

Sexuality, Love, Marital Life: The Indian Scenario Today-Changing Perspectives and Ethical Challenges

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Introduction

On 2nd July 2009 the Delhi High Court, in an epoch-making judgement, decriminalized homosexuality. The court ruled: "Indian constitutional law does not permit the statutory criminal law to be held captive by the popular misconceptions of who the LGBTs (*lesbians, gays, bisexual and trans-genders*) are" and added, "homosexuality is not a disease but just another expression of human sexuality."¹ Different organizations fighting for gay rights jubilantly celebrated this decision of the court. The Ministry of Law, though initially indicated the plan of legalizing homosexual unions, following protests from different religious authorities, has postponed the decision.²

¹ As cited in George Plathottam, "Homosexuality: Faulty, Flawed Debates," *Indian Currents* 21, 29 (13-19 July, 2009), 32-33.

² "India's Historic Ruling on Gay Rights," *The Times of India*, July 2nd, 2009, www.thetimesofindia.com.

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In another “revolutionary” verdict, the Division Bench of the Supreme Court decriminalized “Live-in” relationships.³ This time, the protests were not so many.

Evidently, law and morality cannot be equalized. The law cannot be always a norm for morality, though they can be complementary. I have referred to these two judgements, because somehow they reflect the changes that have been taking place in the last few decades in the Indian society in the attitudes, value system and life style. These fast, drastic and revolutionary changes are similar to those that took place in the West in the 1960s, which is often called the Sexual Revolution. Perhaps we have to think that the Sexual Revolution has begun in the Indian sub-continent. The ideals of the Sexual Revolution have been influencing the Indian society for a long time. This was limited for a long time, not only due to the influence of religions, but more perhaps due to the restrictions on the media, the market, etc. In the last one and half decades, since the economic policy changed and since India welcomed the globalization process, changes are visible in the sexual mores of the Indian society.

To hear that Sexual Revolution has begun in India may raise the eyebrows of many. Some may say that it is not anything new. Others may respond that such a thing will not happen in the Indian society with its traditional values, stable family system and deep-rooted religiosity. I also wish that this (over-?)confidence may be true.

Change in attitudes and life-style is not a right reason to accept it as good and ethical. However, we need to reflect whether the existing norms have been capable of communicating the values we believe in. We need to make a self-examination of the causes for the rejection of the traditionally held moral norms. Moreover, we should be open to change if changes are needed and we need to understand how the Christian vision of man-woman love, sexuality and marriage can be made meaningful in the changed and changing life situations. We shall try to analyse the changed context and delineate some guidelines for a holistic Christian approach to man-woman relationship, sexuality and marriage.

1. Understanding the Context

1.1. Sex surveys: From 2003 *India Today*-AC Nielson-ORG-MARG conducted yearly sex surveys in the Indian cities and the report of

³ “Live in Relationship, Pre-marital Sex, not an Offence: SC,” *The Times of India*, 23rd March, 2010, www.thetimesofindia.com.

these surveys were published in *India Today*. These surveys perhaps reflect the changing sexual habits of Indian men and women. Though we need not give an utmost objective value to the findings, some of them may be indicative of the new life-style. 2007 survey has the following findings: 50% of couples believe that sex is a source of pleasure; those who watch porn with the spouse are 39%; 79% use contraceptives; 18% have had extra-marital affair (Men-31%; Women-6%); 23% of working women have affairs with their colleagues.⁴

2008 Survey, "The Naked Truth"⁵, says: 50% approve of watching pornography (male-73, female-27); 28% (male-37%, female-17%) had their first sexual experience before they turned 20 (of these 6% before their teens); 26% approve of underage sex; those approving adultery: 26% (male-43, female-8); 18% (male-19%, female-16%) have asked the partner to be party to swapping wife/husband or girlfriend/boyfriend; 24%-males and 9%-females approve of paid sex; 21%-males and 10%-females approve of homosexuality. The couples who upload on the internet the videos of their intimate moments are also on the increase. Some of the comments given together with the survey are worth our attention:

This "sex survey throws up a more sexually carnivorous urban Indian willing to break taboos and boundaries." "The days of staid sex are over. Kink is the new sexual thing..." "Sweet 16 and never been kissed? That was yesterday. Today's adolescents are forging beyond foreplay." "Conjugal exclusivity has long been the Indian's sole mode of sexual expression. Clearly though, it's not a natural choice with as many as 41% of men admitting they were unfaithful."⁶

The 2009 survey, "The Fantasy Report",⁷ reveals more stunning changes. For example, those who have participated in orgy or threesome: 9% (male-12%, female-6%). And listen to the comment, "Once aberrant, now open to discussion. Once perverse, now being practised. If sex as leisure is becoming acceptable, so are its accessories."

Of the changing attitudes and life-styles, many areas deserve our urgent attention – teenage and pre-marital sexuality, growing number of divorces, effects of globalization on the family, gender inequality,

⁴ *India Today*, 32, no. 44 (2007, Oct 30-Nov 5) 52-98. 2007 survey was on Sex in Marriage.

⁵ *India Today*, 33, no. 48 (2008), 23-58.

⁶ *Ibid.*

interfaith marriages, homosexuality, increasing availability of pornography, cybersex, prostitution, decreasing birth rate, effects of urbanisation and migration on the family, HIV/AIDS, challenges faced by the nuclear families, abuse of children and minors, etc. We shall briefly consider only a few of them as to get a clearer picture of the changing life-style.

1.2. Teenage Sexuality and Premarital Sex

A recent Indian Council of Medical Research study found that 17% of the 1.4 million teenage abortions that take place every year in developing countries happen in India. It is said that "at least" 1500 teenage abortions take place in Delhi every month. Another survey in Mumbai concluded that 64% boys in the age group of 14-19 had one or more sexual encounters. Out of them, 43% had visited 'homes of disrepute' to fulfil their sexual needs.⁸ Today, the teenagers openly speak about sex, they are exposed to sex through the media, especially TV and internet. Parents are often aware of their friendships with the opposite sex. The girls also do not feel so much in losing virginity.⁹

The opinions may vary whether teenage love and sex are healthy or unhealthy. Even among moral theologians there are differences of opinion regarding the morality of premarital love and sex. Anyway, one thing is clear – teenage love affairs have become widespread and more acceptable in India, especially in the urban context. There is violent resistance as well – the number of honour killings reported in the last few months indicates this.

1.3. The Indian Family Today

Many point out that globalization, though has many positive effects, has affected the traditional values of the family. "Much more havoc is done to the family by the cultural globalization, particularly in the last couple of decades."¹⁰ The nuclear families formed today in the cities have become "anonymous societies". "With its (*globalization*) spirit of neo-liberalism, secularism, materialism, hedonism and consumerism it has alienated the people from their religion-based

⁷ *India Today*, 34, no. 49 (2009) "The Fantasy Report," 27-88.

⁸ Aarti, "Handle Adolescence with Care," *Indian Currents* 19, issue 31 (2007, 30 July – 5 August) 26-27.

⁹ Nikita Doval, "Teeny Boppers to Bed Hoppers. Is the Urban Indian Teen Growing Up Too Fast?," *The Week-Health*, April 4, 2010, 16-23.

¹⁰ Vincent M. Concessao (Archbishop of Delhi), "Family: A Conscious Choice for Happiness," in *Family. A Conscious Choice for Happiness. 11th Asia Pacific Congress on Love, Life & Family*, Bangalore: Respect for Life, 2005, 15.

culture undermining their relationships, particularly marital and family relationships and the value of life."¹¹

Survey reports referred above show the changing style of the urban Indian families. Apart from that we do not have statistical data of the family problems, divorce rates, separated couples, single-parented children due to divorce, religious habits of the young couples, etc. However, many reports indicate a sudden growth in the family problems and divorces.¹²

1.4. The Media

The media both reflect the trends and set the trends. Until recently, in India the discussion on sexuality was centred on population control and, with the outbreak of HIV/AIDS pandemic, on safe sex. But, things have drastically changed in the recent years. Speaking about the negative impacts of the media, we may focus more on pornography, cybersex and other sexually explicit material. But, that is only the tip of the iceberg. Mainstream newspapers and magazines contain reports and articles on sexual behaviour, techniques to heighten sexual enjoyment, different postures, etc.¹³ Teenage love and sex and extramarital relationships are presented as normal and healthy. Sex is no more considered as procreative alone or as something to be thought of within the confines of marriage only. Sex, first of all, is for enjoyment – the media try to convince the Indian. TV serials, talk shows, reality shows, etc. which spread such ideas and ideologies are part of the Indian's day-to-day life. The ethical norms are proposed by the "experts" (?). "Values antagonistic to the family have crept into the living rooms and bedrooms of people through the media. Television soap operas have freely portrayed sexual promiscuity and adultery as the 'in-thing'."¹⁴

2. A Christian Response

2.1. Accept the Reality

Many feel helpless as to how to face the tempest of these changes. Others turn to fundamentalist approaches which consider any change

¹¹ Vincent M. Concessao, 15.

¹² Cfr Gunjan Sharma, "In Pursuit of Happiness," *The Week-Health*, Dec 6, 2009, 21.

¹³ Also, see: Deepu Joy, "Sacred Sex and Media Mischief," *Indian Currents* 21, 27 (2009, 29 June – 05 July), 29; Abhishek Pandey, "Sex on Sale," *Ibid.*, 26-27: There are about 2000 websites providing 'escort'/'massage' services in India.

¹⁴ Vincent S. Pereira, "Enhancing the Total Quality of Family Life (8x5)," *Vidyajyoti* 71 (2007) 409.

as devilish and sin; some try to find fault with the Western civilization for these changes. Yet others continue to convince themselves in vain that our society with its profound values will not be affected by these changes. Although the changes happen in the society as a whole, we shall focus on a Christian response to the changes in life-style and attitudes.

On the one hand, in the contemporary culture there is a romanticization and glorification of sex. On the other hand, there is a social silence around sex. First of all, we need to be realistic in acknowledging the changes. Many, especially the youth, find growing difficulty with the traditional norms in sexual morality. They find those norms oppressive, outdated and meaningless. This can be seen also as a search for deeper meanings in man-woman relationship and sexual love, though often this search is misguided by the media and market interests.

It may not be right to brand the changes in the Indian society as the negative influence of the Western culture. The West also had a culture of high sexual morality and family life, thanks to Christianity. The new culture that took hold of the Western society from the 1950s is not typically Western.¹⁵ It is a culture neither of the West nor of the East, but a culture created mainly by the media and the new market tyrants, motivated by the ideology of profit at any cost. Use of sex for marketing constantly fuels sexualisation of the world,¹⁶ because "sex sells anything."¹⁷ It is true that this new culture began in the West, but it reaches everywhere. As soon as the restrictions on the media and the market are lifted, it is taking hold of the Indian society as well. Accusing the West of the responsibility of this erosion of values will not stop this new culture, whereas learning from the failures may help us to limit this onslaught on the values.

There is no doubt that the Christian vision of sexuality and man-woman relationship is profound, and takes into account their multi-dimensional nature. However, we also need to acknowledge the fact that the Christian tradition somehow failed to communicate the real meaning and goodness of human sexuality, highlighting more its

¹⁵ It is true that different ideologies and movements, especially from 18th century gradually prepared the ground for the onset of the sexual revolution. However, the media and the market together got it established.

¹⁶ Cfr. Marciano Vidal, *Manuale di etica teologica*, II, *Morale dell'amore*, Assisi, 1996, 86-87.

¹⁷ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, Harmondsworth, 1968, 216; Cfr. André Guindon, *The Sexual Language*, Ottawa, 1976, 100-101.

dangers. Moreover, the procreative dimension of sexuality was emphasised, ignoring its interpersonal dimensions.¹⁸

Sexual revolution, though took wrong directions, was also a reaction against unhealthy taboos and restrictions denying fulfilment and meaning. Many people who were attracted by the ideals of sexual revolution saw in it a liberation from the oppressive social restrictions on sexuality. For them, it was a means to discover a more profound meaning of sexuality. That is why Harvey Cox says that “any theological critique” that focuses on the “lewdness” of sexual revolution “will misfire completely.”¹⁹ Instead, we need to show how the concept of sexuality proposed by sexual revolution is distorted, dehumanizing, anti-sexual and anti-human. True sexuality involves the whole person. To reduce it to mere genitality is a new form of dualism.²⁰

Unless we acknowledge the changes in attitude and life-style, as well as openly accept the negative emphases that crept into Christian presentation of sexuality, we will become only defensive and we will not succeed in responding to the present-day challenges.

2.2. Affirm the Goodness of Sexuality

Often, there is a misconception that the Church’s attitude to sexuality is negative, that the Church allows sexual enjoyment only for procreation. On the contrary, the Church has always defended the goodness of body and sexuality, even in the midst of philosophies which condemned sexuality and body. Perhaps, due to the influence of certain schools of thought and to defend the goodness of procreation and body, an overemphasis on the procreative dimension crept into Christian ethics. Today Christian ethics is trying to re-discover the original vision which considers sexuality as God’s gift.²¹

Affirming the goodness of sexuality necessarily means accepting the goodness of sexual joy. Evidently, the greatest attraction to sexual intimacy is its pleasure. This does not signify a hedonistic search for pleasure. Christian ethics has validly held that genital sexual pleasure should be in the context of marriage and should be open to love and life. But, sexual repression and glorification of pain was often presented as the only alternative to hedonism.²² Bernard Häring

¹⁹ Harvey Cox, 214.

²⁰ C.J. Snoek, “Marriage and the Institutionalization,” in F. Böckle, ed., *Moral Theology. The Future of Marriage as Institution*, London 1970, 115.

²¹ Cfr. Jack Dominian, *The Church and the Sexual Revolution*, London, 1971, 69; Gerald D. Coleman, *Human Sexuality*, New York 1992, 3.

²² Cfr. Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, Cleveland, 1994, 82.

observes that although the Bible does not give the slightest indication that pleasure as such in ordered sex could be wrong, throughout the tradition, sexual pleasure occupied a great deal of space in sexual ethics. According to him, the overly sensuous world in which the Church Fathers lived may be responsible for this and adds that today we find ourselves in a similar situation. However, for Häring, Christian theology can fulfil its prophetic role and denounce deviations only against the background of meaning and acknowledging whatever is good.²³

To say that sexuality is a gift also means to acknowledge its human and divine dimensions. Sexuality is an all-encompassing reality, it is the relational capacity.²⁴ It is “the mode or manner by which humans experience and express both the incompleteness of their individualities as well as their relatedness to each other as male and female.”²⁵ Thus, sexuality is the concrete manifestation of the divine call to completion. To deny the goodness of sexuality is to deny the divine plan for human perfection.²⁶

This basic Christian message of the goodness of sexuality and sexual fulfilment somehow fails to reach the Christians. Consequently, even today Christians continue to repeat that the primary purpose of sexuality according to the teaching of the Church is procreation; that sexual enjoyment even in marriage is to be limited, otherwise it will distract one from God; and, many continue to teach that sexual abstinence is the best way to please God. That is why people refer to the scriptures only when they speak about sexual norms and to *Kâmasûtra* and other sex manuals when they speak about sexual joy. It is true that there is a false glorification of works like *Kâmasûtra* in the Indian tradition, without understanding their context and vision of life. However, we need to acknowledge that often Christians fail to give enough importance to the beauty of man-woman love and intimacy as presented in the creation narratives or Song of Songs. A sexual ethic which begins with the premises of control and suspicion will be rejected on the ground that it is oppressive and will lead people to other ideologies which speak of a liberative approach, though in reality they lead to further oppression and destruction. This demands a paradigm shift in sexual ethics and catechesis of the Church. We need to be convinced that to be sexual and to be spiritual are not

²³ Bernad Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, II, Middlegreen, 1979, 513.

²⁴ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Women and Sexuality*, New York, 1992, 56.

²⁵ Anthony Kosnik – *al.*, *Human Sexuality*, New York, 1977, 82.

²⁶ Cfr Vincent J. Genovesi, *In Pursuit of Love*, Collegeville, 1996, 132.

contradictory; that to enjoy sexual fulfilment and to be Christians are not opposed to each other.

2.3. Sex Education

In the recent years there was a lot of debate in India on sex education. Many religions including Christianity had apprehensions about the initiatives to introduce sex education in the curriculum. It is also accused that the government's main interest in imparting sex education is promoting "safe sex" and family planning, and not safeguarding the necessary values.

The Church can be justified in opposing to a programme of sex education which is not in agreement with its value system. But, the question remains: "Has the Church taken steps to impart a systematic sex education?" Though Catechism books and value education programmes in the Catholic institutions have begun to include topics on sexuality, many find them inadequate to prepare the teenagers to face today's challenges. Moreover, the overall tone often is negative and they are presented by those who have no adequate training. Practically, the media with their spicy menu become the sole source and authority in sex education.

The urgency of the situation demands determined efforts from the part of the Church to impart sex education. "Persistent resistance that we encounter in matters pertaining to sexuality when it comes to its instruction could be due to the negative approach that has been adopted..."²⁷ Sex education that focuses only on "don'ts" will be rejected and will lead to antagonistic attitudes to Church's teaching. "Moral education must begin with enabling people to ascertain their personal self-worth through an awareness that their sexuality is the basis of their sharing in God's creative love for the world in its goodness."²⁸ Biological and social sciences should have their role in sex education, but they cannot be considered as the most important sources for interpreting the meaning/value,²⁹ because our sexuality is not merely physical, but is profoundly psychological, social and deeply spiritual as well. Besides addressing the various issues that teenagers and the youth face, evaluation of the media presentation of sexuality should be an integral part of sex education. Our sexuality is not naturally integrated. Sex education should be designed is such

²⁷ Saju Chackalackal, "Editorial," *Journal of Dharma*, 34 (2009) 13.

²⁸ Felix Podimattam, "Sexual Spirituality," *Jeevadharma* 30 (2000) 559.

²⁹ Christine E. Gudorf, 51.

a way as to facilitate the integration of sexuality, especially in the midst of the ideologies that lead to disintegration.

2.4. Gender Justice

The quest for gender justice is reflected on the Indian society as well, bringing about rapid changes in man-woman relationship, marriage and family. The new economic independence many women enjoy today give them the courage to assert their dignity and freedom. "The Indian woman... is no longer willing to sacrifice her identity or to bear any misery silently for the sake of her children, family and society."³⁰ This new awareness of the woman and her partner's refusal to accept it is one of the main factors behind the growing number of divorces, especially in the cities. "It is no longer just trust and commitment that a woman is seeking in marriage, she wants sexual and emotional satisfaction and she wants a life partner who is not just doing well in his career, but respects her career, too."³¹ What the Indian woman seeks today is freedom and personal space in marriage; she is not ready for unnecessary and humiliating compromises. Often we boast of the stability of Indian family; our claim may be true, but, we should also ask ourselves whether this stability has been at the cost of the silent sufferings and interminable tears of women.

The question is pertinent how the Church is prepared to respond to this new awareness of women and its implications for man-woman relationship. In fact, man-woman relationship and marriage based on equality and mutuality is not a compromise to be made to satisfy the 'liberated' woman, but the demand of Christian justice. A healthy man-woman relationship and the stability of the family demand the recognition of the equal dignity of both. "For, genuine love is possible only between two equals."³²

The theme of the 28th Plenary Assembly (2008) of the CBCI was "Empowerment of Women in the Church and Society". However, to change the deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes and patterns, clear and determined steps are needed. Besides pointing out the continuing violence on women, the bishops acknowledge that, "Gender

³⁰ Gunjan Sharma, 17.

³¹ Gunjan Sharma, 18. In the last couple of years there is a 30-40% increase in the number of women seeking divorce and most divorces are happening in the initial first few months. In most cases the reason is that women are not ready to tolerate things beyond a point.

³² Saju Chackalackal, 14.

discrimination has negative effects on boys and men as well.”³³ Discrimination against women results in a distorted way of living men’s sexuality. Man can fully understand the meaning of his sexuality and attain sexual integration only when woman is accepted as an equal partner. The Christian vision of man-woman relationship, as presented in the Yahwist creation narrative and Song of Songs, is not that of dependence-dominance, but of inter-dependence.³⁴

One of the continuing forms of discrimination against women is the dowry system. In spite of the prohibition by law, dowry continues to be widely practised. A lot of violence and crimes are committed on women due to the dowry system.³⁵ Dowry makes marriage an unequal relationship from the very beginning. Dowry is the main reason behind considering the woman as inferior and the girl child as a burden, causing countless female foeticides. Dowry is against the Christian vision of marriage founded on love, mutuality, equality and complementarity. It is doubtful whether the Church has worked with sincerity to abolish the dowry system. The Indian Church has to consider seriously how dowry has to be presented a structural sin which leads to many other evils.

Recognition of the equal dignity of women by men is essential for the stability of the Indian family, as well as for living meaningfully the Christian vision of the family. This conviction needs to be reflected on the Church’s teaching on sexuality and marriage and in the marriage preparation programmes.

2.5. Family: Some Areas of Concern

1. As in other Asian countries, in India also, “the family is still an inclusive communion of husband and wife, parents and children, the grandparents and grandchildren, the young and the old.”³⁶ The presence of this larger family had a great role in the stability of the Indian family. Today, the young couples find themselves uprooted from the network of their context, left to themselves with all the stresses and tensions of a demanding work, economic pressures and limited

³³ Statement of the 28th Plenary Assembly of the CBCI, “Empowerment of women in the Church and Society, “ in *Vidyajyoti* 72 (2008), 301-302.

³⁴ Cfr Shaji George Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition*, Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007, 20-40.

³⁵ In 2008, 8172 dowry deaths and 21467 rape cases were reported in India, and the total number of other crimes against women is 195856: Cfr <http://ncrb.nic.in/cii2008>.

³⁶ S. Arokiasamy, “Editorial” *Vidyajyoti* 68 (2004) 5.

time for each other, for social relationships and for religious activities. This demands a lot of care and attention from the part of the Church.

2. Hundreds of thousands of couples who live separately for years due to the conditions of work need Church's concern.

3. The Church has to be bold enough to defend the inseparability of the unitive and procreative purposes of marital sexuality.³⁷ However, let us remember that the importance given to love, mutuality and intimacy is not often understood well.

4. There is a growing number of the divorced/separated, who are in need of the Church's pastoral care.

Concluding Remarks

In the Indian scenario, attitudes towards sexuality, love relationships, marriage and family are changing rapidly. This does not mean that all the changes are coming from convictions. Blind imitation, confusion and dissatisfaction with the existing norms and life-style also are at work. At the same time, we need to consider the opinion that perhaps today we are at the threshold of developing a meaningful and profound vision of sexuality. Behind the deviations, exaggerations and reactions is the search for the real meaning of sexuality, love and marriage. This heightens the need of a clear, realistic and balanced guidance from the part of the Church.

³⁷ For example, the Pastoral Letter by Major Archbishop Cardinal Varkey Vithayathil, 10 July 2006.