

Demystifying Maternal Sex and Sexuality: Rhetorical Choices of a Situated Mother



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A sexual instinct is a basic biological urge in humans to experience sexual pleasure and beget progeny through sexual relations. However, it is considered a sacred act of procreation in Indian culture and society. For most Indians, a woman is a personification of the mother goddess and her sexuality is a sacramental subject of worship. But the gulf between the ideal imagery and the real-life situation of a woman is a glitch in her sexual expression and choices. Irrespective of the projection of women's inherent sexual energy as being sacred, it is deeply controlled and structured by social institutions. She is not a free sexual being but a situated mother; her sexual choices are located within the institution of marriage maintained exclusively for getting a male heir for the family lineage. This paper expounds and explores the pervasive but ignored women's unseen sexual coercion in the form of maternal choice in Indian society. The dichotomy presented in the symbolic representations of the mother goddess's powerful sexuality—illustrated in mythologies and scriptures, and the social construction of real-life mothers' sexuality influence their choices. It also investigates how her maternal sexual choices are devalued, and viewed as unreal, unethical, and sinful activity. Lastly, it may be said that the divine projection of women as mother Goddesses and the exaltation of their procreative capacity deprive them of their sexual choices. It appears as a free choice but there is a hidden coercion that women fail to understand is the greatest cause of their sexual enslavement.

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Introduction: Sex as a Sacred Act of Life

Biologically, sexual desire is an innate drive required to experience and enjoy sexual pleasure and is essential for the survival of species and life which is expressed

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by sexual relations and activities between two hetero sexes. Many schools of thought, such as Shaiva, Shakta, Shamans, Kabbalah, Taoism, Tantra, Yoga Philosophy, Freud, Osho, etc. believe that sexual energy is the creative energy of the universe and is responsible for life. This energy creates everything in the world, especially, is indispensable for the growth of physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of human beings. Indian scriptures accept the significance of sex or “*kama*” and consider it as one of the three goals of human life (*Purushartha*) regulated by other *Purushartha* called *dharma* (duty). However, the primary purpose of sexual energy is to procreate and participate in the sacred act of procreation for the expansion of human lineage. Indian society worships the mother goddess’s sexuality and views a mother as the embodiment of the divine mother goddess “*Shakti*”. The unrestricted, independent, and autonomous sexual energy of the goddess *Shakti* symbolizes the cosmic energy of procreation, destruction, and preservation to maintain cosmic order. In this manner, a woman has the highest status and value as a mother and her sexual power becomes an essential creative force in society. Here the significant question is whether the deified mother’s sexuality is more than procreation or not. Is she free to make her sexual choices for pleasure and bodily satisfaction as a sexual being? To deal with these questions, we need to go deep into the structure of patriarchal society that shapes and forms the existence and choices of a woman. Strikingly, women’s exalted status in society does not match their real-life situation. They are expected to follow societal norms and act accordingly without any personal choice which shows the gap between the ideal image of a goddess and the lived experience of women’s sexuality. The mother’s sexuality is seen as the sole means of procreation and not as a desire “in-itself” or “for-itself”. They are treated as baby production machines and not sexual beings carrying their own sexual choices and urges. Their choices are situated within the institutions of marriage and motherhood for getting an heir for family lineage. A woman’s sexual choices and lived experiences are grounded within the patriarchal structures of society.

The present article critically explores and discusses the status of sex and sexual choices in Indian women’s lives. They are worshipped as the personification of the mother goddess, but their place and choices cannot be seen beyond the conjugal relation and the institution of motherhood. Since the purpose of marriage is procreation, maternal sexuality and even sexual thinking are viewed as non-existent and an unethical source of sin. A woman is expected to see *her* choices through the lenses of society and has to submit herself and her sexuality to fulfill societal choices and purposes. These choices are rhetorical as they appear like an individual’s free choice but in reality, they are social impositions that knowingly or unknowingly women have to follow by putting themselves and their choices second. In this way, despite her high status in society as a woman, her submissive sexuality is suppressed and regulated for the sole purpose of procreation in which her desire does not get any endorsement and recognition.

Thus, the primary focus of the paper is to analyze mothers’ perception(s) of their sexuality and sexual choices under the logic of tradition and modernity in

terms of sex and gender. The attempt is to find out the linkages between the biological and social location of a woman's sexuality and how it shapes her sexual choices and decisions. How do mothers, potential mothers, and young women express their sexual choices? Do they perceive themselves as independent sexual being capable of making free sexual choices or their choices are influenced and imposed by society on them? Do they even differentiate between free choice and coerced choice? To answer these questions, I have incorporated a phenomenological method and existential feminist ideology (s) to understand the Indian socio-cultural imagery responsible for a mother's gendered sexual decision formation. The paper critically engages with various mythological scriptures and cosmogenic narratives to explore and enquire about the connection between the iconography of mother goddesses and real-life mothers' sexuality and how they affect and influence the sexual choice of contemporary Indian women. These mythic frames have further supported the gendering of sexes and ascribed separate values and roles to each gender. I have discussed how these traditional myths play an essential role in the formation of assumptions about sex and their impact on the construction of gender in the modern era. The paper concludes with the insight that traditional scriptures are the real guardians of sexual norms and practices in Indian society even today. There have been dominant and concealed socio-cultural ideological forces on mothers regarding their sexual choice and decision making which are authorised and passed from one generation to another unconsciously. They look like a free choice but in reality, a rhetorical choice inundated with manipulative societal coercion has a deleterious effect on a mother's physical, psychological, and social well-being and life.

Sex and Sexuality in Indian Culture

India is a multiethnic country with diverse geographical and socio-economic conditions where sexuality has evolved over time and has been influenced by various religious and cultural amalgamations. Generally, the terms "sex" and "sexuality" encompass various creative thoughts and ideas that are manifested through architecture, literature, art and painting, sculpture, music, dance, religion and scripture, rituals, symbols, arts, cultural practices, etc., and deeply impact the lives of people. It can be understood in different ways—an act of sex and sexual practice, identity preferences, eroticism, desire, etc (Chakraborty & Thakurata, 2013). Many Western and Eastern religions and literature, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Jain, etc., explicitly illustrate the nature, moral dimension and attitude of sex, nevertheless, Brahmanical texts have presented a detailed typology of sex and sexuality. These texts consist of Vedas, the *Dharmashastras*, the *Arthshastras*, and the *Kamashastras* (ancient texts on sex) which discuss the moral, social, political, and sexual aspects of human life. Often, the authors of these texts are men who have validated the texts as divine words of the supreme being that cannot be criticized or questioned (Roy, 1996). In the magnum opus text of sage Vatsayan, the *Kamasutra* (Aphorisms of love), the word

kama indicates instinctual desire, love, sensuality, attraction, and art signifying a sacred path for men and women to attain salvation. According to Vatsayan, *kama* is the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting, and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul (quoted in Thakur). It balances the rhythm of the cosmos by the union of masculine and feminine sexual energy (Thakur). The *dharmashastras* define *kama* as one of the goals of human life along with *dharma* (ethics) and *artha* (capital). In Vedic scripture, *kama* is a form of cosmic creative energy known as the goddess *Shakti*. She expresses her sexuality in generative and destructive forms for the creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe with her male consorts. The creative and preservative *Shakti* is called benevolent Parvati and Lakshmi are married, and subordinate mother goddesses to their male consort. Their decisions and choices are based on the decisions and permission of their consorts. On the other hand, malevolent *Shakti* is named Durga and Kali. They are unmarried, independent mother goddesses free to make their choices, possess masculine trades and dangerous sexual energy and have the power to destroy evil forces for the welfare of the world (Apffel-Marglin, 1985). Despite the independent inherent two contradictory destructive and creative powers of the benevolent goddess, they are voluntarily regulated by their consorts. Their choices are not beyond the choice of the male partners. In comparison to malevolent goddesses, benevolent goddesses are more popular in common Indian families due to their submissive and compassionate nature. As Kamala Ganesh (1997) points out, “Kali and Durga are of course a ubiquitous presence, but the safe domestic mode is represented by Lakshmi—quintessential spouse, a symbol of auspiciousness and prosperity” (p. 59). Kamala Ganesh further notices the hidden, invisible coercion, and subjugation of women in the form of goddess iconography in these words:

The ambivalence of the goddess has been linked by many writers to the cultural evaluation of female sexuality as dangerous and disruptive if not harnessed appropriately. The two faces of the goddess are both faces of power, but as properly married spouse, she is the embodiment of grace and benevolence; as the independent goddess, she threatens to destroy the very basis of the social order. The concern with the control of female sexuality manifests itself in many institutions, norms and customs that are current in India (p. 60–61).

The social construction of both benevolent and malevolent mother goddesses represents the nature of free and unfree sexual energy which impacts real-world mothers’ sexuality differently. Since sexual energy of the goddess has the power to interrupt the cosmic order, the latent sexual energy and sexual freedom of a woman has to be suppressed and regulated by society as it can destroy humanity from its destructive aspect. In this regard, Yocum (1982) says:

The actual situation of women at a given point in time reflects a complex mix of ideological and material factors. While the goddess cannot guarantee

status in real life, “talk about god, goddess, gods and goddesses is talk about the (male and female) self in relation to the environment” (p. 281).

In this way, although the mother goddesses are the iconography of sexual power and supremacy, there is less similarity between them and real-life mothers. The real physical woman is not given the sexual freedom that may disrupt the patriarchal system of society. Kamala Ganesh (1997) points out, “Mother-goddess can be interpreted as expressing ideas of power, autonomy and primacy in the widest sense of the term. She conveys not so much the idea of physical motherhood but a worldview in which the creative power of femininity is central” (p. 58). Such sexual control is further justified by the scriptures and mythological narrative in which women’s sexuality is exclusively perceived as an act of procreation to get a male child. The uncontrolled sexual energy and sexual freedom are viewed as unethical, a religious sin, and a threat to society. Thus, it is suggested and expected that a woman must protect her virginity and control her sexual desires and dedicate herself to her husband only to fulfill social purposes. Many mythical stories indicate the above-mentioned purposes of women’s sexuality and the imagery of a good ideal Indian woman which I have discussed in the next section.

Social Construction of a Woman and Her Choices

The imagery of an ideal woman is a “mother” in Indian culture and society. She is signified by her reproductive capacity or motherhood. The institution of motherhood is influential in her life and she is revered as a mother. The Taitariya Upanishad mentions that the mother is a goddess “*Matru Devo Bhave,*” which shows the strong societal devotion and adoration for a mother. The mother goddesses are associated with their reproductive capacity, nurturance, and maternal love. These traits are highly expected from a common woman and the young girls to follow in their mother’s footsteps. In this direction, many old scriptures sanction strict rules and regulations over women’s sexuality to maintain the hierarchical social structure. Here, I am going to discuss three primary texts—the Manusmriti, the Kamasutra, and the Mahabharata. These texts are significant as they prescribe values and measures for the ideal Indian woman, even today. There are many illustrations presented in these scriptures that show the iconography of womanhood as motherhood. For women, there is no choice left but to accept motherhood as their desired choice. Ironically, maternal functions such as menstruation, pregnancy, parturition, and menopause are always considered impure in traditions and because of that their bodies were seen as impure, they were not allowed to study these texts. As Nisha (2023) says, “These texts restricted feminine embodiment to maternal embodiment by creating and recasting de-sexualised, gendered, chaste, sacrificial versions of powerful mythical icons for ideal women within society”. On this ground, scriptures have illustrated various myths about the ambiguous creation of a woman and her actual nature as dangerous which has to be confined and controlled. These myths psychologically affect women’s sexual choices.

The oldest myth of a woman's creation is illustrated in the epic *The Mahabharata* (1973–1978). The author of the text Vedvyasa, has presented a dark and obscure character of a woman and her sexuality. In one place, the creator Brahma indicates that woman is created by me to disturb the worldly order by spreading chaos, evil, unrighteousness, and disarray. He says, “The Grandfather, the Lord, having learned what was in the hearts of deities, to befuddle humanity, created women” (XIII.40.7). He further describes the nature of a woman in these words: “The grandfather bestowed upon them the desire of enjoyment, all kinds of carnal pleasure. Tempted by the desire of enjoyment, women began to pursue men” (XIII.40.9). She is a seductress and requires tools to seduce men: “Beds and seats and ornaments and food and drink and all that is ignoble, indulgence in disagreeable words, and love of sexual companionship: Prajapati gave all this to women” (XIII.40.12). It can be said that she is sinful and illusory by nature: “There is no creature more sinful than woman. Woman is a blazing fire. She is the glorious illusion created by Maya. She is the sharp edge of a razor. She is poison. She is a snake. She is death. Indeed, she is all of these united together” (XIII.40.4). The statements show the evil character of women who cannot be trusted. Such features of women are enough justification to destroy the social order, therefore, it is crucial to take away her choices that may create more chaos in society. Nevertheless, some women are virtuous too. The text asserts that: “In a former creation, women were all virtuous. Those, however, who sprang from this creation of Brahma with the aid of an illusion, became sinful” (XIII.40.8).

Similar myths about the creation of women are found in Christianity and Judaism. In the Bible, the book of Genesis presents two distinct versions of the creation of women. The first description appears in Chapter 1, which says, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” In this version, “woman was created together with man, and in the image of God like him.” The second version (chapter 2, 22) illustrates that “And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man” (Ariella Friedman Hana Weinberg, & Ayala M. Pines, 1998, p. 782). This version states that women created after man was created, and not from “the dust of the ground” like him, but from the man's rib (Ariella Friedman, Hana Weinberg, & Ayala M. Pines, 1998, p. 782). Another controversial myth of “Lilith”—the first woman is mentioned in Jewish folklore to demonstrate the same contradiction. She was created by God as equal to Adam and devilish in her sexuality. After a constant fight with Adam, she left him and started exercising her sexual independence by copulating with demons and bearing their children. Even after God's threat to kill her hundreds of children every day for disobeying. His will to return to Adam, she refused to do so. Then, God created “Eve” as Adam's second wife from the rib as a modest mother of all living creatures. Many such examples in ancient scriptures present women with their ambiguity between sexuality and motherhood, such as the text *Ramayana* (1960–1975) indicates the dyadic nature of mata Kaushalya, Shakuntala and Anasuya, on one hand, and Srupanakha, Kaikeyai, and Manthara, on the other. Due to this

ambiguous nature, Goswami Tulsidas, the author of *Ramacharitmanas*, cushions the society by saying that “*Dhol Gawar Shudra Pashu Nari, Sakal Tadana Ke Adhikari* (Sunderkand, ch 59.3)” which means a drum, ignorant, animal, and women deserve a beating to straighten up and get the acts together.

The *Mahabharata* also mentions a story of sage *Uddalaka* and his son *Śvetaketu*'s *Law* in which the narrator *Pandu* indicates that it is *Śvetaketu* who has created the present law and regulation for women to control her sexual freedom. He continued that at the beginning of humanity, women were allowed to move freely and exercising their sexual choices was considered their eternal *dharma* or righteous act. He says, “This is the eternal *dharma* that favours women” (I.113.7). But it was disturbing for *Śvetaketu* to quietly see her mother coercively or voluntarily moving with another man to satisfy his sexual desire. In this regard, *Uddalaka* replies to him: “Don't be angry, son. This is the eternal *dharma*. Women of all classes are unrestrained on earth. As the cows do, so do the creatures, each in its class” (I.113.13–14). However, for *Śvetaketu* it was an unacceptable situation and he announced that “From this day on,” he ruled, “a woman's infidelity to her husband shall be a sin equivalent to that of abortion, an evil auguring misery” (I.113.17). In this way, the two opposite characteristics of women can only be managed through the institution of marriage and motherhood. She either can be a sexually controlled good wife with maternal love or can be a free destructive sexual seductress with all sexual energy. The destructive sexuality of women must be suppressed and confined to motherhood. This is the only liberating way for her emancipation. She should not be given sexual freedom to engage in hazardous sexual acts to deteriorate men's moral character which is threatening to society.

Another significant text in this regard can be discussed is *Manusmṛiti* seen as the Law book of ancient India, which presents the dichotomous statements about women. He says women are naturally allured by sexual pleasure and regardless of its moral outcome, they effortlessly engage in unrighteous sexual relations. Thus, a woman should be recognized and honored as a mother of children and a chest wife. The unconventional, unguarded, and liberal sexual inclination interrupts the ethical code of conduct of society. He suggests that women are like property on which only the owner—the husband has absolute powers. She was expected to treat her husband as her God, whatever may be the character of the husband (quoted by Nitisha, 2019). He further educates that she must be dedicated to her husband all her life, she has no right to perform any auspicious act without the permission of her husband, she should not do any unpleasant act to her husband, she should maintain her chastity; not to remarry or approach to another man even after the death of her husband, etc. *Manu* states that “it is the duty of woman to provide her husband with a son, only to save him from being sent to hell. If the husband is incapable, it is not wrong if a woman cohabits with any other man for the purpose of begetting children either forced or voluntary” (quoted by Nitisha, 2019). He further emphasizes,

Pitā rakṣati kaumāre bhartā rakṣati yauvane |
Rakṣanti sthavire putrā na strī svātantryamarhati | | 3 | |

“Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (IX:III) translated by G. Buhler).

This verse clearly advocates that in her childhood her father guards her virginity, the husband guards her during her youth, and the sons must guard her in old age; the woman never deserves freedom because of her independent sexual instinct. Similarly, Nārada, says in *Vivādaratnākara* that “Women, even though born of noble families, become ruined by independence; that is why Prajāpati has ordained that they shall not be independent” (quoted by Jha, 1920). Therefore, she must dedicate her sexuality to support her family by choosing to become a mother and procreate a heir for a family in a righteous way to enter into marriage (Shah, 1995).

The classic text *Kamasutra*, traditionally ascribed to sage Vatsayana and compiled between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D. (Bhattacharya, 1975), detailed elaboration of the sexual desire and freedom of upper society men and women, yet probably confines women’s sexuality as only for high caste and class male pleasure and progeny (Puri, p. 617). As Puri says, “the desires for progeny, pleasure, and self-interest provide the incentives for sexual relations for the wealthy male subject, and women are relationally categorized within a system stratified by gender, caste, and class” (p. 617). It is a sexually liberating text for men and women from their social understanding and constraints of sex in a gendered sense. The *Kamasutra* (2009) discusses the sexual freedom between men and women as a divine act. However, this divinity is not devoid of rigid rules and restrictions on women’s sexuality. It promotes heterosexual norms and the regulation of society. The text categorizes women based on their class, caste, courtesans, remarried, and maids for two main purposes—pleasure and progeny.

As the text mentions, the sexual relation with a virgin woman of the same caste and class was allowed to have a progeny, on the other hand, women of low castes and class, other wives, courtesans, or maids were seen as objects of sexual pleasure for a wealthy man of upper caste and class (Puri, p. 617). The nature of violence and violence within coition is both structured and recognized favoring masculine sexuality, whereas women’s anger is only permissible within certain limits. The beating of the woman by the man was recognized as a legitimate part of sexual intercourse, but she could only shout, scream, and even kick the *nayaka* (man), but was then expected to go to the door and cry, and permit the *nayaka* to conciliate her (Roy, 1996, p. 160). Although celibacy was in practice, women were discouraged from adopting it. They were always under tremendous pressure to start a family and serve themselves in society for pleasure and male progeny even today. Women were encouraged to envisage their husbands as gods (*Kamasutra*: VI.1.11). In this regard, Roy provides a detailed account of the expectations a woman should have in *Kamasutra*:

she was expected to treat her husband as a god, look after the household, maintain a garden, serve her husband by dressing for him, cooking

according to his tastes, sleeping only after he had slept, waking before him, performing rituals for his welfare, seeking his permission before going out, avoiding the company of 'disrespectable' (and possibly threatening) women including mendicants, renouncers of the world, witches, fortune-tellers, and unchaste women (p. 161).

The Kamasutra further urges women to accept polygyny and actively forge a relationship that underscores their subordination. The childless women were expected to encourage their husbands to remarry or have a child from another woman (Roy, 1996). It is not wrong to say that even if the text openly discusses intimate heterosexual relations, when it comes to women and their choices, the text promotes and justifies the subordination, objectification, and marginalization of her status in society. She is unable to express her freedom and choices in sexual relations. The entire text illustrates sexual freedom under the umbrella of gender, caste, and class hierarchies and permits it as a subject of a "wealthy upper-caste man".

Apart from texts, many popular mythological narratives illustrate the prescribed wifely duties of women through the imagery of ideal Indian women. In this direction, the imagery of Sati Sita and Savitri is significant who have worshipped their husbands as gods and devoted themselves to them by neglecting their own freedom and sexuality. The *dharmashastras* support such women for their submissiveness, chastity, strength, moral conduct, and devotion to their families and husbands. Both Sita and Savitri are the ideal exemplars of a good wife and mothers for their selfless care, compassion, and sacrifices must be idealized and followed by Indian women. They knowingly or unknowingly envisage their lives not beyond such iconographies. In this scenario, their desires remain unexplored or unrecognized and they start believing this as their ultimate destiny. They perceive their choices through the lenses of society. Interestingly, this idealization does not end here but rather passes from one generation to another generation. In other words, young girls always idealize their mothers as their role models and try to follow them in all aspects of their lives. As a result, women are reduced to being mothers and wives, losing their individuality as independent women. Understanding the fate of a woman and young girl, Sudhir Kakar (2007) states that: "the fate of a traditional Indian girl is a socially enforced progressive renunciation of her erotic needs. The birth of a child does not change this prescription; in fact, maternity often demands an even greater repudiation of a woman's erotic impulses" (p. 97–98). Thus, the sexual choices of women and their daughters lose their real essence and reduce them to objects of patriarchal purposes.

The societal mandates regarding women's sexual freedom and motherhood are deep-rooted in patriarchal social structures that sometimes women have to compromise with their existence. Many mythical stories illustrate the way women were objectified, subjugated, and commodified to serve social purposes. Noticeably, violation of such rules was a menace that had the power to diminish their autonomy and change the meaning of freedom for them. The tale of virtuous and beautiful

Princess Madhavi, the daughter of King Yayati appears in the *Mahabharata* is the best example of the objectification of sexuality and motherhood. Madhavi had a boon by which she would give birth to only male offspring and her virginity would be restored even after sleeping with multiple partners and bearing their children. The king offered Madhavi to Sage Galva to marry or sell her to various kings (for their royal hires for thrown) to pay his Guru's debt. Madhavi followed Galva on his mission of marrying/selling many kings again and again and abandoning her birthed children. At last, she returned to his father who wanted to remarry her to a man of her choice which she refused and decided to spend her remaining life in a forest with nature. In the beginning, it appears that it was her conscious free choice to offer herself to fulfill other's sexual needs, but the unquestioned sexual submission of Madhavi to repay a high-caste Brahmin requirement presents the patriarchal intentions and her objectification. After producing sons, she chooses to become ascetic, celibate, and immaculate as ever and not as wife or mother anymore. Similarly, there are other stories and women characters in the *Mahabharata* such as Satyawati, Kunti, and Draupadi had the boon to become maiden again after coition and procreating. All these women had to compromise with sexual freedom to fulfill social desires of pleasure and procreation. It seems that intentionally and freely, they offered their feminine body and self to men/husbands, but like Madhavi, all women were encountering hidden coercion which they failed to realize and perceived their act as an autonomous and independent decision.

The further myth found in scriptures where women deliberately surrender their sexual choices to their family or husbands, and other men. The storyline of exulted "*Panchkanyas*" means the five maidens—Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari present a gathering of five supernatural, beautiful, independent, submissive, strong, pious, intelligent women who either have consensus extra-marital relations or acceptance of more than one husband as commanded by society. There is a saying about these maidens:

Ahalyā draupadī kunti tārā mandodarī tathā |
Pañcakanyāḥ smarennityaṃ mahāpātakanāśinīḥ | |

It means Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari. One should forever remember the panchakanya who are the destroyers of great sins (Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, 1982).

All five women are regarded to be the ideal Indian women and exemplars of perfect wives and mothers. These five women are worshipped as "holy virgins" who dedicated themselves to bearing social responsibility without any second thought of their own. They never doubted or questioned the patriarchal system and accepted these sexual obligations as their destiny and their own choice. Performing their assigned sacred responsibilities sometimes they were punished. However, they neither defied nor challenged societal reinforcement about their sexuality and feminine body/self for the happiness of their family and society at large. Another popular Indian tradition of begging for soil from the brothel to

prepare the goddess Durga idol in Durga pooja is still followed in modern India. It is known as “punya mati” or sacred soil that should be gifted, begged, or received from the hands of sex workers. The popular belief is that “the soil is considered to be blessed because people who visit the forbidden lanes of prostitutes leave behind their virtue and piety at the doorstep to enter the world of carnal desires and sin. The soil then imbibes all the virtues and becomes blessed” (Digital OB). The other mythical ritual is based on Veda’s faith that nine classes of women known as *Navakanīyās* are to be worshipped, and revered during Durga Puja. A “nati (dancer/actress), a vaishya (prostitute), rajaki (laundry girl), a brahmani (Brahmin girl), a shudra, a gopala (milkmaid); such are the women known as *Navakanīyās*. According to the belief the worship of the ten-armed-goddess is incomplete without paying respect to these women” (Digital OB).

These social reinforcements on women were too explicit and prominent that rejection of women’s sexual submission frequently made them pay with their own lives. In this context, the *Mahabharata*’s mythical story of sage Jamadagni and his wife and mother of his five sons Renuka illuminates us with this disavowal of sexual ideals and its consequences. Jamadagni furiously ordered his youngest son Parashuram to behead her mother Renuka as a punishment because she could not resist her adulterous sexual desires after seeing handsome Gandarva king Chitraratha’s appearance. Her mind got corrupted and polluted with fleeting sexual thoughts which resulted in the end of her own life. The myth presents strict rules for women to suppress their sexual freedom or keep them unexpressed. No woman has the independence to even enjoy or engage with licentious thoughts. Disobeying the sexual rules is unacceptable and considered a punishable offence for a woman to bear at any cost. Indian society recognizes these rules and views women’s sexuality as an integral part of their family and not as a separate autonomous choice even today.

Indian scripture and text are inundated with such mythological tales and ideals where women are displayed as desexualized and situated beings whose primary purpose in life is to give birth to male offspring. It is not wrong to say that a society in which coercive sexual submission and virginity are highly valorized parts of the cultural ideology, cannot consider the sexual freedom of a woman as an integral expression of her existence. These stories raise many uncomfortable and complex questions about the status and treatment of women in our society. Thus, an ideal woman’s sexual choices are limited and located within the social imageries of sacred texts and myths from which they cannot transcend themselves.

Modernity and Tradition for a Situated Being

After independence, Indian culture and society have experienced incessant visible growth. The adoption of new ideas such as globalization, modernity, various socio-economic reforms, exchange, and the introduction of new technologies have transformed and uplifted the social mindset at a global scale (Nisha, Z, 2020). This positive and progressive attitude has further elevated the status of women

in society. The modern woman is conscious of her rights and freedom of expression. Gradually, they have learnt to ask questions, exercise their bodily choices, and raise their voices against injustices and discrimination happening in society against women and others. They are equally helping men and contributing their services to society. However, it is hard for them to break the traditional imagery of an ideal woman as a good mother and wife. They are expected and forced to live under the inevitable umbrella of the patriarchal ideology of motherhood and marriage regardless of their modern and progressive mindset. In this scenario, women find it difficult to express their sexual needs and desires and fail to exercise their agency. They remain the object of men's pleasure and progeny. Thinking sexual freedom beyond family immanence is an evil and punishable offence in terms of their social boycott and abandonment as happened with Renuka. She did not even have the freedom to indulge in fleeting sexual thoughts and urges. Śvetaketu says, in his Law that fleeting urges or unbridled sexual freedom is denting the dignity of life and harmful to the family and society at large. He sanctioned strike regulation to the institution of marriage, codifying moral conduct that limits the sexual freedom of women. These restrictions were helpful for a particular timeframe but later on, became the primary cause of women's subordination and objectification they are facing. The mythical tales are an integral part of Indian life; they regulate and give meaning to their life-world. The iconography of Sati Sita and Savitri, Madhvi, Kunti, mother goddess, etc. are the real ideals of young girls and mothers they have to follow and shape their sexual choices accordingly which looks like a choice but in reality, a hidden social coercion. Like Ahalya or Draupadi, despite women's awareness of their femininity and sexuality, they do not see sex and their sexuality as a source of pleasure and enjoyment but as the dharma shastras say a sacred act of procreation. They happily embrace all societal penalties without any confrontations. In this regard, Patricia McFadden aptly says, "Across almost all societies, the notions of 'pleasure' and 'choice' are rarely mentioned or acknowledged as being among the most contentious aspects of human sexuality, particularly female sexuality (2003, p. 1). It seems that motherhood and the sexuality of a female are two faces of the same coin and there are no such choices and desires granted them from society.

Presently, there is a technological way to reinforce conventional etiquette for women. They are viewed as a choice providing technology for women through which they can have control over their feminine bodies by separating sex from reproduction. They can enjoy their sexual life by delaying procreative functions. However, the desire for a biological child or not having a child can be easily fulfilled by using reproductive technologies such as contraceptives, conceptive, and abortion has further perpetuated the patriarchal ideology in a new way. It is evident that instead of providing choices, these technologies are continuing and preserving the traditional gender roles for a woman as a caregiver and mother. The desire for a biological child especially a male child has increased the rate of abortion and female foeticide. The rampant cases of rape involving girls, domestic violence, sexual assaults, and acid attacks on women show the dominance of

patriarchal thinking that sees a woman as subservient and subordinated second sex whereas a man is a superior subject and placed at the top in a social hierarchy. As a result, women face constant pressure to limit their sexual choice for procreation and not as a choice-based desire itself. Recently, information technologies and mass media have become popular tools for spreading traditional myths and norms to the common public. The use of the internet, TV, radio, smartphones, magazines, and newspapers is a general way of spreading traditional ideology among people. Popular movies, religious series, and web series frequently promoting patriarchal ideology regarding a “good” and “bad” woman. The procreative function of a woman’s sexuality is variously illustrated and valorized in religious films, serials, and speeches. The primary purpose of these programs is to inspire women to stay true to their cultural roots without thinking of their independent feminine Selves. These shows indirectly praise women’s immanence as desexual mothers, and through the guise of traditional duties attempt to control female sexuality.

The most alarming thought is that women tend to accept these prescriptions as their fixed and inevitable destiny, barely raising a voice in protest against such gender-based social ideologies and structural manipulation resulting in rhetorical choices. Therefore, it can be said that even if a woman is considered an embodiment of a mother goddess or attains a high place in society as a mother does not solve the everyday problem of sexual suppression and choices she faces. In this regard, Kamala Ganesh (1997) has made a valid point that “one cannot ‘use’ the goddess for finding solutions to contemporary problems any more than one can apply a modernist yardstick of gender equality or hierarchy to measure all cultures at all times. Perhaps the goddess can only remain a source of inspiration, a vision” (p. 63). It seems that the patriarchal interpretation of mother goddesses is not an appropriate inspiration for physical women’s freedom and strength, as it looks, but a symbolic consolation for their subjugated and weak position in society which they need to overcome through their social awareness and confrontation of social prescriptions.

Conclusion: Realising Gendered Emancipation

To that end, it can be said that in Indian society a woman is valued as a mother and there is no such sexual choice and desire seemingly granted to her. The sexuality of a woman is a “tool” to serve social purposes and not a subject of free desire. Her sexual freedom and autonomy are insignificant and almost rejected. It is not wrong to mention that the sexuality of a woman is discursively constructed and deeply rooted in hierarchical discourses of gender, class, and caste, which is further promoted and reinforced by various ancient scriptures, myths, and texts that still have a robust influence on women’s lives. Moreover, the unbridgeable gap between the sexual imageries of the mother goddess and the real sexual choices of a physical mother as a desexualized woman desiring a son is an unescapable reality in modern Indian society. However, this iconography dominates society even

today. The empirical studies are inundated with the ideas that show that the ideology of “idolizing motherhood” proposes women’s sexuality as a sacred procreative power, resulting in keeping mothers enslaved in patriarchal bondage. Society attempts to circumscribe women’s free choices in the name of custom, ritual, tradition, and history where mothers were not even allowed to think about their sexual desires or recognize themselves as independent sexual beings. Ironically, women shape their lives within these domains unquestioned or sometimes their questions are unacknowledged.

Various mythological scriptures categorize women into two categories—“bad” and “good”, based on their sexual orientation. A woman who dares to express her sexual desires and choices freely is seen as a bad woman or evil and dangerous to society. For this reason, she is suggested to be controlled and regulated by reducing sex to a means of procreation. History shows that sexually active mothers are not viewed as good mothers or wives as they are theoretically unpredictable and unreliable. It is thought that sexually independent women are probably less submissive, and dangerous for their families, and due to these apprehensions, they are frequently stigmatized and criticized, sometimes penalized by their own family and by society in the form of physical, mental, and social abuses, rejection, shame, and separation from their family and the community. Contrarily, the desexualized mother has a high moral and social status and image to be followed by other young girls. Thus, a woman’s sexuality is not a means for pleasure and enjoyment. Childbearing is a way of her emancipation which makes her feel fulfilled. In this way, a woman has a subordinated and devalued status, if she is unable to have children, it is considered unrighteous for her to explore or even consider her sexuality outside of the conjugal boundaries, something which men are freely permitted to do. As a result of hiding and suppressing their sexual desires, women are left feeling fragmented, frustrated, and insecure about being castigated. Recently, the change in societal mindset about mother’s sex and sexuality is visible due to women’s equal participation in the public domain and feminist voices in the Indian arena. Nevertheless, patriarchal ideology is supported in new ways such as the internet, social media, electronic media, and so on, continuously fuelling and perpetuating the traditional idea of a good woman as a mother whose sexual desires are under societal control. In this way, in Indian society, mothers are caught up in the net of rhetorical gendered sexual freedom and choices which are more repressive and present their real objectified Self instead of their emancipation.

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