

An Illustration from the *Mrigavat* shows a man leading a woman to a bed-chamber. 1520, Early Rajasthan

Women, Sex and Marriage

Restraint as a Feminine Strategy

Madhu Kishwar

THOUGH sexuality is considered an innate human drive, its expression varies in different cultures. Patterns of sexual behaviour in a society are outgrowths of a whole cultural ethos. The same sexual behaviour can acquire substantially different meanings and consequences in different societies.

Most societies have tried to regulate sexuality by placing it firmly within their marriage and kinship structure. However, in societies which evolved male dominated forms of family, marriage became an instrument of control over women's sexuality. In the West, Engels preceded the feminists in critiquing the sexual morality inherent in such male dominated family structures. He saw the destruction of the patriarchal

family as a necessary step towards freeing women from men's control.

For the nineteenth century and early twentieth century feminists, the right to education and the right to vote were the primary issues. It was only after the advent of cheap, effective and readily available contraceptives for the mass of women in the West that the feminist movement began to seriously engage with the idea of sexual liberation. The possibility of separation of women's sexuality from reproduction made it easier for women to assert their own sexuality. This phase witnessed not only perceptive analyses and radical insights into the power play behind the sexual aspects of man-woman relationships, but also ideological challenges to the cultural ideals of women's sexual purity,

virginity, and lifelong sexual loyalty to a husband.

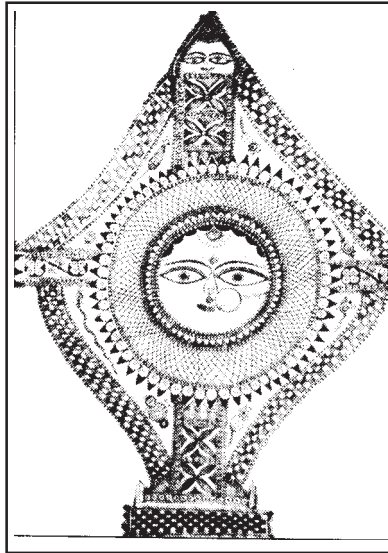
Efforts to promote sexual liberation in the contemporary West were accompanied by a very high rate of breakdown of marriages and families, especially since simultaneously many of the legal and religious bars against divorce were removed. At the same time, subjective expectations of marriage became more and more exaggerated. In the West marriage is not just expected to provide economic and social security for raising children, but also sexual compatibility, orgasmic delight and romantic excitement. Walking out of marriage in search of more exciting liaisons is no longer only a male prerogative. Women frequently exercise this option. However, even

though the idea of lifelong sexual loyalty in marriage is no longer assumed in the West, the majority of believers in sexual liberation expect a new form of sexual commitment — serial monogamy. For whatever duration that a couple are together, the new morality assumes that they will refrain from sexual involvement with others. Marriages and even non-marital relationships often flounder if either partner discovers the other having clandestine sexual affairs.

While western women have begun to be more sexually assertive, many find they are not necessarily sexually fulfilled. A German feminist friend of mine who was an enthusiastic participant in the heady days of their sexual revolution once described in vivid detail to me how she came out of that experience bruised, hurt, and confused. This is how she summed up her experience: "I now think we were bugged not just physically but also mentally and ended up feeling used by men." Today she feels that free sex without any emotional commitment suits men much more than women because it allows men easy access to any number of women without taking on any responsibility.

In my own social I find that circle men who propound sexual liberation to women tend to be far more exploitative than the supposedly traditional men. They flaunt ultra-feminist rhetoric and the ideology of sexual liberation mostly as a device to intellectually seduce women into being sexually available at their pleasure. When a woman resists such advances, she often gets responses like: "I had no idea that you are such a prude. I took you to be a liberated woman," implying thereby that a sexually "liberated" woman loses the right that even some prostitutes have — the right to say 'No'.

While many feminists might disagree about the negative fall-out of sexual revolution in the West, there



is little doubt that the resultant instability in life within the nuclear family causes havoc for the children. The breakdown of the patriarchal family has not yet led to more egalitarian and secure family structures. Rather, it has contributed to the atomisation of society into a loose collection of self obsessed individuals. Consequently, kinship and other human relations have become very fragile.

Sex and Liberation

This seems to be an important reason why Indian women do not seem very enamoured of the idea of sexual liberation as it came to be understood and practiced in the West. Feminism in the West came as an offshoot of individualism — the doctrine which holds that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the interests of the social group, family, or the state. However, in India, despite the cultural

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diversity among its various social, caste, and religious groups, there is a pervasive belief shared equally by men and women that individual rights must be strengthened not by pitching yourself against or isolating yourself from family and community, but rather by having your rights recognised within it. For individual rights to be meaningful, they have to be respected by those with whom you are close, rather than being asserted in a way that estranges you from them. The vast majority of Indian men and women grow up to believe that the interests of the family are primary and take precedence over individual interests.

Therefore, even our idea of the place of sex in life is very different from those of western women due to widely differing cultural values and philosophies. Children, the extended family and *biradari* continue to be the main anchoring point in our lives. Individual freedom is given far lower priority.

Many Indian women are unwilling to remarry after a divorce or widowhood if they already have children even if there is no family opposition to remarriage. They demonstrate enormous resilience and resolve in bringing up children on their own while snubbing sexual advances from men or their family's offers to get them remarried.

This self denial is based on a fairly astute understanding of the risks involved in this culture in pursuing intimate male companionship at the cost of other valuable relations, and a careful calculation of their children's long term well being. Women in our society seem to consider sexual deprivation as far less painful than being estranged from their children and family.

Since, in our culture, people (both men and women) who sacrifice their self-interest for others are given far more respect and reverence than

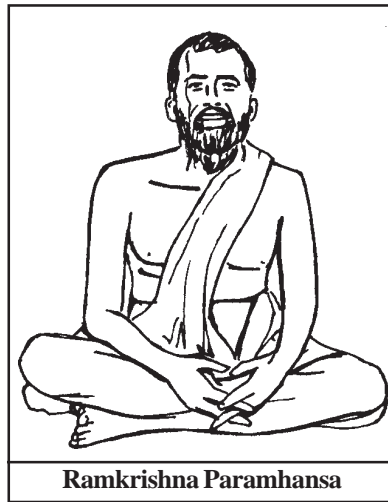
those who pursue their own pleasure without taking the concerns of others into account, the idea of voluntary renunciation in pursuit of a higher goal or for the interest of others continues to have a profound hold on our imagination. For instance, an elder brother who remained unmarried for many years because he chose to put all his energy into ensuring that his younger siblings got well-settled in life would be an object of veneration in his community and family. Similarly, a man who refuses to remarry after his wife's death so that his children do not have to deal with the insecurity and risks that come with having a step-mother is treated with special respect in his entire social circle.

The Power of Celibacy

This self denial no doubt takes a heavy toll and cannot be unduly romanticised as, for instance, Mahatma Gandhi often did. He saw "voluntary enlightened widowhood" as a great "social asset" and believed that "a real Hindu widow is a treasure. She is one of the gifts of Hinduism to humanity"¹. Gandhi believed that a Hindu widow had "learnt to find happiness in suffering, had accepted suffering as sacred....Their suffering is not suffering but is happiness."² However, he did not have a different yardstick for men. He wanted men to emulate the same ideal: "Hinduism will remain imperfect as long as men do not accept suffering" as many widows did and, like them "withdraw their interest from the pleasures of life."³

Celibacy, as a voluntary option, seldom gets treated respectfully in the West because the West has, by and large, succumbed to the theory that sexual abstinence is an unhealthy aberration which leads to unhealthy neuroses and a disoriented personality. Abstinence is undoubtedly harmful when it is due to external repression. However, when it is voluntary and purposeful it can

often be liberating. In India people have special respect for those who can live satisfactory lives without the need for sex. We are still heavily steeped in the old Indian tradition which holds that voluntary sexual abstinence bestows extraordinary powers on human beings. Indian mythology is full of stories of sages who went so far in *tapasya* that Indra's throne in the heavens would start shaking. The gods would then send some exceedingly attractive *apsara* to lure him and disrupt his *tapasya*. Those few who successfully resisted the sexual lure achieved *moksha* and a status higher than gods.



Ramkrishna Paramhansa

In the 20th century we have the example of Mahatma Gandhi who tried to transcend his sexuality in order to make it contribute to forging the powerful, modern political weapon of *satyagraha*. His sexual abstinence was part of a larger *tapasya* through which he attempted to discipline his life for devotion to the cause of freeing India from political slavery. His rigorous austerity, various fasts and dietary experiments, vows of silence, and giving up material possessions altogether, were all essential components of his *tapasya*. He believed that the spiritual force of even one fully formed *satyagrahi* could set right the world's wrongs.⁴

It is not just *rishi-munis* and *mahatma* who practice rigorous *tapasya* with *brahmacharya* as an essential component in order to acquire powers greater than gods, but even ordinary men and women living a life of voluntary sexual abstinence come to be highly respected. Such women tend to be treated as a special category, are subjected to much less scrutiny and restrictions, and tend to get much greater respect from men provided they don't show signs of sexual frustration.

Many of the most revered women in Indian religious history opted out of sexual relations altogether, as the lives of Mirabai, Mahadevi Akka, Lal Ded and many others attest.⁵ They are treated as virtual goddesses.

In India, men are trained to fear the wrath of non-consort Goddess figures like Durga, Chandi and Vaishno Devi. While Sita and Parvati invoke reverence, Durga invokes fear and awe. She is the great saviour from worldly adversity. "Herself unassailable and hard to approach" but someone to whom men also turn for protection. Similarly a woman who rises above being sexually accessible, consort of none, nor in search of a consort, tends to command tremendous awe and reverence.

Gurbachan Kaur's life story is a good example. She is now 85 years old and has lived all her life in a small village town of Punjab called Samrala. Her father Mann Singh was a farmer who had two sons and two daughters, one of whom died early. Gurbachan was married at the age of 16 to an army doctor who died within 4 months of their wedding without consummating their marriage. Gurbachan's family tried to get her remarried but she firmly refused, saying had married life been fated for her, then her husband would not have met with such an early death. She lived an extremely disciplined life. Seeing her take on such a tough resolve, her father transferred some

land in her name and began to put the family finances and other decisions under her charge because he did not want her to live like a dependent on her brothers. He would proudly tell everyone that his daughter was stronger and more capable than any man. She became the virtual head of the family even in her father's lifetime.

The power balance in her family came to be tilted in her favour not just because of the special measures her father took but also because of her own very extraordinary qualities. I got her life story from her niece who told me that even their kids and grandchildren revere her in the same fashion that her father and brothers did. She is the power centre and decision maker for her entire extended family. It is she who has the final say in selecting grooms and brides even for her grand nieces and nephews. No financial decisions are taken in the joint family without her sanction and approval.

Her relatives say that she is held in such reverence because 'she never tells lies, she is open and forthright, doesn't keep grudges in her heart, does not badmouth anyone and is a genuine well-wisher of everyone she knows. Whenever someone is in trouble she is the first one to go and help them and expects virtually nothing in return. Even her sisters-in-law and their daughters-in-law are devoted to her.' To quote her niece: "She has lived such a rigorous life of *japa-tapa* that her entire community treats her as a woman with a touch of divinity — a virtual goddess. Whenever she goes to the bazaar even local shopkeepers say 'we got *devi's darshan* today'".

However, her niece Devinder Kaur, who gave this account to me, emphasised that the starting point for this turn around of the power equation in the family began because she invoked great awe and respect from her father and brothers by

demonstrating extraordinary self discipline, especially in sexual matters. Lapses in this regard would have undoubtedly washed away all the credit she got for her other qualities.

It is noteworthy that a woman like Gurbachan Kaur could acquire such special powers and clout in rural Punjab which has a very repressive culture for women and in a community which does not today subscribe to the goddess tradition on account of their conversion to Sikhism. In the West, a woman like Gurbachan Kaur would be an object of ridicule and contempt as in Auden's famous poem, *Miss Gee*. Our culture has the remarkable ability to provide special space and respect for women who voluntarily opt out of the sexual marital role.

Peripheralising Sex

Even in the life of married ordinary women, making sex a contingent relationship works as a very effective strategy in carving out a space of respect and honour for them within their communities. I illustrate this strategy by sharing with you glimpses from the lives of some women I have known closely. They have told me their stories in many versions over a period of time. I may well be accused of being overly anecdotal and drawing conclusions from too few instances. But my perceptions are influenced not just by the lives and experiences of the women I describe below, but also by closely observing the lives of a good number of other women I have gotten to know closely over the years. The life stories I have chosen as illustrations are fairly typical and representative of a wide spectrum of Indian women's concerns, calculations, and aspirations.

Let me begin with the example of my friend Razia, a Muslim woman in her mid 40s, employed as a college teacher. She is respected by most of those who know her because of her

quiet dignity and generous temperament. She was widowed after eight years of what was a very happy marriage to a medical doctor. He not only earned well but treated her with love and affection and took great delight in providing her with all possible comforts, even luxuries. His sudden death from a heart attack more than 14 years ago came as a big blow. She had to put herself together after this in order to bring up two small kids, depending on her own much smaller income. Their standard of living fell dramatically. Her in-laws turned her out of her marital home and she had to fight hard to secure even a portion of her husband's own property since her in-laws wanted to grab it all.

Even though she comes from a Muslim community which does not frown upon remarriage of women, she resolutely turned down all attempts to get her remarried. Considering that she was in her early 30s at the time of her husband's death, her natal family was worried as to how she would manage alone. But she was clear: while remarriage would get her a husband, for her children a step father could never be a substitute for the father they had lost. If anything, they would feel even more insecure.

After being pushed out of her in-laws' home, she moved in with her own natal family so that her brothers, father and other family could give her and the children a sense of security. This is how she explains her choice: "My husband was such an ideal husband — one could not ask for better. That is why I kept his name connected to mine after his death. Had I remarried, I would be known as somebody else's wife. Whatever tasks he left incomplete, I have tried to fulfil those. However, even if I had not been lucky enough to marry such a good man, I still would have done the same. After children come, your target in life is their well-being and future — not just your own fulfillment. Unless you

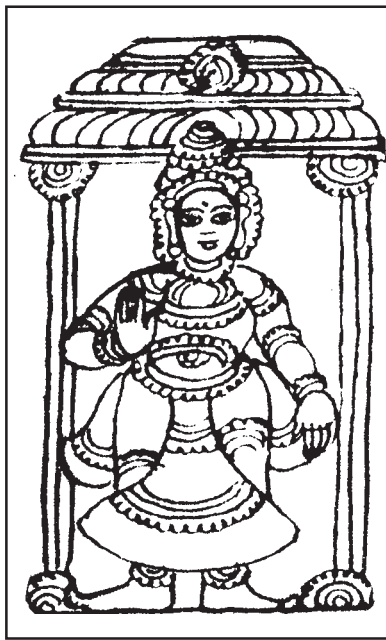
are willing to sacrifice your own self-interest, you will never be held up as an example to others.”

She says sexual abstinence did not pose such a major problem because she has kept her connection with her husband very strong: “He is never apart from me even for a moment. So I cannot even imagine the thought of another man in my life. The idea of sex was buried forever when I decided I was not going to remarry.” She explains that even while her emotional tie with him remains unshakeable, her strength comes from the fact that she has a very deep involvement with her numerous relatives, especially parents, brothers and their wives, sisters, nephews, and nieces with whom she lives in a very large joint family. “With each of these people I have a very strong bond”, she says.

She is proud of the fact that her family holds her up as an example. They respect her for having performed her responsibility so well despite such odds. Even her colleagues hold her in high esteem for her resolute commitment. She has a specially close relationship with her teenage children and is convinced that this kind of closeness would not have been possible with a step-father in the house. She exudes enormous confidence in both her son and daughter: “They would never do anything to hurt me or refuse me anything I asked of them.”

Rejecting Male Norms

This kind of resilience is frequently maintained even in cases where the husband is alive but blatantly disloyal to his marriage — as Maya’s life shows. Maya works as a domestic in several homes in one of the South Delhi colonies. I have known her for years. She is an exceptionally attractive woman but not at all self-conscious about it. This is not to say she is sexually repressed



—just that she never uses her charm for flirtations.

She comes from what is considered a lower caste South Indian community which, unlike many upper caste North Indian communities, does not treat women’s body and sexuality as a matter of shame. They celebrate it through various rituals. One of the most beautiful is the ritual to celebrate a girl’s first menses.

A couple of years ago, Maya joyfully came to invite me to a “party”. When I asked her what was the occasion, she happily answered: *Ladki ki khushii hui hai* (my daughter’s happiness has come). The celebration was a big affair. Sugandha, her daughter, after being given an oil and turmeric bath, was decked out like a bride, with a new brocade saree, flowers in her hair, new gold jewellery and all the traditional decorations on her body. Various relatives brought gifts — utensils, sarees, earrings, toiletry and what not. It was almost as big a celebration as a marriage; Sugandha was taken in a procession through their entire neighbourhood to the joyous beating of drums and dancing. This was followed by a whole series of rituals involving rice,

coconuts and fruit to symbolise fertility. It all ended with a big feast for the whole community.

Even though Maya does not come from a sexually repressed tradition, yet her notion of female sexuality includes a very high degree of self-restraint. To her that is an essential component of self respect. When I first got to know Maya about a decade ago, she would occasionally tell me about how her husband beat her. At that time, he was heavily addicted to liquor and spent a big part of family earnings on his drinking. For years he worked as a casual labourer but has now got a regular job with the railways involving unskilled, manual work. He has a roving eye and has had numerous sexual affairs.

His extramarital affairs started from the early years of their marriage when they were living in a Tamil Nadu village. She first became aware of his affairs when she was eight months pregnant with their first child. The same pattern continued even after his children started growing up; in fact, even after he became a grandfather. Over the years a good part of his income was spent on his various lovers and mistresses. For instance, in recent years he was stationed in a town in Haryana where he kept a regular mistress on whom he spent a good part of his earnings. Maya was both angry and hurt and had many fights with him over it. He would justify his actions by saying that since he was away from home, he needed a woman to cook for him and could not do without regular sex.

When he used to come home drunk and beat her up, she would refuse to cook for him for days on end. Some years ago she unilaterally decided to abstain from having sex with her husband. She says she neither enjoys sex anymore nor does she feel obliged to provide it to him as a marital duty since he procures it from outside. I asked if he forced her every now and

then. On those rare occasions she says she gets sick and has terrible abdominal pains. On occasion, she has had to be taken to a doctor and has missed work for several days. Seeing her reaction to forced sex he has learnt to keep away from her.

Her physical reaction seems a clear statement of emotional rejection. The message is: 'I don't really need you either financially or physically. I am with you mainly because of my children. It is you who need me more than I need you.'

She often tells me proudly how whenever he is unwell he rushes to her. It is she who has nursed him back to health through many illnesses and helped him get over his addiction to liquor. He realizes her worth because none of his mistresses ever provided him with care during difficult times.

No matter how angry and hurt she has been with him over his infidelity, Maya has refrained from letting her children know about their father's proclivities (except recently when she told her married daughter about it). She feels the kids would have stopped respecting their father if they knew of all his doings. That would only harm the children and do her no good. Similarly, she feels she would never consider breaking off her marriage because that would not only make her children unhappy, but also have a negative effect on their marriage chances, especially those of her daughters.

Over the years she has resigned herself to his extramarital relationships, but gets particularly upset if he does it in ways that are likely to expose him before his children. On a few occasions when she found him sneaking into a neighbouring woman's hut at night after everyone was asleep, she really gave hell to both him and the woman concerned. Apart from the personal humiliation his infidelity causes her, she feels outraged that he is not

careful to hide it from his own young children, though in many other respects he is a good and caring father. Her expectations: "All I want is that he should live at home, return after work at a respectable hour, have his food and go to sleep. He should not pick up quarrels or give me trouble. All I want is peace in the house. I don't want any *pyar vyar* (love-shove). I know he cannot do without screwing around and he knows I don't want to have sex with him. As long as both of us stick to keeping a peaceful home for our children, he can sleep around with whoever he likes; but when he returns home, I don't let him enter the house without a bath, be it summer or winter, so that all the filth he gathers when outside is not brought inside the house."

When I asked her whether she would ever consider having a relationship with another man, she looked at me in total disbelief, saying: "Why would I behave as stupidly as men behave?" She is truly proud of her unconditional resolve not to mess around with men regardless of what her husband does. It is not as if she is afraid of retaliating in other matters. But, for her, having sexual relations outside marriage amounts to losing her own dignity.

Sometimes her views initially seem contradictory and confusing. For instance, she will start off by explaining her unilateral commitment to her marriage by saying, "For a woman, her husband is like a god. No matter how he behaves she is not supposed to stray. She must stay chaste and steadfast. I, too, touch his feet and pray that my *thali* (*mangalsutra*) stays around my neck till the day I die. Whether he is good or bad, he is after all my god." When I remind her how I have heard her abuse him, heard her tell me about her fights with him and how she refused to cook for him or talk to him, her

answer is disarming. Pointing to the statues of Ganesh and Krishna in my house, she says: "But I fight with and abuse those gods as well. When both my brothers were taken away (one was murdered over a land dispute and another committed suicide in recent years) I cursed God endlessly. I said to him — may you also experience being orphaned like me." (She was deeply attached to both her brothers and grieves a lot over their deaths). "I fight with God a lot for giving me so many troubles even though I am a firm believer."

When I ask her why it is that real god-like behaviour is not expected of her husband if she is expected to revere him like a god, I get a response so irreverent, it turns the whole concept of Sati-Savitri on its head. Maya is no Sati Anasuya who will carry her leper husband on her back to a prostitute's house at his bidding. She has learnt to cope with his irresponsible behaviour because she has a very low opinion of men in general: "Men are like dogs. They will go around sniffing in every gutter. (*Char nali moonh maar ke hi aayega*)." It is part of her coping strategy that she can think of her husband as a god and at the same time call him a dog almost in the same breath. As a "god" she accepts her relative helplessness before him as also the need to accept him for what he is, as one does with gods. But in describing him as a dog she seems to be saying that far from being superior to her, she thinks of him as a species much lower than herself and, hence, has very low expectations from him.

Usually, when a woman says her husband is her god, it is assumed that she is a mental slave, soaked in unhealthy tradition. However, when you probe deeper, it becomes clear that most women use this rhetoric as a way to anchor their loyalties to their marriages, not because they really believe that their husbands are

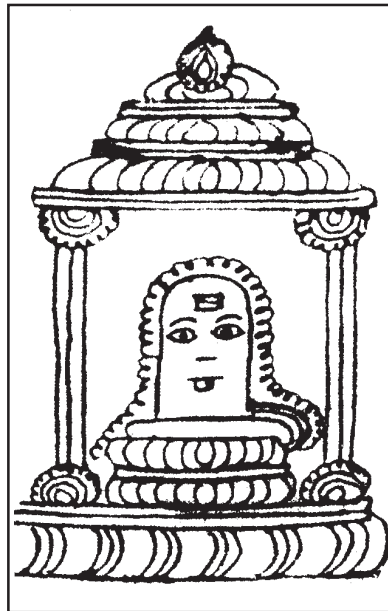
infallible or deserve unconditional obedience.

Recently, when he broke off from his latest mistress, her response was equally cynical: "How long can a monkey go on eating tamarind? (*Bandar kitne din khatta khayega*) He is bound to come down on his own. However, when a monkey is climbing up a tamarind tree and you call him down and say, 'don't do that, this fruit is no good for you', the monkey will get even more excited and climb still higher. But if you leave him be, he soon rushes down when the sour tamarind hurts his teeth."

Even while Maya has a lot of complaints against her husband, she is proud of the fact that her husband trusts her and believes in her integrity completely. She tells of many women in her neighbourhood who are beaten up by suspicious husbands when they see their wives talking to other men. But in Maya's case, no matter what time she returns home, no matter who she is seen talking to, no matter what a gossip-monger might say, her husband never doubts her fidelity — a position more secure than even Sita's. Thus, she has him on a permanent guilt trip. He has never been able to maintain his sexual fidelity in their marriage. But she stays faithful unconditionally — not as a favour to him, but because her sense of dignity does not allow her to stoop to his irresponsible, undignified ways or to play the game by his norms. She despises his norms and his lack of self restraint and, therefore, will not stoop to his level.

I don't see this resilience as that of someone trapped in an unhealthy patriarchal ideology. I see this as an attempt by a woman steeped in her cultural ethos to define her own sexual mores as a demonstration that she is not living by male-defined standards. Over the years she has been able to tilt the scales more and more in her favour. She has been able to persuade

her husband to give up drinking. And she is proud of the respect she commands. For instance, she says that when she gets angry and scolds him or even abuses him, he usually listens quietly. In recent years, his violence against her has decreased considerably. She gives him hell if he lifts his hand to her.



Maya's deliberate underplaying of her role as a wife and emphasis on her role as a mother is a strategy Indian women commonly use. They often move in the direction of suspending the sexual dimension of their relationship with their husbands, while retaining the marriage, thus ensuring a measure of security in the outside world and providing a stable family life for their children.

Maya lives in a dangerous and poor slum. It is infested with drug peddlers, sundry criminals, bootleggers, and prostitutes. Her status as a married woman provides her a measure of security and safety in this unsafe atmosphere. Yet, so unsafe is the atmosphere that in the hot summer months she dare not sleep out in the open with her young daughters. They huddle up in their *jhuggi* lest some *goondas* set upon

her or her daughters. But she is never sexually harassed by any of the men in her community. I asked her why. Maya's answer was revealing: "They Only go after the loose women. They dare not make a pass at me because they know I will give them hell." Not too long ago I witnessed what she meant. A railway employee lives nearby her hut. Maya and some other women take their regular supply of water from his courtyard tap. One day he made a pass at her and suggested she become his mistress. She picked up a broom lying nearby and threatened to beat him if he dared cast another dirty glance in her direction. The man never dared again.

Learning to Say 'No'

There is a lot more talk these days of affirmation of women's sexuality. However, in my view, the key to a dignified life for women is learning to say "No" to sex when it comes on humiliating terms. Those who do not know when to reject sex end up far more messed up than those who can do without sex when it is available only as part of an unsatisfactory relationship.

Here is an example from a friend's life who went through years of severe battering by her husband. Describing her predicament, in those years she told me, "One of the most humiliating things about our relationship was that I could not resist sex with him even after he had beaten me black and blue. I got to hate myself when I found that after giving me a brutal beating along with awful verbal abuse, he would come to me for sex. As soon as he touched me to arouse me I would find myself going wet. I know he despised me for being so easy to manipulate and for desiring sex on any terms, but I still could not refuse him." She also told me that it took her so many long years to break out of that abusive marriage in large part due to her being afraid that she could not live without regular sex. After she broke out of her

marriage, living without regular sex has been her most serious problem, leading to one unsatisfactory affair after another.

Disciplining Husbands

While most women in India do not seem to find it hard to subordinate their sexual needs in order to enhance the well-being of their children, too many men think providing a stable home for him and their children is primarily a woman's responsibility and that men ought to be free for occasional fun. But it is hard for to realise the point when this little bit of fun on the side begins to threaten the stability of their marriage. Maya, despite all her self restraint, was unable to build a happy conjugal life for herself. But many women I know have been successful in building stable marriages by maintaining very strict discipline on themselves as a strategy for keeping their men on a tight leash.

My friend Reena explains the subtleties of this game very matter-of-factly. Her marriage is one of the best I know. She comes from an educated and well-connected middle class Punjabi family. She married a man of her choice, a high ranking bureaucrat climbing up the professional ladder very rapidly. Theirs is a relationship of mutual trust and respect. But she, too, feels she has to work hard to ensure that she plays an active role in defining the norms of their marriage.

Reena is well aware that a man of Deepak's status, power, and good looks would attract any number of women ready for short term or long term affairs. She is also aware that he likes the company of attractive women. With his job requiring him to travel frequently, anything could happen to jeopardise her marriage. But she has kept Deepak disciplined by imposing a very strict discipline on



**A women belabouring an importunate man,
Bazaar painting, Kalighat, Bengal**

herself. For instance, she refuses to drink alcohol, even though she admits she enjoys the experience, simply because she wants to keep control over Deepak's drinking. She feels men tend to use drunkenness as an excuse for many of their indiscretions. When they go to parties together, she refuses to dance with anyone other than Deepak. Even though she does not forbid Deepak from dancing with other women, she knows her refraining from dancing with anyone else makes Deepak feel guilty and rush back to her after a dance. It is not that she that she considers western dancing immoral. She simply recognises its potential threat for it provides an opportunity for male female closeness in a manner that may become the prelude to sexual involvement. Close physical proximity creates a whole chain reaction which, in her view, is better kept under check from the start. Even when they went to live in Europe for several years she did not change

the rules for herself, even at the cost of being considered a prude.

Committed as she is to her marriage, Deepak, and their happy family, she says openly that she sees her own sexual restraint as a device for keeping her husband under check because he, like most men, might stray when tempted. She has already had a heart breaking experience early in life. She was deeply in love with one of her childhood friends. The relationship was built over 10-12 years and she believed he was as committed to it as she was. After his engineering degree he got a job in the U.S. Before he left, they got engaged. He was expected to come back, get married and take her with him. However, within no time he got involved with some American woman and broke off the engagement rather crudely, leaving her in a severe emotional trauma. Her opinion of men is not

every high even though she has a very good relationship with her husband: "Men are the same everywhere. They have few scruples. Society stays sane only when women set the rules." She too, like Maya (in almost the same words), says that even if her husband began having affairs, she would not stoop to having affairs of her own. She is certain that his guilt would make him so miserable, he could not continue with it for long without breaking down himself.

I am not holding up Reena or Maya as role models but simply showing how women's strategies for building a stable family life often make sexual needs subservient to other requirements women consider more important.

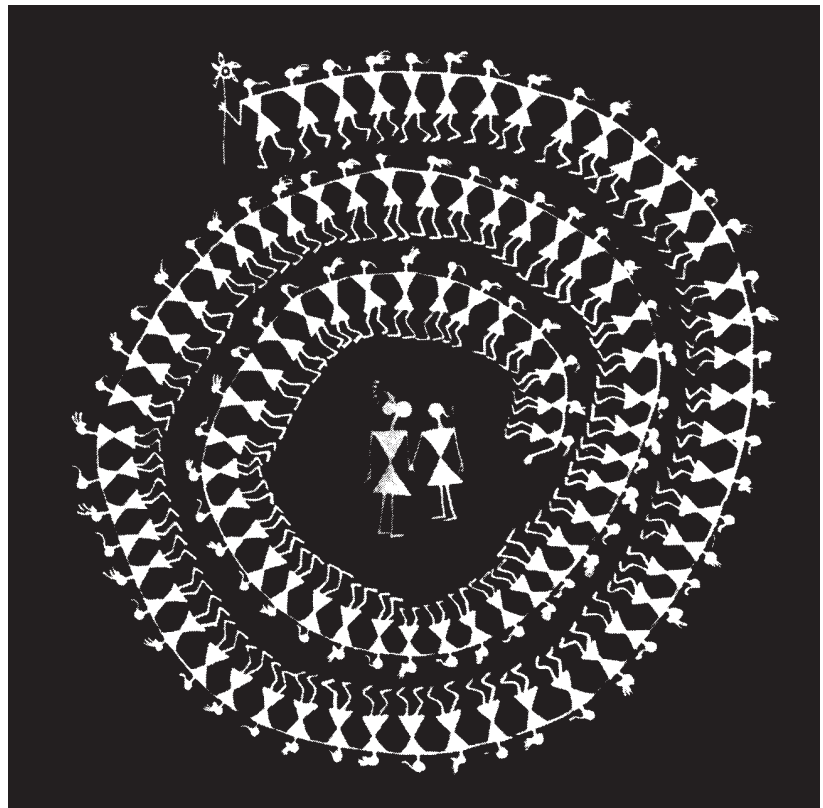
Children as Allies

Promila comes from a fairly well-off middle class family from Punjab. At the age of 19 she was married into the Batra family who run a business in the walled city of Delhi.

Soon after her marriage, Promila came to know that her husband, was involved with and had wanted to marry some other woman before their marriage, and that he was still continuing his relationship with that woman.

About three years after her marriage, Dinesh started a business independent from his father's and began to make a lot of money. Whereas earlier the couple used to get no more than Rs 200 as pocket money from her father-in-law, Dinesh was now earning Rs 15,000-20,000 per day. With that came bad company — gambling, liquor and drugs. (By now Promila had given birth to a son and a daughter). He began spending the money as swiftly as it was earned. If Promila resisted Dinesh's ways, she would be thrashed and abused. For years she tried to help Dinesh get treatment for his addictions. But as soon as he would return from the hospital and meet his old buddies, he would go back to his old habits. In the early years, Promila tried to get her parents to intervene, and to get other relatives to put pressure on her husband. When none of that worked, she finally simply refused to let Dinesh into the flat. She told her parents-in-law, who live on the ground floor of the same house, that their son was their responsibility while her priority was to protect her two children from the influence of such an irresponsible father.

Promila is in the prime of her life. She is 35 and good looking. Since her husband's health and mental balance have been completely lost because of excessive drug abuse, he is no longer able to run his business. She gets an allowance of Rs 5,000 from her in-laws to run the house but that is not sufficient to meet the needs of her two growing children. Some three to four years ago, she met a man at a hospital she had taken her husband to for treatment. They became friends and



he adopted her as a sister and eventually offered her a business partnership even though she had no previous experience. She was provided with a company car and a handsome, regular income. This upset both her husband and her in-laws. They began to accuse her of carrying on an affair with her “*bhaiyya*”. She stoutly denies all such charges and insists she would “never do such a thing”. I, for one, could not see why, if she so desired, she would deny herself a relationship with a man who had been so supportive of her and helped her back on her feet again. Undoubtedly she is emotionally attached to him, but insists her feelings are “sisterly”.

Her reasoning for ruling out a romantic or sexual involvement with the man is: “My children will not respect me if I do such a thing” But doesn't she need sex and all that goes with a man-woman relationship — especially considering that the

relationship with her husband broke down more than a decade ago when she was in her early 20s and that since then beatings, fights and character assassination have constituted her conjugal life? Her firm answer: “My children need emotional security more than I need sex or romance. They already have no respect or trust in their father. If they lose their respect for me, if they stop feeling secure with me, they will have no emotional anchor left.” Indeed both her children are devoted to her. Even though they are only in their teens, they are beginning to form a protective ring around their mother to defend her from her husband and in-laws. It is indeed likely that if she were to become sexually involved with another man or get remarried, she could not count upon her children as her strongest allies — an alliance likely to be much stronger and last longer than her relationships with her own parents and brothers.

Mothers Vs. Wives

Most Indian women, even when their marriages are good, depend much more on their children for emotional sustenance than they do on their husbands. They recognise that to enter into a sexual relation with a man is to enter into a power relation. Relationships with children are considered far more dependable, enduring, and fulfilling. This may be related to the fact that while as a wife, a woman is expected to serve and surrender, as a mother she is allowed the right to both nurture and dominate and is supposed to be venerated unconditionally. She can expect obedience, love, and *seva* (service) from her children, especially sons, even after they grow up. Unconditional giving brings in its own ample rewards. In her role as a mother she is culturally far more glorified.

As Sudhir Kakar puts it in his discussion on the Ram-Sita relationship: for an Indian woman, motherhood brings not only personal fulfillment but is an event in which “the culture confirms her status as a renewer of the race, and extends to her a respect and consideration which were not accorded to her as a mere wife.... it is through their children’s instrumentality that the injustice done to the mothers is redressed and they assume their rightful place as queens.”⁶ This theme recurs in many Indian legends and tales: “Thus Ram repents and is ready to take Sita back from her exile in the forest after he sees his sons for the first time. Dushyanta remembers and accepts Shakuntala as his legitimate wife after he comes face to face with his infant son.”⁷

Even though not all present day Indian women succeed in getting their rightful due with the help of their young children, Indian women are frequently

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able to rely on their children after they grow up to settle scores with husbands or in-laws who may have maltreated them during the early years of marriage. Without doubt “a Hindu woman’s ‘motherliness’is a relatively more inclusive element of her identity formation than it is among western women. Given her early training and ideals of femininity held up to her, motherhood does not have connotations of cultural imposition or a confinement in an isolating role.”⁸ That is why, when necessary, she is often able to suppress many of her other needs as a woman, especially her sexual needs, without there being too many harmful effects on her

personality.

Opting for Sexual Freedom

In direct contrast to Maya and Promila is Sunanda. She lives in a *basti* (neighbourhood) similar to Maya’s but is from a north Indian community. She also works as a domestic in one of the South Delhi colonies. Though much younger than Maya, she looks wasted and rather disoriented. I came to know her some 15 years ago when she was in her early twenties. She was then a very vivacious and attractive woman. At that time she was married to someone who beat her frequently. Many of their quarrels would start over her not being at home when he returned in the evening and his suspicion that she flirted with other men. One day she left her two-year-old daughter and ran away with a truck driver from another community. However, the beatings did not stop in her new home — if anything, they increased. This man encouraged her to join him in drinking because he told her sex was much more fun when both partners drop their inhibitions under the influence of liquor. Within the first year of their living together he squandered the money she had saved over the years in the form of some gold jewellery. She got into the liquor habit willingly because she says she had never before enjoyed sex as much as she did with this boisterous truck-driver. Even his beatings seemed less hurtful because he was not as sexually dull as her first husband.

However, when she was in an advanced stage of pregnancy and found it difficult to have sex, he became enraged, beat her up and forced her to submit regardless of how painful intercourse was for her. His reasoning was: “I brought you here for fun, not to produce babies.” On several nights



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during the last month of her pregnancy, he would bring another woman into their *jhuggi* — often a prostitute — get drunk with her, abuse or even beat up Sunanda for protesting, and have sex with the other woman right in front of Sunanda. Perhaps due to all the beatings and stress she gave birth to a premature baby girl who died within days of delivery. Since Sunanda was too weak for boisterous sex and unable to work and earn money, her truckdriving lover beat her out of his house. She returned to her *biradari's basti* (kinfolk's neighbourhood) but had nowhere to live.

Her husband had in the meantime married another woman. Her widowed mother in the village could not support her. In any case, going back to the village would mean living without a source of income. Neither of her two brothers were willing to keep her in their homes because she had “shamed” the family by running away with a man of another community. Her sisters-in-law were both hostile and abusive, but one of them agreed to give her temporary shelter when she offered her the one pair of gold earrings she had left and the promise of Rs 250 a month from what she earned.

But now she was treated as a freely available woman by the men in the *basti*. She had three affairs in quick succession which caused nasty fights with her brothers and their wives. Finally she moved in with one of the notorious *goondas* of the *basti* who had a wife and family, but also had the money to maintain her as a mistress and provide her with a separate *jhuggi*. But for him it wasn't just a sexual partnership. He made her join his very flourishing business of brewing illicit liquor. He required that



she agree to make herself occasionally available to the local policemen as a sexual bribe. If she protested, he beat her up saying that she is hardly a Sita-Savitri to be acting so coy. Today she is one of the most hated women in the *basti*. Since many of their husbands have regular dealings with her on account of her involvement in the liquor business, the women are very hostile to her and have big abusive battles with her.

Women vs Women

Women who are promiscuous provoke fear and hostility in other women rather than inspire them as symbols of freedom. That is because most women live in fear of their men straying: “Men are men. They will always run after sex” is how they

Women who are promiscuous provoke fear and hostility in other women rather than inspire them as symbols of freedom.

describe men's tendency towards promiscuity over which they can exercise only limited control. But married women fear and despise those women who make it easy for their men to be promiscuous by being easily available. Among my own women friends, the few who behave in sexually liberated ways — that is those who are willing to have sex whenever and with whichever man they feel attracted to, or have no qualms about having sexual affairs with any number of men — are generally hated by other women in their social circle for good reasons. They have jeopardised many a marriage and stable relationship.

Interestingly, I have also observed that almost all of the liberated women I know are fiercely jealous and aggressive

when it comes to the man they are currently involved with — for however long or short a period their attachment lasts. Women who consider being sexually attractive to men a very high priority in life, tend to be fiercely competitive and very mistrustful of other women. One of my close woman friends who has had countless affairs with engaged and married men takes no time to drop a female friend if she finds the man she is currently interested in is paying the slightest bit of attention to her friend. I personally have been able to retain her friendship only by making sure that I avoid meeting her in the company of men she is interested in. On the few occasions we have met in the presence of any of her current boyfriends, she has been so jumpy and nervous, I have had to put in all the effort at my command to remain totally focused on her, while avoiding conversation with her male companion so she could be assured that I was not competing with her for

his attention. Despite all of this effort, her insecurity remains strong. She speaks of other women, especially if they are young and attractive, in the most disparaging terms and trusts virtually none of her female friends and acquaintances.

Relationships of trust between women are not possible if a woman cannot trust other women to respect her marriage or romantic relationship. A woman cannot have close relationships with other women if she cannot feel secure that at least her own friends or sisters will not steal her husband or boyfriend. If women are forever insecure about each other, if they are forever competing for male sexual attention, they are bound to hate and mistrust each other. This makes them self-hating as women, more dependent on men and, hence, more vulnerable.

This is not just true in a relatively conservative society like ours, but is even more true in the supposedly sexually liberated societies. My American friends tell me that, usually, as soon as a woman's marriage breaks down, her social circle shrinks dramatically. Most of her married friends and acquaintances will exclude her from their social gatherings because they are afraid of her trying to grab one of their husbands. Single women find it hard to have a close social relationship with married couples and are expected to socialise mostly among singles where they are free to pick and choose partners without jeopardising other women's marriages.

Among my friends who were sexually "liberated" there is not one who has built a satisfactory personal life. I recall two cases in particular. During my university days my friend Smita was the most westernised and unconventional of us all in every respect. She had spent a good part of her student years in Europe. An extremely good hearted and generous

friend, she believed sexual desire was no different from physical hunger and, therefore, you should have sex whenever you feel the urge and with whomever you felt attracted to. She was one of the few women I knew who was perfectly honest and open about it and had the courage to proposition a man in so many words, whenever she felt sexually attracted to him. A number of our fellow students had sexual relations with her for brief periods. She was neither possessive nor wished to be "possessed" by any one man. But over the years I saw her become embittered over the fact that many of her male friends used her as a stop-gap between one steady affair and another, or someone to have a

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little bit of free fun with till they found someone in whom they were really interested. Even though most of her friends — male and female — liked her for her honesty, she could see she was not taken seriously and that the men she got involved with did not really respect her. By the time she began to feel the need for a steady and stable emotional relationship and became dissatisfied with casual sexual encounters, none of the men in her vast social circle were willing to consider her as a fit candidate for an enduring relationship. She is today far from being an inspiring symbol of liberated womanhood. Most of her friends feel sympathy and pity for her.

Competing with Men

Equally pathetic has been the case of my friend, Veena. She married Rakesh after a fairly long courtship and affair. Both of them were part of

university left radical circles and resolved to have a marriage which did not tie either of them down. In the early years of her marriage Veena found it a very heady idea that both of them could exercise the freedom to have relationships outside marriage. However, when she gave birth to two children in quick succession, the relationship began to change dramatically. While Veena was stuck in the house nursing babies, Rakesh continued to have his flings. Now it began to hurt. But if she protested she was given a high sounding sermon on her "bourgeois" tendencies, of trying to treat another human being as property, and, on resenting his freedom. She had to learn "not to feel jealous." After much heartache and argument they came to an agreement that while they would keep the marriage going for their own sake as well as for the sake of their children, neither of them would object to the other one having affairs. She really sees herself as another Simone de Beauvoir and claims hers is a good liberated marriage and they both understand each other.

During the next few years, Veena, too, went on a competitive binge and got involved with one man after another. But it became increasingly difficult for her to find meaningful relationships as she began to age. For one thing, only married men were available to pick and choose from. Because of this, most of them wanted only clandestine sex rather than open and free relationships for fear of their own wives finding out. However, for her husband there were no such limitations. He is a fabulous earner in a position of power working for a multinational. For a man of his status and good looks, getting young, unmarried women is no big deal. A touch of silver in his hair only adds to his glamour whereas Veena, who has greyed and become fat, has found that it has become harder and harder for

her to get men interested in her. The more interest she shows in men, the more they play hard to get. She is forever on the lookout for a meaningful relationship. Apart from wanting an emotional anchor, she wants a man she can claim to be in love with just to prove to her husband that she can also succeed at this game. But it is becoming harder and harder to win. Now I constantly hear her complain that while Rakesh continues to have “a good time”, she is condemned to repeated rejections and sexual frustration.

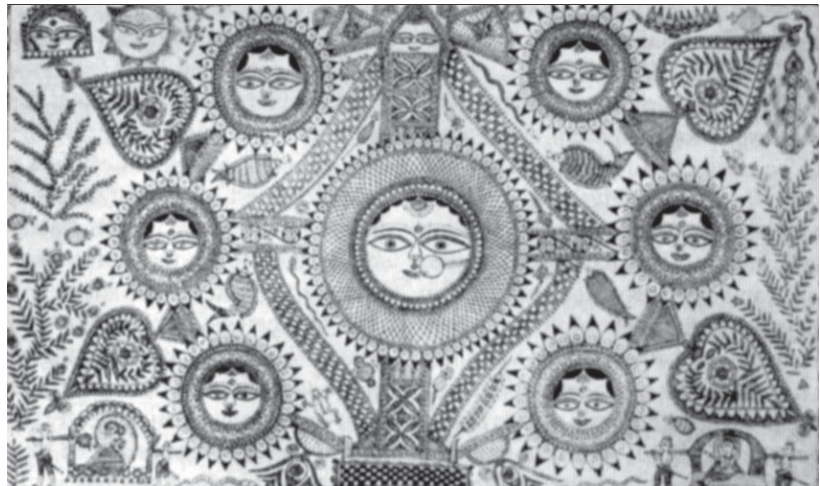
A Losing Game

I am convinced that women cannot win if they play the game by men’s rules. Men’s capacity for irresponsible sex is relatively unlimited partly because nature has made it possible for men to escape most of the possible consequences of sexual encounters. Moreover, as power relations go in today’s world, men, especially if they are rich and in positions of power, can easily get young women for sex or for marriage. However, in most cultures and societies, women find it harder and harder to get men sexually interested in them once they are past their youth. This is one of the reasons it is much more in women’s long term interests to bring about a measure of sexual restraint in men, to teach them to take emotional responsibility for their sexual partners, rather than for women to adopt a competitive approach emulating men’s casual approach to sex. The ‘I am free to have sex with who I please, when I please’ approach may sound radical and liberating in theory, but in actual fact it works out to be patently harmful for women in the long run, especially after the birth of children.

Women in a nuclear family set up have found it particularly hard raising children in the absence of stable

Women cannot win if they play the game by men rules

relationships with the men who have fathered those children. Even in the West where remarriage and step-parents are so frequent as to be routine, there is glaring evidence that children become resentful, insecure and even traumatised when they see their parents have multiple sexual relations or bring home new sexual partners in close succession, especially since fierce nuclearisation of the family has denied them the nurturance and support of grandparents, aunts, uncles and other



relatives.

Stable family life plays a far more important role in the healthy development and well-being of children than material luxuries. In a nuclear family set up no matter how much the two parents care for their children, they cannot provide emotional security to them if their own relationship is not stable, if either or both of them are carrying on affairs outside of their marriage, and if both of them feel they are free (or ought to be free) to walk out of their marriage as and when they please. Sexual loyalty and restraint are indeed a

precondition for the stability of a nuclear family.

Extended Family Buffers

It is perhaps only in matrilineal communities with their complex extended family system that women have been able to exercise a large measure of sexual freedom without having disastrous consequences for children. For instance, in the *maramakuttayam* system which prevailed in Kerala till a few decades ago, women stayed with their own families even after entering into a marriage or regular sexual relationship with a man. A husband merely had visiting rights in the wife’s family home. Children belonged to the

matrilineal joint family called the *tarwad* and enjoyed inalienable inheritance rights in the mother’s *tarwad*. A woman was free to terminate her relationship with her husband/lover any time she pleased by merely placing his slippers outside the door as a symbol that she wanted him out of her life. The brother-sister relationship was far more important than the conjugal tie on account of the siblings being members of the same *tarwad*. Consequently, maternal uncles played a far more important role in the lives of children than their own father.

In such a large extended family, children got emotional security and nurturance from a large variety of relatives and were not so dependent on their biological parents, least of all their fathers, as in a nuclear family. Therefore, the comings and goings of men in their mother's life were not a source of much disturbance and anxiety for the children.

This is not to project the *marumakattayam* system as an ideal to be nostalgically revived. It had many problems of its own. For example, this arrangement of visiting husbands could not have been very fair on Namboodri women who lived in patrilineal families while their men were free to have relations with Nair women and raise parallel families with them while taking little responsibility for the latter. I give this example merely to point out that exercising sexual freedom in a nuclear family set up causes far greater damage to children as well as to women's emotional stability whereas certain kinds of extended families act as buffers.

However, too many of the votaries of women's liberation seem simultaneously enamoured with nuclear families and the supremacy of the conjugal tie, to the exclusion of other relationships. They see any kind of extended family situation, including those that provided valuable support to women, as an encroachment on their personal freedom.

Nuclear families may look liberating on the surface but they put an excessively heavy load on women for the raising of children and maintaining a stable family life. In societies where the man-woman relationship and the nuclear family have come to occupy the central place



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in people's personal and emotional lives, at the expense of other relationships, women's emotional lives tend to become far more fragile and exercising sexual as well as other types of freedom becomes a high risk venture.

By contrast, supposedly traditional Indian women rooted in the extended family tend to be far more resilient because they do not put all their energy into being sexually attractive to men. Thus, they avoid letting men play too large a role in determining their self view. Consequently, they seem to have a stronger sense of self definition as well as of the special requirements of womanhood. They can more easily cope with emotional incompatibility and other kinds of stress in their conjugal relationship because they invest their emotions across a whole range of relationships within the family — parents, in-laws, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews, and especially, among their own children who usually occupy a far more important place in their considerations than husbands. Since today most women live in patrilineal families, which demand of women sexual loyalty and restraint as a precondition for a stable family life, they try to stick to the rules of the game far more determinedly than men.

It is over simplistic to interpret their opting for sexual restraint merely as proof of their subjugation to

“patriarchal norms” as is often done in feminist literature. I see it as an effective though costly strategy to win over the sympathy and support of the rest of the family, which can by its disapproval of men's irresponsible sexual behaviour exercise a large measure of restraint on them, thereby bringing about a slow but definite shift in the power balance somewhat in a woman's direction. This is not my idea of an ideal situation if we subject it to the test of attaining full freedom and equality for women. But then we are not living in an ideal world. □

The names and some details regarding the people mentioned in this article have been changed to ensure anonymity.

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