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Introductory Chapter: Sex, Sexuality and Ethics - An Indian Perspective

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“Ethics is not neutral information. Ethics is active formation,” Jordan wrote in an email. “So an essential part of teaching sexual ethics is getting people to reflect honestly both on what they believe and on how they have been led to those beliefs.”
Jonathan G. Adler, 2016.

1. Introduction

It is said that “In the beginning, when Twashtri came to the creation of woman, he found that he had exhausted his materials in the making of man and that no solid elements were left.

In this dilemma, after profound meditation, he did as follows:

He took the rotundity of the moon, the twinkling of the stars, the curves of creepers, the clinging of tendrils, the trembling of grass, the slenderness of the reed, the bloom of flowers, the lightness of leaves, the tapering of the elephant’s trunk, the glances of deer, the clustering of rows of bees, the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, the weeping of clouds, the fickleness of wind, the timidity of the hare, the vanity of the peacock, the softness of the parrot’s bosom, the hardness of a diamond, the sweetness of honey, the cruelty of the tiger, the warm glow of the fire, the coldness of snow, the chattering of jays, the cooing of the kokila, the hypocrisy of the Crane, the fidelity of the Charvaka, compounding all these together, he made woman and gave her to man. But in 2 weeks, the man came crying: “O Mighty Waster of Mysteries! Thou who has made all the wonders of the world, take again the woman that thou gave it me; she teases^ tantalizes and tires me, and I cannot live with her anymore.” And Twashtri took the woman away. But in 2 weeks, the man came again and cried out: “Give me back the woman” that thou made; I cannot live without her.

This ancient description of creation of woman and man’s dependence on woman for a complete life speaks the essence of bonding between the two describing the bond as social, scientific, and sexual in nature [1].

1.1 Marriage and sex

The institution of marriage in Indian culture and ambience emphasizes that “Sexual act has to be after marriage.” This sets the moral principle for ethical evaluation. Ethics in simpler terms describes choice as an individual right but within the confines of social structure where we live in [2].

The word “sex” itself is considered to be discussed with responsibility and in private. Sexuality and sex are considered to be a part of one’s personal domain

whose sanctity cannot be transgressed. In other words, sex is viewed not just as a biological instinct but as an essential human activity and living.

One cannot discuss ethics without dissecting sex out of human sexuality as a biological need and instinct.

- It is a complex phenomenon that reflects our personality.
- According to WHO (2002), sexuality is “A central aspect of being human throughout life and it encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, and social well-being that relates to one’s sexuality.”
- It can be influenced by biological, psychological, sociocultural, and religious factors [3].

1.2 Science of sex and human sexual response cycle

When one discusses sex, it is assumed that the person or the community have the right kind of knowledge both scientific and social. The science of sex and the human sexual response cycle has to become an essential part of analyses.

Human sexual response cycle is broadly divided into desire (libido), arousal (excitement), orgasm, and resolution [4].

Sexual desire or libido is shaped by age, sex, past experiences, values, social norms, and culture. It is felt that a woman cannot openly reveal her desire and it has to be always the male who has to initiate the cycle. Any open exposition of desire by the woman is considered as a taboo and even talking about sex is considered as a bad virtue. The verbal, visual, auditory, or touch stimuli trigger such a desire. It is required that sexual activities have to be private and personal.

1.3 Survey regarding sexuality

A survey to test the knowledge about sexual response cycle and its physiological effects were carried out over a period of 5 years. The number of respondents or participants was around 4400 persons of either sex [5].

The percentage of people who did not know about the sexual response cycle was 55% of women and 45% of men were ignorant. The rest of the people had no true information about the other three stages of the cycle. The urban people seemed to have better awareness compared to rural population. Rather, it was difficult to get the rural population to respond to the questionnaire, which required lots of persuasion and help from the village chief. They responded with total ignorance of these different phases. The rural population formed 49% of the total cases screened. The rest were from urban areas (51%). There was also significant difference between the perception of sex between the urban and rural cases. Majority of the rural population answered that the very purpose of having sex is for procreation (80% of the rural population) and the rest of the rural population did not wish to respond to the question about having sex with the partner. Some of the urban and rural population did not have adequate knowledge about orgasm. The response did bring out a fact that most of the time the needs of female partner is not respected or given serious thought. Many did not know the difference between sex and gender. It has to be explained that sex is related to chromosome, hormones, and differences in the anatomy of the sex organs. Gender refers to the attitudes, interests, behaviors, and activities. Rather very few could understand that sex is biological instinct and gender is related to social structure [6].

Many did not understand the development of sexuo-erotic orientation that one could be heterosexual or homosexual or transgender. It was difficult to

explain how one develops sexual orientation. It has to be taught that sexuo-orientation starts with initial exposure to hormonal influences along with environment where an individual develops or lives. This scientific explanation or knowledge very few had and could not believe or understand how one behaves differently to different perceptions of sexuality. Rather, though there was a tradition of child marriage or the description of sex in the pages of Kamasutra, many people do not yet understand or acknowledge forms of sexuality other than heterosexual relationship [7].

1.4 Sexual rights

“Sexual rights refer to the human rights of all persons with respect to the free and responsible expression of their sexuality and their control over their bodies. They encompass the right to experience a pleasurable sexuality, which is essential in and of itself and, at the same time, is a fundamental vehicle of communication and love between people. Sexual rights include the right to liberty and autonomy in the responsible exercise of sexuality” [8].

Sexual rights are human rights demanding equal rights, respect, consent, and shared responsibilities between consenting sexual partners irrespective of all other considerations including sexuo-erotic orientation.

What is the state of women when it comes choosing to a sexual partner. Every one of legal age has the right to marry and form a family. This choice cannot be extended to all societies for one has to consider the culture and social determinants of the institution of marriage and social structure. In Hindu joint family system, marriage becomes essential for exercising sexual rights. The usual custom is if one desires to marry the bride, the groom's family visits the bride's family to ask for the hand of the bride. Sometimes it may be one of the many visits of bridegroom to be in choosing a bride for his marriage. During the formal enquiry, the two families converse with each other and decide whether marriage between the two is possible including matching the horoscope of the two individuals to be married. Even if both partners love each other, they want to marry with the consent of the parents of both parties. There are so many customs one has to follow to finalize a relationship with marriage. This decision is influenced by the community they belong to, the social status of the family, and also the caste system. If the consenting adults live in a relationship say with premarital sex and they wish to become life partners, they still need to go through the religious customs of the family they belong to. This living together relationship, though prevalent in many of the metro cities, has not taken deep roots to infiltrate the age-old tradition of the families living in many rural areas. There are many social constraints that influence such relationships. It is not easy to get an accommodation for a living together couple unless they show evidence of their marriage. There is still honor killing when two consenting adults of different castes get married or when the two persons belong to two different religions. The right to choose one's partner, though it resides with the consenting adults, has to pass through many social hurdles to accomplish it [8, 9].

The right to seek pleasure *after marriage* is mutual and depends upon the foundation of that relationship. Though condoms are available freely in the market, its use is not universal for it creates a doubt in the mind of the partner why condom is used. This is not because of any social pressure but because they lack sex education. Slowly, this trend has taken a marked change through family planning and the AIDS awareness program. Even this contraceptive use for safe sex is usually forced on the woman compared to men. Seeking sexual pleasure requires an understanding of the sexual response cycle as well as the methods of sexual intercourse. Whether a woman had orgasm is not being expressed by

the women for the fear being called as sexually aggressive. The consent to have sex is usually dominated by the male without giving due respect to the consent of the woman. The social strata of society play a bigger role where economically emancipated women demand equal right to have sex with mutual consent. Forcing a wife to have sex without her consent is considered as rape legally [10].

“Nowadays, parents simply suggest the person they feel is suitable for their son or daughter. Only if their child approves (after interacting with him or her), do things move ahead. Also, children are now increasingly taking the initiative to find their own partners. The number of people putting up their profiles at matrimonial sites is a case in point. So, children are now ‘arranging’ their own marriages,” says Sanjeev Sharma, 29, a software engineer currently in the “marriage market,” looking for a bride [11].

1.5 Conclusion

In India, sex and sexuality had undergone a vast transformation from the days of polygamy to living together life style. In short, sex generates fascinating debates. With roots in biology, the topic of sexuality” remains complex. Its pleasures are intoxicating and invigorating. The desire to have sex, its expression and experience differ between men and women [12].

Its discussion and social implications form the basis of ethical discussion and, therefore, an introspection of these issues from different perspectives is important and the book deals with some of these issues in a concise and scientific way.


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