



# SOCIOLOGUE

आओ बात करें

## THEME- WOMEN AND DESIRE CELEBRATING FEMALE SEXUALITY

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### From the Editor's Desk

Historically, most studies, researches and even discussions on desire and sexuality have posited men as their subject. Male sexuality is often used as the standard, leading to the invisibilisation of other kinds of sexualities. This has led to women being marginalised, and their sexuality discounted as unimportant and often a taboo.

This misrepresentation, repression and even fear of female sexuality is a result of the broader trends that have percolated down to the modern society through a myriad of historical incidences and archaic ideologies. Some of the first traces of sexuality can be found in the ancient Indian texts wherein sex was considered a reciprocal duty within matrimony, equal satisfaction of both partners being the norm. (eg. Kama sutra). However, Indian society overtime found itself more subservient to Britain's codes of morality as it's own were deemed primitive and barbaric by the colonial rulers. Thereby bearing the brunt of Victorian values which propagated the belief that respectable women were passion-free beings. These standards on sexual morality have inexorably persisted till the present day.

Thus, the societal and cultural baggage on the subject has blinded society at large, almost regarding female sexuality a myth. The biggest impact has been on women themselves, who have often felt acutely negative feelings about their own bodies. They shy away from having any sort of conversation about their sexual desires and fantasies due to the stigma surrounding the same. Some even seem to stop having sex completely after a certain age as social conventions deem older women sexless beings, devoid of desire. This enforced passivity puts them in a precarious position, leading to the omission of the very existence of their desire. On the other hand, they might develop a sense of alienation, not only from the realm of sexual desire, but also from their own bodies due to constantly being objectified and eroticised in popular culture and media. This binary typecast of the virgin-slut dichotomy, which is often used as a litmus test for women's morality, is itself from the point of view of men. (Most clearly expressed by Freud in his idea of Madonna-whore dichotomy).

Moreover, the domain of sex and sexuality have been inherently bereft of the female voice. This gap can only be filled if we have more narratives that question the idea of male sexuality as the standard and re-conceptualise sexuality from the point of the view of the women too. Hence, it has become essential, now more than ever, to explore the narrative through the lens of the female gaze. We also need to stop the crusade waged against people who overtly express their desires and do not shy away from articulating their stance on sexuality publicly. These torch bearers of sexual liberation are instead categorically tagged "besharam". It is time to reclaim the word in a positive light, where besharam is the one who speaks, who expresses and who converses.

Our theme for the year strives to dislodge these illusory perceptions of female sexuality and celebrate it. While the last semester's issue drew attention towards the misrepresentation of female sexuality, this year our goal is to urge women to value desire, pleasure, eroticism and gratification, and to bring empowerment and sexual agency back to them.

Picture Credit - Suzanna Scott

### Events:

- Amnesty International: Troll Patrol India - Violence against women on 9th August, 2019
- Movie Screening: Lipstick Under My Burkha on 16th August, 2019
- Alzheimer's Day on 18th September, 2019
- M.N. Srinivas Declamation Contest on 25th September, 2019

# **FEMALE SEXUALITY IN INDIA: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS THROUGH THE AGES**

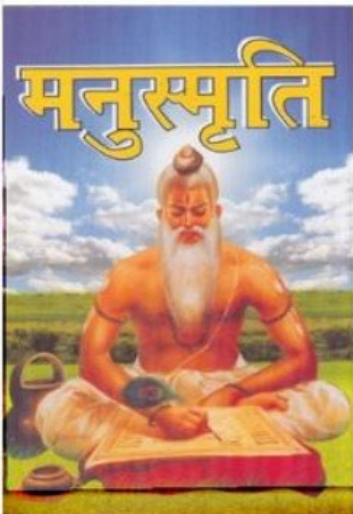
**- By Mridusmita Ray**

The ideas about female sexuality have changed over times in India. Indian concept of female sexuality has been immensely influenced by the various rulers, invaders, religion and also by the various cultural and social practices. In many historical contexts, female sexuality has been considered to be subordinate to men and barely discussed and given importance. Women are often told not to desire and women who have pursued their desires have been regarded as deviant or dangerous to society.

Women enjoyed all the required rights which were common for human beings in the Vedic period. Also, the first ever attestation of female sexuality and perspectives on sex are found in the ancient texts of Hinduism and Buddhism particularly the Vedic script that provide righteous perspectives on sexuality, wedlock and rituals for increased productivity. In the Vedic period, sex was not regarded as a taboo and also it can be observed that the concept of virginity was not considered to be a measure of a woman's purity. Men and women had equal autonomy over their bodies and desires.

In the later Vedic period, the status of women has been downgraded and through sexual discrimination for which Manu has played a huge part in the Hindu society. The strength of Manu's approach lies in generating moral anxiety over women's sexuality. According to the writings in the manusmriti, after the death of a woman's husband, she may voluntarily emancipate her body by eating pure flower, roots and fruits, but she may never mention even the name of another man and devote her life to her husband and remain patient and controlled. A good woman is one who controls her mind, speech and body, does not care about beauty and is not unfaithful to her husband and makes love to him whenever he demands. In case a woman tears the hymen of her vagina which is often considered to determine a woman's virginity, she shall instantly have her head shaved or two fingers cut off and made to ride a donkey. The major support for this notion came from the marriage ritual 'kanyadaan', which presumably requires a woman to be a virgin for the ritual to be valid.

The British colonisation of India also played a significant role in making the attitude towards virginity more conservative. Due to colonisation the impact of Victorian era, related to abstinence from sexual desires was felt in Indian context. The concept of chastity and purity became more important and strict rules were observed to control one's sexuality and desires. A deep emphasis was put on the righteousness of female sexuality which meant that the first and foremost duty of women was to give birth and raise children.



The Indian nationalist movement too had an impact on women's sexuality. Indian nationalist discourse always referred to the country as a specific kind of feminine entity referring to it as 'mother' or 'Bharat mata'. Moreover, Gandhi addressed women as central to Swaraj or freedom. His repeated appeals to embrace the female virtues essentialized women's sexuality in a way that it became synonymous with purity, chastity, self control and patience.

All these historical instances have contributed in determining the contemporary perspectives on female sexuality in India. Even though there have been attempts to understand female sexuality in current society, we still have not accepted female sexuality in all its richness and complexity.

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**"Women's Sexuality in the Indian Nationalist Discourse - By Hira Naaz**

# *POLICING FEMALE SEXUALITY*

## *AN ANALYSIS OF THE TABOOS AND STIGMAS*



- Aditi Kumar, Vani Shukla

Women throughout the different stages of their life, face constant surveillance under widespread patriarchy prevalent in our society -to the extent that their sexuality, be it “losing virginity” (outside of wedlock) or exploring their sexuality post middle age, are policed by the society. Sexual desire is typical for both men and women across all ages. The very act of robbing their right to sexuality, and thus their desire to live life on their own terms is a degrading act on society’s part.

The patriarchal setup we live in largely emphasizes on the “purity” of women. Having reconsidered how flawed this notion is, what our skeptical minds wonder is that it has to do with the gendered power dynamics where women are considered to be subordinate to men. The idea of purity puts a woman in a place where she has to undergo the humiliating tests of virginity on her first night of marriage to be considered ‘sanskari’ enough for the family. The blood after the hymen break becomes the proof of her purity. But this overemphasis on the breaking of hymen is so flawed that one fails to recognize that a hymen could be broken due to various other reasons. A woman is subjected to character assassination and mental abuse only for the fact that there’s no blood to signify her purity. It is only when women will be seen as independent beings with a mind and choice of their own, rather than some kind of product owned by men, will this idea of purity and putting her under constant surveillance over her virginity might end.

Society does not spare women who are no longer in their youth, from its scrutinizing gaze either. The topic of older women’s sexuality has always been a complex subject to engage with. Social conventions and blatant stigmas make it difficult for them to embrace their sexuality without the fear of being humiliated. Older women are expected to “act” their age and maintain dignity even in very banal acts like choice of clothes, food, friends, ideas of leisure, etc. This also translates into them considering themselves as being sexually dead or not worthy of any kind of self-pleasure. Regardless of the physical incapacity due to the unavoidable physical changes that comes with old age, the elderly women can resort to different facets of sexuality. A factor that stops desire dead in its track is that the elderly women are often not at peace with the changes in their bodies. Society seems to value a sexuality that flourishes in youthful beauty. Popular culture markets a certain type of body as sexually attractive and reduces anything different from it as sexless. Films and visual culture, as well rarely depict the sexual side of elderly women. Any kind of sexual expression on her part whether it is dating younger men or being open about her sexual desires is met with criticism. Elderly widows, divorcees, or spinsters, often perceived as a vulnerable group of the society have to go through a lot of stigmatisation on a daily basis. They are expected to remain chaste and viewed with disgust, even resentment if they seek out sexual or romantic partners or indulge in activities to fulfil their sexual desire.

Women are not the puppets of men that they would comply with the patriarchal society and its perception of dignity. It should be up to the girl to decide at what age she is willing to lose her virginity or explore her sexuality and with whom. The right to control one’s own body and sexuality, pleasures and fantasies without the fear of external coercion is one integral part of empowerment. One should keep in mind that whenever women irrespective of their age are discouraged from fully claiming their own sexuality, they are in fact deprived of their basic rights – the right to self expression and the right to be able to control their own body.

# "GUILTY" PLEASURES

- Priya Bhatt , Ananya Upadhyay, Ananyaa Anirudh

While sex and sexuality are considered to be the most intensely private parts of a person's existence, a woman's sexuality and experience of it in the context of the greater society is not always her own. Our sexuality is being created for us before we even have the knowledge that we have something to fight for. Very often we do not get to decide what our sexuality means, the world has already decided for us. And one aspect of female sexuality that has had been most intensely labeled is masturbation. Masturbating is a way to connect with your body and get to know your sexual likes and dislikes. When men begin to masturbate it is seen as a rite of passage but many women don't do it because of the stigma surrounding female sexuality. When women do masturbate it's often seen as deviant, dirty and promiscuous. Why is self-pleasure looked down upon in the case of women? Perhaps because of the male centric discourse of sexuality that downplays and tries to tame female sexuality. Women are too often taught to consider themselves sexual objects rather than agents, stigmatising female masturbation.

Though experts emphasise benefits of masturbation, many women are tormented by doubts and fears. Masturbation lends a chance to get to know your own body better, introducing hormones that improve sex life and the overall state of your body; it makes one more confident and aware of sexual responses and even relieves stress. Women who explore their bodies experience relief from sexual and emotional tension. Women should be able to feel empowered to take control of their body and dictate their own pleasure without judgment from anybody.

Further, "Dildos...Vibrators...Clitoris Simulators..Hey, What's the matter? Why are you straightening your collar? Are- Are you thirsty? There's sweat drops on your forehead too.."

Of course there's sweat. After we're done normalising masturbation, the next hurdle that needs to be crossed is the general contention latched to "sex toys". Usually they are expected to be kept socially and overall indistinct from the public eye. When a woman or a man feels the need to use a sexually satisfying toy to enhance their autoerotic capability, they often find themselves at a standstill. And this dead end is brought to them by societal notions of "shame" and stigmas attached to sex toys. Users are considered to be deviants who use venereal methods to take part in "filthy" acts. Some believe and make believe that sex toys are the materialistic integration of "sin" and other sultry deeds. But this is untrue. Often, sex toys' users are considered to be "lonely" or "asexual", although these stereotypes are misleading.

Using sex toys to enhance the procedure of pleasuring oneself can be very beneficiary. Masturbation secretes hormones like melatonin, better known as the "sleep hormone" in our bodies which is extremely lucrative for our physical and mental well being along with other hormones which fasten the body's overall functioning. Self eroticism also leads to combusting stress and anxiety and moreover, it is about discovering and experimenting with oneself. Like masturbating and self exploration, using sex toys to merely enhance the same process is not in any way chronic to health and this process certainly does not make anyone lonely or a societal deviant or even a promiscuous sleazebag, contrary to what the society has made it out to be.

And as Walker Thornton, vocal author/ writer on female sexuality said -

"Fingers, tongues and penises are wonderful, but sometimes using a vibrator on your body can be instructive- and delightfully pleasurable"

Orgasm is the physical and emotional sensation experienced at the peak of sexual excitation. But you don't need it to find sex pleasurable. Orgasm is experienced differently by men and women. According to AsapScience, female orgasms last 20 seconds or more, while male orgasms typically last for 3 to 10 seconds. Women (especially heterosexuals) orgasm only 69% of the time during sex with their partners. In comparison, men claimed to orgasm well over 95% of the time. Interestingly when women engage in homosexual encounters or masturbation, this gap nearly disappears while there is no noticeable difference for men in homosexual relationships or who are masturbating alone.

There are of course various reasons for this. Low self esteem due to poor body image is a leading one, along with women not knowing what they want, and hence being unable to guide their partners. Even women who know what they want, are often uncomfortable expressing their desire and guiding their partners.

Orgasm requires mindfulness and few of us have mastered this skill in our daily life, let alone during sex. Other cultural problems that might be holding us back are that we have a double standard that judges women more harshly than men for casual sex. Further, sex education generally doesn't focus on pleasure. Most of us have little training in sexual communication, yet good sexual communication is key when it comes to female orgasms.

Ladies; the men that we love, want us to experience their love too. So don't hold back from expressing yourself. Help them help you. Talk. The female orgasm has a biological basis with physiological advantages. But even if it didn't, since orgasm is a (pleasurable) end in itself, should we not proactively seek to achieve it? We all experience desire, doesn't it just make sense to take it to its logical conclusion?

Picture Credit - @beautifullyflawedbean

# SPRAWLING HAMARTIA

By: Nikita Sarma

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Before you read: “Sprawling Hamartia” deals with the spreading out of political abuse of female sexuality by innumerable nations in order to consolidate their position as a nation at the global stage. As these stories live and die in the pages of history, the women who manage to survive are told time and again that:

\*\*“THIS ISN’T ABOUT YOU.YOUR FEELINGS ARE IRRELEVANT HERE.

THIS IS ABOUT SAVING THE REVOLUTION. IT’S ABOUT SAVING THE WORLD.”

.....  
The suburban town was fast asleep. The dogs were barking. She lit her cigar looking for warm solace as the chilling breeze pierced through the minute holes of her stockings. She walked down the street clutching on to her black blazer not to attract attention from the cops lurking the avenue. As she was about to take a turn in the roundabout, the walkie-talkie in her left pocket started to buzz. She responded to it .She turned back. She disappeared in thin air.

She knew that the hotel staff will never be able to lay bare the truth. She also knew that it will not take her much time to clean all the blood spilling over the entire hotel room. What directed her intended movements was the mixing of blood that has taken place during the scuffle, the blood gushing out of her vagina and the blood coming out of his sliced throat. Her gown dipping in red water she dialed the numbers to inform about the resurrection of the war. She instantly felt a kind of suffocation penetrating the damp air. The war was at doorstep and this was the high point for the nations and also for the lives of likes of her.

“Graceful, unflappable, opinionated, strong and emotionless”

That’s how they made their women. The women who could twist the nagging paws of diplomacy with equitable diplomatic arrangements in bed.

The women had the persistence and talent to snug out every kind of secret information but as they went about killing men in the name of nation, little did they know that they were the ones amending the international power dynamics; their sexuality formed the “political asset” of their country. Their sexual desires became a matter of least concern because their sexuality was used to suffice the political needs in the name of sovereignty.

She turned the pages of the newspaper taking a note in her mind of the baits to be created for the mission that night. She turned the pages of the newspaper hoping against hope to find something about her immediate source who disappeared in a suburban town two months after disclosing about the confounded occupation resurfacing sudden attacks on their nation. She knew that her source met the ultimate fate of brutality, probably was raped, harassed, mutilated, killed thereafter cut into pieces and disposed off in some unknown place. She also knew that she will meet the same fate sooner or later. She returned the newspaper to the person sitting next to her and thanked him. She was protecting her country, defending at times, sacrificing at another to restore peace for the ones who believed in warfare

She walked down the street clutching on to her black blazer not to attract attention from the cops lurking the avenue. As she was about to take a turn in the roundabout, the wacky talkie in her left pocket started to buzz. She responded to it .She turned back. She disappeared in thin air.

.....  
\*\*These lines are taken from the movie “Red Joan”.

## EDITOR'S CHOICE

'...for women sex is work. Giving pleasure to a man is an essential part of what is expected of every woman.'

'Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually enticing.'

- Revolution at point zero; housework, reproduction and feminist struggle by Silvia Federici

' you plough into me with two fingers and I am mostly shocked. it feels like rubber against an open wound. i do not like it. you begin pushing faster and faster. But I feel nothing. You search my face for a reaction so I begin acting like the naked women in the videos you watch when you think no one is looking. i imitate their moans. hollow and hungry. you ask if it feels good and I say yes so quickly it sounds rehearsed but the acting you do not notice.'

- Milk and honey by Rupri Kaur

This pressure on women to be pleasure- giving machines is the prevalent notion that plagues the realm of female sexuality. Instead of being reciprocal recipients and givers of pleasure, it is often women who are designated to be the 'please- er'.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Parched (2015)**  
**Veere di wedding (2018)**  
**Anarkali of aarah (2017)**  
**Bulbul can sing (2018)**  
**Badhai Ho (2018)**  
**Angry Indian goddesses (2015)**  
**Gloria (2013)**  
**A L'aventure (2008)**

### SHORT FILMS| DOCUMENTARIES

**Lakshmi (2017)**  
**Explained- the female orgasm (2018)**  
**The good girl (2004)**  
**Documentary – Passion and Power: the technology of orgasm (2007)**

### BOOKS

**The boundaries of desire by Eric Berkowitz**  
**Come as you are : The surprising new science that will transform your sex life. By Emily Nagoski**  
**Radhika Santawanam or the Appeasement of Radhika . Translated by Sandhya Mulchandani**  
**She comes first by Ian karner**  
**The Story of V by Catherine Blackledge**  
**Vagina by Naomi wolf**

### TV SHOWS

**Lust stories(2018)**  
**Chewing gum (2015)**  
**Orange is the new black (2013)**  
**Jane the Virgin (2014)**  
**Bonding (2019)**  
**MUSIC**  
**PYNK- Janelle Monae**  
**Love myself- Hailee Steinfeld**  
**God is a woman- Ariana Grande**  
**Blow- Beyonce**