral of the epic is that a woman should refrain from expressing sexual desire; otherwise, punishment may follow.^[15] Subsequently, Surpanakha's brother and king Ravana kidnapped Rama's wife, which started the Ramayana war. Similarly, the popular scripture Manu Smriti 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.^[16] So, the question is: how the contemporary India treat women overall? A closer look at the ground reality may reveal some social facts.

Gender inequalities

The 2023 gender inequality index has ranked India in 122nd out of 191, indicating the lingering women social inequality in practice.^[17] The crimes against women are also on the rise.^[18] Besides, women have less access to reproductive health, education and participation in public and political positions. For instance, India has over 1,000 universities and only 70 women leaders hold the leadership vice-chancellor positions and that too predominately in women-only universities where hiring them is mandatory.^[19] Although women contesting in local elections has increased nearly seven times since the 1950s, many often fail to win the elections as they contest independently without a national-level party affiliation. India has had only one woman Prime Minister and 15 women Chief Ministers of States since its independence in 1947. Moreover, the government however has committed towards women's empowerment and plans to increase women's leadership in politics, which is commendable.

India has recorded about 950 million registered voters, and women occupy equally. However, they make up only 15% of lawmakers in the lower house of Parliament, comparable to the US House of Representatives and only 10% in state legislative assemblies. However, on 21 September 2023, the parliament passed a new bill prioritizing 33% seat allocation for women in the lower house and state legislature, a landmark political decision and a pleasant perspective of gender prosperity. Although India lacks transgender political representatives in parliament and the state legislature at present, the federal and state governments are working hard to prioritize political recognition for the third gender.

Families often abandon the transgender people; they end up on street corners to engage in sex work, begging and selling cheap merchandise along roadsides with minimal social support.^[4] Although the government has been trying to prioritize their protection and welfare lately, they are often affected by AIDS vulnerability, sexual abuse and stigma.^[20] The 2011 census showed only five million transgender citizens in records, but experts

estimate their population may reach up to 10 million.^[21] India's Supreme Court recognized them as a third gender with equal rights only a decade ago, which paved the way for them to get legal recognition as people finally.

Hindu women are usually barred from holding priest positions in popular temples as they are depicted as impure due to menstruation, which still remains a social taboo. As a result, menstruating women are unwelcome to offer prayers, touch scriptures and join socio-cultural ceremonies. Nevertheless, one of the most revered tantric deities dedicated to sexual desire is located in Kamakhya in Assam state of northeast India that interestingly goes through a menstrual period yearly in June, and the deity's vagina is worshipped there by thousands of disciples.^[22] However, the temple surprisingly does not have any female priests.

Conclusion

A large number of pilgrims visit numerous holy shrines across India in search of gurus and spiritual wisdom through yoga, tantra and other mystical approaches. India's spiritual industry ranks among one of the wealthiest conglomerates, and popular gurus have enormous wealth and social influence because millions follow them in search of divine directions.^[3,23] They certainly have a societal obligation to endorse female equality since people must 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 the 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 gender subjugation, a 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 the national level. When people are spirituality reinforced on scriptural portrayal of goddesses as equal to gods, gender equality will eventually prevail in society.

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