

SEXUALITY in INDIA

ANCIENT PERIOD

CLASSICAL INDIA

Basic patterns. After the decline of an earlier river-valley civilization in present-day Pakistan, classical Indian history took shape gradually with the formation of regional governments but above all through the emergence of Hinduism and Buddhism plus the unfolding of the social caste system. Hinduism was a cluster of beliefs and practices that evolved over time under the guidance of priests or Brahmins and through epic poems, initially written in Sanskrit, which began to emerge by the 7th century BCE; Buddhism developed as a partial religious alternative by the 5th century. The caste system similarly took shape during final millennium BCE, rigorously separating groups by occupation and permissible social contacts (including marriage).

Artistic culture. Distinctive features of Indian sexual culture were most clearly linked to the rise of Hinduism and related public art, which at least superficially contrasted rather vividly with the cultural patterns of classical China. As in China, however, some significant sexual patterns developed outside the leading religious and social systems. Simply put, aspects of Indian culture embraced sexuality more openly and enthusiastically than was the case in Confucian China, though actual sexual practices, centered around the family and reproductive life, probably varied considerably less.

Artistic representations were striking. Depictions of Hindu gods and goddesses frequently emphasized sexual attributes, for example in friezes on temple exteriors. Public art also included scenes of copulation, including divine lovers like Krishna and Radha, and murals might contain paintings of nude dancing girls. A 5th century (CE) poet described men pining over portraits of their lovers, commenting on the beauty of their bodies. In the Gupta period, sculptors portrayed voluptuous mother-goddesses in pink stone, with almost lifelike fleshy qualities. Other artists in the Gupta empire offered illustrations of sex manuals, with detailed descriptions of anatomy and sexual positions. Clearly, sexual expression and spirituality were not seen in opposition. Women were esteemed for beauty and fertility, not sources of dangerous temptation.

Religion and literature. Some ambivalence did exist: holy men might renounce sex as part of their removal from worldliness, and boys might take vows of celibacy during religious training. Sexual abstinence was also recommended on some Hindu holy days. On the whole, however, it was the compatibility of sexual pleasure and religious goals that was most striking.

These attitudes readily carried over into literature. Thus in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, a major epic: "In the embrace of his beloved, a man forgets the whole world, everything both within and without" – the same sensation that occurs in the process of spiritual advancement. A variety of writers authored sex manuals, describing positions and techniques designed to offer maximum pleasure – for women as well as men. The *Kama Sutra*, the most important textbook of love ever devised, was written in the 2nd century CE, but it had many antecedents. The *Kama Sutra* itself, with its varied and detailed suggestions beginning with elaborate foreplay, was republished frequently in India and was also widely translated – even gaining audience in the United States during the 20th century when interest in recreational sex began to increase in a very different cultural context.

Family and marriage. This distinctive sexual culture, which would deeply shock Western observers when they began to reach India in any numbers during the early modern period, may have had some impact on actual sexual behavior, but some caution is essential – partly, of course, because the evidence is less abundant. Rulers early in the classical period probably took several wives, and some polygamy persisted in other groups; but – more than in China or the Middle East – India on the whole emphasized the importance of monogamy – and this would include assumptions of strict female chastity, with women often marrying quite young. Marriages were carefully arranged by parents – here was a tradition that took deep root – and couples often did not even meet until their wedding. This said, the Indian tradition also

stressed the importance of a get-acquainted period of four days at the outset of the marriage, prior to sexual activity – followed by six days of further seclusion designed for enjoyment. And sexual pleasure, along with fertility, was a valid goal as the marriage progressed, with husbands responsible for their wives' satisfaction along with their own. Here, possibly, was a real life link with the assumptions embedded in the public culture.

Prostitution and adultery. Considerable prostitution developed, not surprisingly not only because of the public culture but also because men usually had to wait for years after puberty before marrying. Some Indian women, trained as entertainers, were even exchanged with other societies – as far away as Egypt – in what might be seen as an early version of the sex trade. In India itself, brothels but also street prostitutes flourished in the larger cities, loosely supervised by regional governments and, as in China, supplying tax revenues. The autumn Diwali festival might include visits to prostitutes, and accomplished, high-level prostitutes frequently accompanied leaders when they traveled.

On the other hand, adultery was strongly condemned, at least in principle. And prostitutes themselves might be punished if caught with ordinary married men (more harshly than the men themselves). While female beauty was certainly praised, standards emphasized qualities appropriate for childbirth: fertility was a clearer goal than pleasure. Many rituals developed to promote conception, and both pregnant women and new mothers were carefully supported and monitored. Indian culture also tended to disapprove of homosexuality, another sign of the link between sex and reproduction. Male prostitution seems to have been less common than in other classical societies. But there were some artistic depictions of same-sex activity, as well as considerable acceptance of the idea of the “Third Sex”; traditional Hinduism ranged from critical to neutral. Revealingly the *Kama Sutra* dedicated an entire chapter to erotic homosexual behavior. On another front: while eunuchs existed they were far less numerous or important than in China (or, later, the Middle East).

Sexual jealousy. One other feature of Indian sexuality, measurable today, might have had roots in the classical period: a slightly higher than average level of male sexual jealousy. Jealousy is a sexually-linked emotion found everywhere to some degree, though more common among men than women, which in itself reflects the gender disparities of the Agricultural Age. The greater intensity of sexuality in Indian culture, combined with larger assumptions of male superiority, might spur a readiness to lash out in cases of real or imagined sexual rivalry. There is no direct behavioral evidence from the classical period, but the theme emerges in several stories within the Hindu epics, sometimes featuring women who deceived their husbands but were ultimately brought to justice. Even wives forced into sex by other men could be roundly condemned (and, at least in literature, sometimes renounced or even put to death by their husbands).

Conclusion Overall, it remains highly probable that Indian sexual representations were considerably more distinctive than daily norms and behaviors. As in other classical societies, and despite the esteem for female pleasure, gender distinctions mattered considerably; and social differentiations, between the mighty and the population as a whole, complicated the picture as well. Within marriage, however, the values of public culture may have had some impact in expectations and practices alike.

Study questions:

1. What were the most important differences in sexual culture between India and China during the classical period?
2. How was sexuality compatible with the strong emphasis on religion in classical India?
3. What might have been distinctive about prostitution in the context of classical India?
4. What were the principal sexual constraints for respectable women, and were they particularly unusual for a predominantly agricultural society?
5. What are the main problems in relating sexual culture to actual sexual behavior in classical India?

Further reading:

“A Chronicle of Sexuality in the Indian Sub-continent”. By Keya Das and T.S. Sathyanarayana Rao. In *Journal of Psychosexual Health* (Mar. 2019).

Sexual Morality and the World's Religions. By G. Parrinder (Oneworld, 1996).

The Invisibles: tales of eunuchs in India, By Z. Jaffrey (Pantheon, 1996).

Sexual Designs in Indian Culture. By Akhileshwar Jha. (Vikas Publishing House, 1979).

Crime and Sex in Ancient India. By Chandra Sures (Naya Prokash, 1980).

Oh Terrifying Mother: sexuality, violence and worship of the Goddess Kali. By Sara Caldwell (Oxford University Press, 1999).

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

BUDDHISM

Buddhism formed initially as a reaction against aspects of Hinduism, most obviously what Gautama Buddha saw as excessive Hindu commitment to ritual and the priestly role plus its embrace of the caste system. Buddhism also moved against some of the Hindu approaches to sexuality, though – just to complicate matters – Buddhist faithful might also replicate aspects of Hindu thinking and representation.

Sexuality as danger. At one level, Buddhism could seem unusually hostile to sexual interests. Buddha's first discourse, focused on craving as the key cause of human suffering, illustrates his warnings through sexuality:

“ If one, longing for sensual pleasure, achieves it, yes, he's enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what he wants. But if for that person – longing, desiring – the pleasures diminish, he's shattered, as if shot with an arrow... So one, always mindful, should avoid sensual desires. Letting them go, he will cross over the flood like one who, having bailed out the boat, has reached the far shore.”

Other early Buddhist comments pointed in the same direction: desire was like a tree laden with fruit but too dangerous to climb. The *Dazhidulum* clarified the admonition: “He who enjoys pleasures is never satisfied; he who is deprived of them suffers greatly; When he does not possess them, he wants to possess them. When he possesses them, he is tormented.”

Monasticism and gender. Correspondingly, most Buddhist religious orders – both male and female -- remained firmly celibate, with any violation a cause for expulsion. Similarly, Buddhist temples, far less elaborate than their Hindu counterparts in any event, dispensed with any explicit sensual imagery. The tone of Buddhist public and artistic culture was, usually, vastly different from Hindu patterns.

Concern about sexuality applied to specific comments concerning women: while the spirituality of individual women was praised, many stories offered warnings about women who led men into sexual temptation. An East Asian Buddhist story highlights a monk who fell in love with a courtesan; ridiculed in public, he lost all his spiritual power.

Complexities. Yet a number of further elements entered in, modifying what otherwise might seem an unusually bleak view. In the first place, while sex was certainly a good example of the snares of pleasure-seeking, it was not the only one. Some Buddhist leaders have been at pains to point out that sexual enjoyment was not distinctively worse than other kinds of superficial indulgence.

Further, while the Buddhist approach emphasized caution, it did not generate an elaborate list of do's and don'ts – except for a few admonitions to monks and nuns about specific practices to avoid. In contrast to the Abrahamic religions, all of which built on the Jewish impulse to develop specific regulations, Buddhism allowed considerable discretion, leaving decisions about particular sexual interests largely up to the individual or the specific community. A key Buddhist precept did warn against “sexual misconduct” but without detail. This could generate, among other things, wide differences of opinion about issues like same-sex involvement. Buddhists in general were instructed not to have sex with another's spouse or betrothed, with someone under age, or with a person vowed to celibacy, but that was about it. Nor, in contrast to Judaism, was there particular emphasis on focusing only on reproductive sex (which in principle could be just as disappointing as any other human striving).

East Asia. Lacking a single holy book or elaborate governing apparatus, Buddhism, as it expanded its geographic range, also generated a number of variants, and sexuality was one of the elements involved. In China, for example, Buddhists encountered concerns about the lack of emphasis on the family, and

some adjustments were made to stress the importance of family life for most people. At the same time, even non-Buddhist Chinese sometimes found Buddhist sexual caution desirable, for example in disciplining wayward girls, who might be sent to Buddhist nuns for guidance.

Buddhism in Korea and particularly Japan often greatly modified the warnings about sexuality itself. Several Korean stories featured Buddhist holy men who indulged in sex without harming their sanctity. One, from the 12th century, even highlighted a monk who regularly visited brothels, but by being open about his desire suffered no spiritual damage. Other Buddhists might claim that their enjoyment of sex merely expressed a love for humanity, and so they were not defiled. Yet another story featured two monks, one, celibate, was condemned because of false beliefs while the other, though committing immoral acts, won salvation because of his true faith.

Japanese monks were particularly likely to participate in sexual relationships, visiting prostitutes and sometimes maintaining longstanding relationships. Some claimed that this was a vital part of their spiritual quest. A Buddhist representation of the Hindu god Ganesha was worshipped by elements of the Japanese public, including women in the pleasure business. In the 12th century an extreme monastic order arose that explicitly used ejaculation in ritual, though this was ultimately condemned by mainstream Buddhists. More quietly, several Japanese Buddhist leaders preached that sex and love were paths to Enlightenment. And, unsurprisingly, in the Japanese context some Buddhist saints were worshipped as gods of love and sources of fertility.

Tantric Buddhism. Even outside Japan, Buddhist groups might directly associate sexual acts with spiritual goals. A variant called Tantric Buddhism developed in India, Tibet and elsewhere that – against the Buddhist norms – highlighted sexual intercourse in artistic representations of the ultimate reality, as a means of stimulating meditation practices and chants. While the female form, including the vagina, was central in these representations, most practitioners were male; women's bodies promoted Enlightenment, but a woman was rarely directly enlightened. Some forms of yoga were developed that also involved sexual expression. In some services a Tantric master had intercourse with a female acolyte and then used the resultant bodily fluids to anoint others. Over time (and into the modern era), this aberrant form of Buddhism could lead to a variety of sexual abuses, and also served to promote attacks on Buddhism more generally that greatly exaggerated the extent of sexual license. Many Buddhist leaders themselves condemned that Tantric approach and urged adherence to the original ascetic purposes.

Variety. The variety of sexual implications in Buddhism obviously complicates any overall evaluation. The overriding goal of seeking spiritual enlightenment and release from ordinary worldly concerns could lead to sexual restraint, including monastic asceticism or, simply, adherence to more common rules about avoiding adultery or premarital sex. A number of Buddhist variants sought to downplay female sexual pleasure, seeing the female body as impure and a source of temptation, leading to particular emphasis on the need for restraint. But for some, the goals of enlightenment and release incorporated sexual outlets directly, making sexuality one of several domains that highlighted the multiplicity of Buddhist styles. It is vital also to remember the absence of detailed rules about sexual behavior in the overall Buddhist approach, which could generate some tolerance for different sexual expressions.

The Buddhist mainstream. It is not easy to determine the general impact of the Buddhist approach to sexuality. The religion encouraged a minority toward asceticism, but it also, though more rarely, could steer another minority to incorporate sexuality into religious ritual. Many ordinary people, sincere Buddhists, might well conclude that the religion did not address sexuality particularly clearly, muting its impact and confirming older traditions about the importance of reproduction and male potency, or the need to keep a watchful eye over female behavior. At most, Buddhism might enhance a concern about undue emphasis on sexuality more generally, and it is important to remember that some people explicitly turned to monasteries to train sons and particularly daughters in restraint. The absence of specific regulations, apart from some monasteries, also played a role in popular interpretations. For the literate, Buddhism offered varied discussions on sexuality and even on sexual positions – depending on the specific sect – but it avoided detailed commentary on daily issues like birth control, homosexuality, abortion, masturbation or even the promotion of fertility. As a result, a “Buddhist approach” to sexuality is harder to define than would be the case with the other world religions.

Study questions:

1. How could Buddhism lead to contradictory extremes in dealing with sexuality?
2. What was the role of the monastic movement in Buddhist approaches to sexuality?
3. Did Buddhism promote major changes in sexual ideas and practices for the majority of the faithful?
4. Why did Buddhism, in the main, avoid detailed rules about sexual behavior?

Further reading:

The Different Paths of Buddhism: a narrative-historical introduction. By Carl Olson (Rutgers University Press, 2005).

Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and sex. By John Stevens (Shambhala pub., 1990).

Courtesans and Tantric Consorts: sexualities in Buddhist narrative, iconography and ritual. By Seinity Young (Routledge, 2005).

Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender. Ed. By J.I. Cabezon (State University of New York Press, 1992).

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

SOUTH ASIA: THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

The Mughal period, beginning in the 16th century, introduced some new developments into Indian sexual history, though almost entirely at the upper-class level. The sexual practices of the emperors and their families drew wide attention, but ultimately the most important theme involved the interaction between the new Muslim rulers and India's established public culture.

Hindu art. Early Mughal rulers, firmly Muslim, though tolerant in most respects, were shocked by the open eroticism of some Indian art. Several major statues were defaced or destroyed. At the same time, both Hindus and Muslims largely agreed on the importance of sexual pleasure within the family, and women might use a variety of perfumes and cosmetics to make themselves attractive within the home.

Hindu erotic art continued to flourish despite some official concern, particularly in a new style of love poetry. The poet Upendra Bhnja (1670-1730) offered an ornate celebration of lovemaking. Songs in the Bengali languages celebrated lovemaking outside of marriage, and praise for beautiful women abounded. Older stories about lovemaking between gods and mortals were also revived and circulated. Paintings also reflected some of these themes. In other words, the imposition of Muslim rulers did not generate substantial change. Even for women, though limited in public interactions (true for both Muslims and Hindus), public marketplaces provided some opportunities for social contacts and flirtations: this is where the Emperor Jehangir met his great love, for whom he would ultimately build the Taj Mahal.

Same-sex linkages drew little comment, again in keeping with earlier tradition. Homoerotic art continued to flourish.

Imperial household. Mughal emperors themselves established elaborate harems with up to 5,000 women. However, most of these women were servants of various sorts or other members of the royal family. Only about 5% were sexual partners (admittedly, still a considerable number). Harems were carefully guarded by eunuchs. Doctors occasionally visited to oversee health conditions, but their contacts were scrupulously regulated. Emperors were the only males (eunuchs aside) who could freely enter a harem. Imperial sons were kept rigorously away.

Daughters of the emperor were carefully regulated in principle, destined for marriage only with other Mughals. Their portraits were painted using other women as models. On the other hand, several daughters were both talented and clever, and managed to arrange some liaisons – though lovers if caught could be punished severely. Officially, however, the image of chastity for women in the imperial family was vigorously maintained.

European comment. A growing number of European traders visited India during the period, and they were both intrigued and confused by what they saw. They characteristically exaggerated the sexuality of the emperors, failing to understand the varied duties of members of the harem. Their tales began to

convince a European public of the sexual degeneracy of the subcontinent under Mughal rule, reflecting but fueling the European sense of moral superiority. Thus the Italian Niccolò Manucci wrote that “Muslims were very fond of women, who are their principal relaxation and almost their only pleasure.” Or a British observer who noted more simply, the emperor “keepeth a thousand women for his own body.”

Study questions:

1. Why did Muslim rule introduce so few changes to Indian sexual culture?
2. Why did imperial sexual practices confuse Europeans? Was their confusion historically important?
3. How and why were imperial harems so carefully guarded?

Further reading:

Sexual and Gender Representations in Mughal India. By Syed Zehra (Manak Publications, 2011).

19TH CENTURY

SEXUALITY IN IMPERIAL INDIA

India, increasingly under British political and economic control in the 19th century, was one of the first places where European standards played out against regional traditions. Interactions built on some of the shock Westerners had already expressed about this aspect of Indian culture, but with fuller involvement and with Victorian standards in mind, potential tensions grew. At the same time, British impulses were constrained by the challenges of ruling this vast realm, and many compromises and some outright benign neglect were essential.

Imperial wives. British reactions were affected by another intriguing innovation: the increasing presence of English wives, now able to participate with their husbands as the latter served as imperial officials or business representatives. Previously, many British adventurers, male and single or at least free from marital control, actively took local consorts, a behavior widely familiar during the previous colonial era. Now, however, wives sought to exercise direct control, aware that their husbands might be tempted. Two obvious results were, first, a greater social separation between the British and most of the Indian people; and second, a further enhancement to the drumbeat of criticism of native eroticism.

Critiques. Western observers claimed to find rampant sexuality everywhere they looked. A Scotsman described the typical Indian man as “a living Priapus,” constantly lusting after sex. Even Indian prostitutes were described as distinctive, for actually enjoying sex: “they are sumptuously dressed, they wear the most costly jewels in profusion, they are well educated and sing sweetly.” A Mrs. Colin summed up a common opinion in 1857: “You may imagine the degraded condition of the people here, when I tell you we constantly pass women in the open street bare down to the hips...They do not seem to have the least sense of decency.” Male commentary was similar, though often reflecting a more complicated combination of shock and envy.

The challenge of course is to determine if these condemnations actually had much impact on their local targets. The answer is: not as much as the British would have liked, but enough to reshape some Indian traditions.

Homosexuality. British officials vigorously attacked apparent Indian tolerance of homosexuality, and while this involved some exaggeration, the Indian tradition did differ from its Western counterpart. A few arrests were made for same-sex behavior or even crossdressing as early as the 1840s. Then in the early 1860s, an overhaul of the Indian legal system included application of the British law against sodomy. In fact, actual prosecutions for same-sex activity remained fairly rare, but there was no question about a heightened official concern.

British disapproval promoted similar legal changes in other parts of South Asia, even territories not directly under colonial control. Some traditional ambivalence about same-sex activity combined with a clear effort to respond to the imperialist sense that only Western sexual standards counted as truly civilized.

South and Southeast Asia formed one of several cases where Western (particularly British) concern about homosexuality had particular impact – even though, in the West itself, the issue was not at the top of the agenda during most of the 19th century. . The role of Christian standards might seem salient in an age of active missionary outreach. More to the point, Western hostility usually combined with some traditional hesitance about same-sex practices within regions like South Asia, and as a result a focus on attacking homosexuality constituted a particularly attractive target in responding to more general Western criticism.

Early marriage. British observers frequently lamented arranged marriages involving children, particularly female children. Criticism mounted in the later 19th century, when some British feminists began to agitate for gender reforms on the subcontinent. Definitive action came only in 1929, with a new law outlawing the practice. By this point, Indian feminists themselves provided considerable support. However the reform failed significantly to dent the practice, as many Hindus and Muslims alike hewed to tradition.

Public culture and legacy. The British made no secret of their official distaste for Indian erotic art, though as in other areas they treaded carefully in fact, eager to avoid rousing local opposition. One measure even created an exception to British pornography rules, allowing some representations of Hindu statues to appear on postage stamps. But the new public buildings and statues promoted by the British moved away from the older artistic traditions, driving many erotic expressions underground.

And the long colonial experience left a lasting mark on Indian officialdom, even though the changes in actual popular behaviors had been rather modest. Well into the 21st century many leading officials either ignored the erotic elements in Indian cultural traditions, or actually denied them, as in claiming that Hinduism had always firmly opposed homosexuality. A partial redefinition of respectability was hard to shake off.

Study questions:

1. Why were the British so critical of Indian sexuality?
2. Did significant changes in Indian sexual culture or behavior result from the colonial experience?
3. What were the major limitations in British impact?

Further reading:

Imperial Bodies: the physical experience of the Raj. By E.M. Collingham (Blackwell, 2001).

The Courtesan's Arts: cross-cultural perspectives. Ed. M. Feldman and B. Gordon (Oxford University Press, 2006).