

KĀMA WITHOUT DHARMA?

Understanding the Ethics of Pleasure in *Kāmasūtra*

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1. Introduction

Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra* is one of the most popular and well-known works of the Indian tradition in the West and other parts of the world. It has become the symbol of Indian eroticism and Indian sexology. *Kāmasūtra* became so well-known in the English speaking world, thanks to the pioneering work of Richard F. Burton. Although it was published in 1883, *Kāmasūtra* began to get great attention worldwide from the 1960s. Many subsequent translations came, but Burton's translation continues to enjoy great authority. *Kāmasūtra* has gained a greater attention and curiosity in the United States of America and the English speaking world with the publication of a recent translation with notes by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar.¹

Searching for recent works on *Kāmasūtra*, I visited some of the leading bookshops in Bangalore city. Interestingly, most of these bookshops have a section named '*Kāmasūtra*'. Majority of the books in the section '*Kāmasūtra*', however, are popular erotic novels and other erotic works, both Indian and Western, which have nothing to do with Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra*. Most of those books cannot be considered works on sexology even and, in all legitimacy, they can be classified without much deliberation as pornographic. This is indicative of the way

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¹Mallanga Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra: A New, Complete English Translation of the Sanskrit Text with Excerpts from the Sanskrit Jayamangala Commentary of Yashodhara Indrapada, the Hindi Jaya Commentary of Devadatta Shastri, and Explanatory Notes by the Translators*, trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Hereafter, referred to as Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra*. I have mainly depended on this translation or, occasionally on that of Sir Richard F. Burton; see also Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love*, New York: Continuum, 2007, 91.

Kāmasūtra is considered today, the way it is presented and read. It seems that it is approached as a classical work on erotica or sexology, which advocates an unbridled search for and enjoyment of sexual pleasure without any other consideration. Moreover, it should be seriously doubted whether it is advertised as a classical pornographic work, which perhaps accounts for its unusual popularity.²

In this essay, we undertake to consider whether the above described approach to the *Kāmasūtra* does justice to its content and the purpose of the author in writing/compiling it, so as to understand its philosophy of life, especially its ethic of pleasure. In order to facilitate this, we shall also attempt to understand the context in which we situate it in the overall context of the Indian vision of life and sexuality. In this project, we shall not be judgemental, but try to understand it in its original context.

2. Indian Approaches to Sexuality

“Nowhere have close relationships of religion and sex been displayed more clearly than in India and, with divine and human models of sexual activity, sacramental views of sex were abundantly illustrated.”³ “The *kāma purusārdha* denotes human wellbeing, feeling well, or happiness, resulting out of the gratification of a desire for an object, external or

²For example, see Alka Pande and Lance Dane, *Indian Erotica*, New Delhi: Roli Books, 2001, 42-43: “Yet, unfortunately, the book is one of the most exoticised of Indian texts carted abroad in all manner of forms and meanings... However, it is often viewed merely as a source of titillation by many.” This may be evident also from the way some editions of *Kāmasūtra* are published today. For example, see *The Illustrated Kāma Sutra*, Charles Fowkes, ed., London: Hamlyn, 1998. The editor writes: “Although only the ‘64’ – the second part of Sir Richard Burton’s version – deals exclusively with sex, this is the ‘*Kāmasūtra*’ of the popular imagination. There is much more to the work than that” (10). But, although such a solemn statement is made, this edition gives only the ‘64’ in detail and the sections before ‘64’ are given very briefly whereas almost everything after ‘64’ is omitted. Doesn’t it say something about the way *Kāmasūtra* is presented today to cater to the popular expectations, but draining it of its profound vision? Please note, Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love*, 91: “It is Book II – notably only one book of the seven – that has been the object of prurient interest, satire, and a certain amount of infamy; indeed, the *Kāmasūtra* is frequently equated with the sorts of material in this one book.”

³Geoffrey Parrinder, *Sex in the World’s Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, 5.

internal.”⁴ The Hindu conception of a full life consists in the harmony of Dharma, *Artha* and *Kāma*. Although Dharma has primacy, it is equally emphasised that neither *Artha* nor *Kāma* is to be neglected by a normal human being. Moreover, the concept that *Kāma* is the foundation of Dharma and *Artha*, that it is their essence and womb and the innermost core of the world, is also present in the scriptures.⁵ Just like in many other religious traditions, different approaches to sexuality can be identified within Indian religious traditions. They may be perhaps broadly classified as follows.⁶

2.1. Mythical and Ritualistic Concept of Sexuality

In this approach, sexuality is considered godly. This is especially depicted in the creation stories, where the work of creation is presented as the result of the sexual desire and sexual act of god/gods. The Upanisads contain descriptions of ritual intercourse. The stories of creation as the result of the sexual intercourse of Prajapati are examples.⁷ *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* describes sexual intercourse as a ceremony. The woman is considered the consecrated place where sacrifice is to be performed: “Her lap is a sacrificial altar, her pubic hairs are the sacrificial grass, her skin is the press for the Soma libation, the two lips of the vulva are the fire in the middle.”⁸ As one is strengthened by the sacrifice, so great is the world of him who practises sexual intercourse with this ritual knowledge. “From this time, at least, there spread the belief that the rewards of a sacrifice could be obtained by a ritually consummated sexual union.”⁹ The mythical

⁴Rajendra Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study of Classical Indian Philosophy of Morals History of Science, Part I*, in *Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, vol. 12, New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 2008, 249.

⁵*Mahabharata*, 12.167: see Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, 14. However, here *kāma* is more as a precondition for all the other *purusārthas*. “Unless an individual has a desire to attain *artha*, to follow *dharma*, or to attain *moksa*, he cannot have *artha*, *dharma*, or *moksa*.” Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 250.

⁶It should be kept in mind, however, that we cannot make a watertight division of different approaches. The origin and foundation of different approaches can be seen in the same *puranas* and in the stories of the same gods and goddesses. Similarly, elements of different approaches can be found in the same approach. I have attempted this classification taking into consideration their major emphasis.

⁷*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, 1.4.

⁸*Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, 6.4.

⁹Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, 18.

and ritualistic concepts of sexuality are more evident and elaborate in the stories and other texts about Śiva. It is the union of *Purusa* with *Prakṛti*, symbolized as the union of Śiva and Śakti, that is believed to create the world. There is, in fact, the cult of worshipping the primordial Mother Goddess and the Father God. Both are symbolically represented in the cult of Śiva Linga, which is, in fact, a representation of the *Linga* and *Yoni* joined together. *Linga* symbolizes Śiva and *Yoni* symbolizes Śakti. “It [*the phallus*] is the tool of procreation and also the giver of divine ecstasy or *ananda*, which emerges from the union of the phallus and the yoni. *ananda* ultimately leads to detachment and enlightenment.”¹⁰ Moreover, the godheads are always represented with their female consorts.¹¹ The stories of gods engaging in love and sexual intercourse with goddesses or humans also have as their underlying principle this approach to sexuality. This is, in general, the basis of fertility cults and rites. What is emphasised more is the procreative dimension of sexuality, although the recreational dimension does not go neglected. The whole creation, fertility, and prosperity are considered to be the blessings of gods, who have engaged/engage in sexual activity. By worshipping the sexual powers of gods – which is often expressed by worshipping representation of the sexual organs of gods – and by engaging in ritual sexual intercourse, the devotees believe to attain fertility, prosperity, and final salvation.

2.2. Mystical Concept of Sexuality

The relationship and union between God and the human being/soul are symbolically presented in sensual and erotic language. The longing of the soul/human for God is described in vivid and explicit imageries of the sexual love and union of the devotee with the deity. Uninhibited description and narrative of the desire for the lover/deity, the pain of separation and the joy in union are presented in sexual terms. Usually, the devotee is the female and the deity is the male. The *Kṛṣṇalīlā*, especially the love-play of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, is the best example for this. Other works in the *Bhakti* tradition also contain many such descriptions and stories.¹² “The *gopīs*’ love for the youthful K□□□a

¹⁰Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 75; see also, 54-79.

¹¹Subodh Kapoor, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Heritage*, vol. 45: *Vatsyayana*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2002, 3.

¹²Among love poetry based on the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, *Gīta Govinda*, the works of Chāṇḍī Dās, of Chaitanya (16th century), of the Ālvārs, etc., are among the most popular. Chaitanya used to dress himself as Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā.

became the symbol of the love of the soul for God, and this self-abandonment to the divine became central to the cult of Kṛṣṇa... God is in love with the soul, and the soul with God. In this divine love-affair, God is necessarily the male, the soul the female...”¹³ Radha’s sexual passion for Kṛṣṇa and her adultery in leaving her husband are symbolic of the loving devotion that a *bhakta* should have for the Lord. Here, sexuality, sexual love, and union are made use for the purpose of describing the union of a *bhakta* and the deity, perhaps because no other imagery can better express the divine-human intimacy and union. Sexuality is the symbol of the highest union and intimacy that is possible between the *bhakta* and the deity. Thus, sexuality is raised into the realm of spirituality and mysticism. Although the descriptions of sexual union and expressions of love do not in reality speak about sex or man-woman relationship, indirectly a message can be taken for the actual man-woman relationship as well, namely, human beings have the actual experience of the union and intimacy that can be lived between a man and a woman, an intimacy that surpasses all limits and involves the totality of the two persons. Here, it may be noted that there is no mention about the procreative dimension of sexuality, but only the affective and unitive dimensions of sexuality.

2.3. Tantric Concept of Sexuality

In the *Tantric* system, in which mainly the Mother Goddess is worshipped, sexuality occupies a central role. *Tantra* is said to predate all texts, Śiva and Devi themselves being the authors. *Tantra*, instead of a withdrawal, encourages the fullest acceptance of human desires and feelings, since they are the *via media* between the physical world and the inner reality. The aim is not the discovery of the unknown, but the realisation of the real, as *Viśvasara Tantra* puts it: “What is here, is elsewhere; what is not here, is nowhere.”¹⁴ That is, *Tantra* is not a philosophy of the denial of the world or the physical, but of their affirmation. The world and the body are means of attaining spiritual realization. The body is not the enemy of the soul; the matter and spirit are not two opposing forces fighting with each other. The body is the means, through which alone the human can come to spiritual fulfilment. Spiritual powers are hidden in the body itself.

The duality of the male (*puruṣa*) and the female (*prakṛti* or *śakti*) is the basis of everything in *Tantra*. *Puruṣa* is static and it can create only

¹³R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, 166-167.

¹⁴Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 80.

through the union with the *prakṛti*, the kinetic energy. “The *tantrics* view the universe as being one with themselves. The psychological and biological functions of the human body are a tool through which the ultimate energy, the *kundalini sakti*, can be awakened to unite with the supreme being, Lord Śiva.”¹⁵ The *kundalini sakti* lies coiled in the spinal cord, called *chakras* and when it is awakened, it results in opening the unfathomable energy in the brain. This can be aroused through *pranayama* and meditation. Another means of awakening the *kundalini*, according to some schools of *Tantra*, is sexual interaction and sexual intercourse. “There is such intense sexual energy in the body, says *tantra*, that it can liberate the psyche of an individual.”¹⁶ Sex is a means of awakening the *kundalini*, of joining the female and male principles in the body, through which alone the spiritual powers of the body will be ultimately released and realized. Hence, sexual union becomes a ritual for spiritual realization. In practice, various rites, *mantras* and prayers are prescribed for each stage of sexual union and detailed instructions are given how the sexual act is to be conducted. The roles of both the male and female partners are equally important since only through the perfect blending of the female and the male can the spiritual realization be attained. The love or personal communion of the partners is not at all the goal. The partner is rather a male/female principle, a means of attaining the spiritual realization. Hence, in some sects, the practice of indiscriminately choosing the partner from the group for sex was practised.¹⁷ “Also, sex is neither immoral nor moral; it is amoral.”¹⁸ Here again, there is, in reality, no importance given to the procreative dimension of sexuality. Moreover, the aspect of personal love and union is also not emphasised. What is important is the union of the male and the female, as a means of releasing the hidden powers of the individual, which ultimately leads to the union with the Ultimate.

¹⁵Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 82.

¹⁶Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 84.

¹⁷Tantric sex also has elements of ritualistic sex. At the same time, perhaps a distinction can be made on the basis that, in general, the ritualistic sex has as the object fertility and prosperity, whereas Tantric sex aims at the spiritual realization of the partners.

¹⁸Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 85. Perhaps it is important to keep in mind the distinction that is made among the different schools of *Tantra*, namely, *daksinachara* (right-hand path), *vamachara* (left-hand path, which recommended the five M's, namely, *madya*, *mamsa*, *matsya*, *mudra* – parched cereal – and *maithuna*. See Parrinder, *Sex in the World's Religions*, 37 and Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 88.

2.4. *Kāmaśāstra*

Kāmaśāstra is the science of love and sex. This can be said to be the Indian sexology. Elements of Ayurveda and eugenics also can be seen in this. Like *Arthaśāstra*, *Kāmaśāstra* is a practical science that begins with the teaching on the three aims of life. Just as *Arthaśāstra* is concerned with presenting *artha* (attainment and rejoicing of earthly happiness), *Kāmaśāstra* is concerned merely to teach the means and manner through which man may enjoy *kāma* the best.¹⁹ *Kāma*, although often understood as sexual pleasure, “denotes the whole range of possible experience within the sphere of love, sex, sensual gratification and delight. *Kāma* is wish, desire, carnal gratification, lust, love, and affection.”²⁰ In the *Kāmasūtra*, Vatsyayana explains how this science got developed: In the beginning, after having created men and women, the Brahma laid down rules for regulating their existence with regard to Dharma, *Artha* and *Kāma*. Of these, those which treated of Dharma were separately written by Manu and those related to *Artha* were compiled by Brhaspati; those related to *Kāma* were expounded in one thousand chapters by Nandi. What was written by Nandi was reproduced in an abbreviated form in five hundred chapters by Svetaketu. This was again reproduced in further abridged form in one hundred and fifty chapters by Babhravya. These one hundred and fifty chapters were put together in seven parts by seven different authors. Vatsyayana, combining the work of all these authors and putting together the different parts, composed an abstract, the *Kāmasūtra*.^{21,22} Here, Vatsyayana is trying to situate *Kāmaśāstra* in general, and *Kāmasūtra* in particular, in the Indian religious tradition. Following Vatsyayana, there are also other works, like that of Kokkoka’s *Ratirahasya* (written between 10-12th century), Kalyana Malla’s *Ananga Ranga*, etc. However,

¹⁹Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 35.

²⁰Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1990 (reprint 2005), 145.

²¹Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 1.1.1-14, 3-5.

²²Zimmer points out that, in fact, the treatment on love and sexuality can be seen in the Vedas and the Upanisads. For example, a 13th part of the whole of *Atharvaveda* (41 out of 536 items) is devoted to the art of love and sexuality. “This old Vedic material has never been studied and treated in comparison with the much later formulae preserved to us in such works as Vatsyayana’s *Kāmasūtra*, yet it discloses the originally sacred and authoritative character of the doctrine that appears in the later words in a rather secularized, worldly form – as a kind of *ars amandi* for courtesans and gentlemen-about-town.” Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 146.

Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra* remains the most authoritative and foundational work. *Kāmasūtras* deal with the sex and man-woman relationship. Their chief concern is to help the human being attain pleasure. Although they are aware of and concerned about other *Purusarthās*, their emphasis is on *Kāma*, and “strictly disregard the discouraging insights and devastating ascetic prescriptions... The case is similar to that of the Hindu handbooks of the science of politics, where all the principles of virtue are disregarded except insofar as a mask of morality may serve the purpose of the power specialist.”²³ They also speak about family and the importance of the progeny, but what they underscore is the dimension of man-woman relationship and the attainment of pleasure in their union. They do not refer to the ritualistic or mystical dimensions of sexuality or engage in detailed ethical analysis, but rather approach it as a science based on empirical data. Everything, however, is oriented towards the overall wellbeing of the human person, who is a social and religious being.

These different approaches to sexuality existed side by side within Hinduism, some traditions or sects giving more importance to a particular approach or adopting only one. However, there was no attempt from a particular sect or tradition to condemn other approaches to sexuality. Different approaches were accepted as equally valid and as having their own value.

3. *Kāmasūtra*: Author and the Text

Kāmasūtra was composed by Mallanga Vatsyayana (Mallanga is the personal name and Vatsyayana is the name of the *gotra*) between the 1st and the 5th century AD. Many scholars are of the opinion that it was written in the 3rd century AD, more possibly in the second half of it.²⁴ It was written in the form of *sutras* or aphorisms. Though commentaries must have been written on *Kāmasūtra* – as was the practice – the first authoritative commentary extant to us today is the *Jayamangala* commentary of Yashodhara Indrapada, which was not written earlier than the 11th century.

In the introductory section, as already pointed out, Vatsyayana ascribes the authority of his work to seers prior to him and limits his role to that of compiling what contained in their works. This may be intended to give greater authority and validity to his work by attributing to it a semi-

²³Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 145.

²⁴For a detailed discussion on the date of composition of *Kāmasūtra*, see Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 69-108.

divine origin.²⁵ Scholars, however, have opined that Vatsyayana is more the author than the compiler and that even if we accept that Vatsyayana was a compiler, his genius and originality are evident from the deep insights he had of the human psyche, of physiology of sexual responses and enjoyment, of the social life and practices of different peoples of his times, and of sexual practices and behaviour. The mythological nature of the origin of *Kāmasūtra*, as narrated by Vatsyayana, may have another purpose as well:

Its point is towards the importance of the pursuit of *kāma* as a *purusārtha* and towards the respectable character of anyone’s studying matters relating to *kāma* and the methods or techniques of attaining the kind of wellbeing which *kāma*, as a value, denotes... Vatsyayana’s objective, thus, clearly is to aver that the pursuit of sexual pleasure in the most effective way and to the greatest possible extent is as respectable a human value as any other human value may be, that is, that there is nothing profane, or intrinsically evil, in pursuing it.²⁶

Vatsyayana himself states that he has been a lifetime celibate. This is not much questioned in the Indian tradition. However, there are those who do not take it for granted and hold that Vatsyayana has presented himself like this “only to add to his account a *yogic* authority, since it might have been believed in his time that what was received in a state of *yogic* concentration could neither be anything questionable nor anything undesirable.”²⁷

However, we need to be clear about one thing: *Kāmasūtra* is not listed among the sacred books of India. It might have been read by many in the era in which it was composed. But, how far it was used by Indians in the later centuries is not clear. However, it was never condemned, nor was its authority questioned. Moreover, perhaps no other single work has so much influenced the religious art and literature following its compilation.

Kāmasūtra is divided into seven sections or parts: (1) Society and Social Concepts: attainments of Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*; Sixty-four arts; the lifestyle of the *nāgaraka*, his companions, etc.; on women fit and unfit for sexual union; on taking another man’s wife; and on friends and messengers. (2) On Sexual Union (the famous ‘64’, since it deals with

²⁵Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 7.

²⁶Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 255.

²⁷Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 255.

eight subjects, each of which is eight types): sexual typology; kinds of union – embracing, kissing, pressing, biting; sexual positions, unusual sexual acts; slapping and accompanying moaning; on females acting the part of males; on oral; on how to begin and end the sexual union. (3) On the Acquisition of a Wife: betrothal and marriage; creating confidence in the girl; courtship; on gaining a girl by the man and the man by the girl; devious devices for marriage. (4) About a Wife: life of a virtuous wife and her behaviour in the absence of her husband; relationship between the senior and junior wives, remarried virgin widow, a wife unlucky in love, women of king’s harem and a husband who has many wives. (5) Other Men’s Wives: characteristics of men and women and men who have success with women and women who are easily gained over; About gaining over a woman; state of a woman’s mind; the business of a go-between; love of persons in authority for the wives of other men; women of the royal harem, and on keeping of one’s wife. (6) About Courtesans: courtesan’s resorting to men, the kind of the desirable man; on courtesan’s living with a man as his wife; on the means of getting money; about reunion with an ex-lover; on different kinds of gain; different kinds of profits and on different kinds of courtesans. (7) On the Means of Attracting Others to Yourself: on adornments, subjugating the hearts of others and on tonic medicines; on rekindling exhausted passion, the ways of enlarging the penis and on unusual techniques.

4. Social and Family Life at the Time of *Kāmasūtra*

The ideal life described by Vatsyayana is that of a *nāgaraka*, a city-dweller, by extension any cultured human being. “It can be inferred from the *Kāmasūtra* that in the urban culture of the times, the *nāgaraka* was deeply concerned with his sexual impulses.”²⁸ From the detailed instructions that Vatsyayana gives to the *nāgaraka* on keeping his household, on his relations and friends, on his food habits, on his hygienic and aesthetic habits, on his intellectual and cultural engagements, on his relationship with women and so on we get a vivid picture of the ideals of social life of that time. Clearly, such a life presupposes a considerably high economic wellbeing: “It is apparent that working men and women could not really have been part of the *Kāmasūtra* pantheon: they would not have had the time for the elaborate, pre-sexual preparations.”²⁹ However, this

²⁸Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 43.

²⁹Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 45.

may not indicate that Vatsyayana is addressing a scant minority of the society, considering the prosperity that India had in those days. The society as a whole seems to have led a peaceful life and it could afford high intellectual activity, social amusements, and religious festivals. Only such a society could invest time and energy for a systematic thinking on the science of pleasure.

A gay and happy people who worshipped their gods, performed their rituals but enjoyed life with all its refinements to the full is the picture of Indian society which is seen in Vatsyayana. That this was not an idealistic presentation may be seen from other evidence, but is clear from the text itself, because what our author attempts to do is not to describe an ideal society, but to instruct people how to live the life of the senses in society as it existed.³⁰

This is also evident in the man-woman relationship. The picture that we get is different from that of the present-day Indian society:

The *Kāmasūtra* was possible in an ancient Indian society that was liberated, happy and candid when it came to sexual affairs. Moreover, society was still more or less tribal. Women moved freely in public and young men courted girls without eyebrows being raised. Marriage as an institution had been established, but sometimes functioned on a plural basis. Both pre-marital and extra-marital sex were common. Most notably, courtesans were admired and socially accepted, and not looked down upon as is the case today.³¹

It was a society that enjoyed art, literature, dance, drama, and sports. Free and cordial relationship between man and woman was encouraged and practised. Regarding sexuality, different sexual phenomena such as homosexuality, lesbianism, etc., were known and accepted.

There are also differing opinions regarding the vision of life and social context of *Kāmasūtra* and other writings in the *Kāmaśāstra* tradition. For example, Heinrich Zimmer points out that the dominant attitude in Hinduism was that of austerity, chastity, and extreme restraint, marked by an emphasis on purely spiritual pursuits and an absorption in religious and mystical experiences. *Kāmaśāstras* intended to correct this extreme approach to life. They also tried to ward off the frustration of

³⁰Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 34.

³¹Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 41.

married people in a society where marriages of convenience prevailed over marriage of love. “No doubt there were many dull and painful households where a little study of the courtesan’s science could have been of immense service. It was for a society of frozen emotions, not libertine, that this compendium of the techniques of adjustment and stimulation was compiled.”³² It would be beyond the scope of this essay to establish what kind of a society actually led to the compilation of *Kāmasūtra* and similar works. We can, without much deliberation, say that different views of life and different approaches to sexuality existed side by side in Hinduism and they simultaneously reflected on the social life. However, *Kāmasūtra* did not limit itself rigidly to married life and marital sexuality. *Ananga Ranga*, a later work of the 16th century, instead addressed the married people and considered sex outside marriage as destructive.

4.1. Marriage

Regarding marriage, Vatsyayana agrees with the ideals and procedures and rituals prescribed by the *Dharmaśāstras*. However, in agreement with his general approach, he also refers to the customs from a commonsense point of view without making much ethical judgements. Until the completion of studies, one was expected to be a *brahmachāri*. The Vedic tradition held the obtaining of a son who would offer sacrifices for one’s father as the goal of marriage. Although Vatsyayana is chiefly concerned with the physical aspects of marriage, he does not ignore the aspects of worldly gains, social position, and the spiritual welfare of the couple. “A good marriage secures the ends of *Dharma* and *Artha* – that is, spiritual as well as social and economic welfare and besides, progeny, increase of relatives and friends and also untarnished, genuine love.”³³ “As for marriage, the *Kāmasūtra* believes in the idea of compatibility. This should not just be physical but extend to social and economic equality between families and partners as well. Values, beliefs and living standards should be common and shared... Happy married life rests, says the *Kāmasūtra*, on a substratum of love, respect and trust.”³⁴ Marriage was to take place with a virgin belonging to the same caste. This shows Vatsyayana’s practical sense and an awareness of the social system. Sexual relationships with women of both higher and lower castes, with public women or widows, was not approved as befitting, nor was it prohibited since the object was

³²Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, 39.

³³Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 174.

³⁴Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 45.

only pleasure. However, such a woman was not to become the lawful wife or to give birth to a lawful progeny. The *Dharmaśāstras* hold that offerings by such an offspring will not be acceptable to the gods.³⁵ Vatsyayana gives a long list of the qualities required of the bride, but as the ultimate norm, he says, he will be a happy husband who marries the woman on whom his heart and his eyes are set. Hence, he should not consider any other woman.³⁶ That is, not the physical charm and other concerns, but love was the ultimate norm. The importance given to love is clear, again, from the fact that he considers *Gāndharva* as the most preferred form of marriage:

... because, he declares, love is the fruit of all the forms of marriage that can be conceived of, and love is more in evidence here than in any other forms where considerations of birth, money or other qualities are the deciding factors. It brings forth happiness, is not accompanied by all the troubles of a lengthy negotiation and ceremonial, and what is more important, is the result of mutual love.³⁷

Among the wealthy and the powerful, polygamy was prevalent, though monogamy was not unknown. Vatsyayana says that the wealthy people had generally a plurality of spouses who were very miserable, indeed, as the husband was but one and the claimants to his affection were many; and he gives the advice that it is better to have a poor husband even though he may not have many qualities to recommend him than to have a clever man whose favours have to be shared with many.³⁸ This piece of advice given to women shows that Vatsyayana considers one-to-one relationship based on love and equality as the ideal form of marriage.

4.2. Position of Women and the Life of Courtesans

From the descriptions given by Vatsyayana, we understand that the dignity of woman was acknowledged and that her capabilities as a person were respected. The woman's role was not that of a mere object of pleasure. Women were literate, though higher education perhaps was not so common among them. The woman was supposed to develop her skills and talents. This is evident from the list of 64 arts that she was expected to

³⁵Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 175.

³⁶Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 3.1.13, 76.

³⁷Kapoor, *Vatsyayana*, 193.

³⁸Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 3.4.50-52, 90.

master. However, it is important to make a distinction between *nāyika* and the wife of the *nāgaraka*. The *nāyika* is not identical with the wife. The *nāyika* is a highly educated and cultured woman of great accomplishments. She has easy access to the elite and high ranks of the society. She can be a maiden, a twice married woman or a courtesan. Enjoyment – of all kinds – with the *nāyika* was not prohibited by Dharma. There are different sections in the *Kāmasūtra* ‘About the Wife’ and ‘About Courtesans’.

The courtesans were a special class of women, highly educated and cultured. Traditionally, a distinction is made between *kulatas* (mere prostitutes) and *ganikas* (cultured courtesans), and Vatsyayana follows this distinction. He says that one who is versed in arts obtains the name of a *ganika* or a woman of society, of high quality, and receives a seat of honour in the assemblage of men. She is, moreover, always respected by the king and praised by learned men and her favour being sought by all, as she becomes an object of universal regard.³⁹

The enjoyment of pleasure and the attainment of respect through association with respectable and powerful men was part of the life of the courtesans. However, for her, the important *purusārtha* was *Artha*. Sexuality, for her was a means of obtaining *Artha*. Even when she would live ‘like a wife’ with a man, she should be mindful of this. Here, again, Vatsyayana’s basic concept of the goals of life and their interrelationship is clear. Even when she would enjoy *Kāma*, she should not forget that *Artha* is more important for her than *Kāma*.

Evidently, all these show a kind of double morality. Unconditional fidelity was expected of a wife, whereas the husband was given more freedom, whether to have more than one wife or to have sexual relationship with other women.

5. *Kāmasūtra*: A Book on Eroticism?

Kāmasūtra, though it deals with sexual enjoyment and ways of heightening sexual pleasure, cannot be considered as belonging to the category of erotica. There is no attempt to identify itself with pornographic literature, but clearly considers itself as a work in the science of love. Similarly, *Kāmasūtra* does not try to belong to the class of romantic literature; it adopts the dry language of aphorisms. It does not limit *kāma* to sexual intercourse and sexual pleasure, but includes all kinds of enjoyments. Moreover, rather than a work on sexual relationships, it has to

³⁹Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 6.1.1-20, 131-135.

be considered as dealing with man-woman relationship, in the given social context and prevailing practices. Although techniques for heightening sexual pleasure are given, it does not advocate a hedonistic enjoyment of pleasure, neither is it about pleasure which is physical alone. Sexual pleasure is to be enjoyed in the context of a relationship, which was evidently not restricted to the monogamous marriage, according to the customs of the times.

6. Deep Knowledge of Female Psyche and Sexuality

Kāmasūtra, although written by a man, contains a deep understanding of the female psyche and sexuality. The man is asked to take into account the differences of female psyche and the physiology of female sexual responses and is asked to create first the confidence in the woman. An atmosphere of freedom and dialogue is to be maintained. The man has to understand the difference in the sexual response of the woman and that attainment orgasm in the woman is generally slower than him and has to help her to reach the orgasm considering this difference. Instructions on winning a woman also give insights into her psychology. In part III, Chapter II, Vatsyayana says:

Women being of a tender nature, want tender beginnings, and when they are forcibly approached by men with whom they are but slightly acquainted, they sometimes suddenly become haters of sexual connection, and sometimes even haters of the male sex. The man should make use of those devices by which he may be able to establish himself more and more her confidence.⁴⁰

7. Sexology

It has to be acknowledged with admiration that *Kāmasūtra* contains a number of findings of the modern sexology. Vatsyayana does not consider sexuality and sexual pleasure a mere physical phenomenon or instinct or biological drive, but a psychological phenomenon. This is an evident distinction that he makes between animal sexuality and human sexuality. The objection to which he replies indicates that there were attempts to define human sexuality comparing it with animal sexuality. Our admiration for Vatsyayana may be heightened when we consider that other traditions in his time generally took animal sexuality as a model for human

⁴⁰Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra*, trans. Richard F. Burton, London: Penguin Books, 1994, 85-86.

sexuality and, thus, for defining the norms regulating human sexual conduct.

Similarly, a detailed knowledge of the male-female sexual anatomy, the difference in male and female psychology, the difference in male and female sexual behaviour, physiology of sexual response cycle and their male-female differences, etc., can be seen in *Kāmasūtra*. Most of the findings of Vatsyayana are verified and confirmed by the modern sexology. *Kāmasūtra* is not shy about sex as an enjoyment; the detailed descriptions about foreplay and about different positions also make clear Vatsyayana's insight into human psychology and sexual behaviour. "The recommended pre-coital activities make the persons involved in the act more relaxed – a point the *Kāmasūtra* is well aware of."⁴¹

From the beginning till the end, Vatsyayana clearly maintains that his work is on the science of love. He considers the study of this science necessary for the enjoyment of *kāma* and, thus, for a successful life. However, Vatsyayana is well aware of the limitation of this science and importance of spontaneity. Science is only a help for enjoyment, not a hindrance to it: "About these things there cannot be either enumeration or any definite rule. (*Sexual*) congress having once commenced, passion alone gives birth to all the acts of the parties."⁴² This principle shows not the limitation of Vatsyayana as a sexologist, but his wisdom and greatness as a sexologist.

8. Philosophy of Life and Ethics of Sex and Pleasure

8.1. Vision of Life and the Role of *Kāma*

The *Purusārthas* – Dharma, *Artha*, *Kāma* and *Moksa* – and their interrelationship is basic to the Indian vision of life. Vatsyayana begins the work with a salutation to Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*. In the first part of the work, Vatsyayana clearly enunciates the basic vision of life and the philosophy of pleasure. The second chapter shows the interrelationship among Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*:

Man ... should practise Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma* at different times and in such a manner that they may harmonize, and not clash in any way. He should acquire learning in his childhood; in his youth and middle age he should perform Dharma and, thus, seek to gain *Moksa*, that is, release from further transmigration. Or, because of the

⁴¹Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 48.

⁴²Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 65.

uncertainty of life, he may practise them at times when they are enjoined to be practised.⁴³

After defining Dharma and *Artha* and showing the means of acquiring and practising them, Vatsyayana defines *Kāma*: “*Kāma* 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. The ingredient in this is a peculiar contact between the organ of sense and its object, and the consciousness of pleasure that arises from that contact is called *Kāma*.”⁴⁴ From this definition itself it is clear that *Kāma* is not mere sexual enjoyment. It is also clear that it does not refer to physical pleasure alone, but psychological realm as well. Rather, it is the experience of pleasure in which the body and mind are involved. *Kāma*, since it denotes all kinds of pleasures resulting from any sensuous-mental operation, includes all sorts of aesthetic pleasures. Evidently, it includes sexual pleasure, resulting from emotional, mental, and physical interactions between persons. Following this, Vatsyayana proceeds to the interrelationship among these three: “When all three, Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*, come together, the former is better than the one which follows it; that is, Dharma is better than *Artha*, and *Artha* is better than *Kāma*.”⁴⁵

Vatsyayana disagrees with the opinion that *Kāma* does not need any scientific study, since it is practised even by the animals. As human sexuality is different from animal sexuality, scientific and systematic study on *Kāma* is necessary. The gist of Vatsyayana’s philosophy of pleasure can be seen in his answer to the following objection: There are those who argue that pleasures should not be sought for since they are obstacles to the practise of Dharma and *Artha*, which are superior to *Kāma*; that pleasures also bring a man into distress and into contact with low persons; that pleasures cause him commit unrighteous deeds, produce impurity, encourage carelessness and levity; they make him despised by all and ruin him and his families.⁴⁶ To this objection Vatsyayana replies as follows:

This objection cannot be sustained, for pleasures, being as necessary for the existence and wellbeing of the body as food, are consequently equally required. They are, moreover, the results of Dharma and *Artha*. Pleasures are, therefore, to be followed with moderation and

⁴³Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 9.

⁴⁴Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 10.

⁴⁵Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 10.

⁴⁶Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 12-13.

caution. No one refrains from cooking food because there are beggars to ask for it, or from sowing seed because there are deer to destroy the corn when it has grown up.

Thus, a man practising Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma* enjoys happiness both in this world and in the world to come. The good perform those actions in which there is no fear as to what is to result from them in the next world, and in which there is no danger to their welfare. Any action which conduces to the practice of Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma* together, or of any two, or even of one of them, should be performed, but an action which conduces to the practice of one of them at the expense of the remaining two should not be performed.⁴⁷

In the concluding part of *Kāmasūtra*, Vatsyayana underscores once again that *Kāma* is to be obtained and enjoyed taking into account the principles of Dharma. The enjoyment of *Kāma* disregarding Dharma and *Artha* is destructive and is not the sign of real wisdom:

He who is acquainted with the true principles of this science pays regard to Dharma, *Artha*, *Kāma*, and to his own experiences, as well as to the teachings of others, and does not act simply on the dictates of his own desire. As for the errors in the science of love I have mentioned in this work, on my own authority as an author, I have, immediately after mentioning them, carefully censured and prohibited them.

An act is never looked upon with indulgence for the simple reason that it is authorized by the science, because it ought to be remembered that it is the intention of the science that the rules which it contains should be acted upon only in particular cases...

This work is not intended to be used merely as an instrument for satisfying our desires. A person acquainted with the true principles of this science, and who preserves his Dharma, *Artha*, and *Kāma*, and has regard for the practices of the people, is sure to obtain the mastery over his senses.

In short, an intelligent and prudent person, attending to Dharma and *Artha*, and attending to *Kāma* also, without becoming the slave of his passions, obtains success in everything that he may undertake.⁴⁸

⁴⁷Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 13.

⁴⁸Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 197-198.

Kāmasūtra, thus, accepts the value of pleasure and recommends its pursuit. It also has a physical philosophy:

It sees sexual desires as being in direct relation to the senses of the body which are experienced as emotions and emphasise the urge to be at peace with oneself and the inner unity of the body and mind. Vatsyayana relates physicality to the erotic, without which, he claims, sex is meaningless. Also, since a holistic approach to recreational activities and art forms like dance, music, poetry, and literature helps to develop self-realization, and furthermore since sex is a part of such activities, it is vital.⁴⁹

However, it needs to be regulated by moral principles. This is true not only with regard to sexual desire, but also with regard to any desire and pleasure:

We cannot live a desireless life because without a desire we cannot do anything. Gratifying a desire yields pleasure, but exceeding a certain limit in gratifying it causes evil effects. It is, therefore, that we do not need to stop gratifying our desires, even sexual desires, but to regulate them, or regulate our efforts to attain any kind of appetitive wellbeing. It is here that morality comes to our help by providing the needed regulation. It offers the guidelines as to which sort of desires are worth satisfying and which sorts are not.⁵⁰

“As an experience, the experience of pleasure is ... an intrinsic value in the sense of its being a value not because of its being a means to the attainment of another value, or in the sense of its being a value for which there is no need to give a reason for its being a value. Rather, it is a value because of its being what in itself is.”⁵¹ However, in some cases it may not be a positive value, or it may be considered to be a lower value compared to another value. The pursuit and enjoyment of pleasure is a value, but it should not contradict other values or *purusārthas*.

The satisfaction of a desire is to be regulated also because of a social reason, namely, to keep the social equilibrium and to avoid social conflicts. Satisfaction of one’s desire should not do injustice to others. This is also the role of Dharma.⁵²

⁴⁹Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 48.

⁵⁰Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 268.

⁵¹Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 266.

⁵²Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 268-269.

8.2. Sexual Ethics in *Kāmasūtra*

Kāma Sutra is the most important and basic book in *Kāmaśāstra* tradition or the science of love. As already pointed out, it gives some insights into the ethics of sex and of the interrelationship between *Kāma* and other *Purusārthas*. However, apart from occasional remarks on certain practices, Vatsyayana does not intend to give a detailed ethical analysis of all the different sexual practices and the means to attain and heighten sexual pleasure. As a scientific observer, he just records the different practices in different cultures, even those that he himself does not approve:

As a scientific *shastra*, the *Kamasūtra* is both a model of and a model for..., both descriptive and prescriptive... More precisely, by claiming to be merely descriptive it is able to position its prescriptions and proscriptions as if they were facts rather than suggestions. It situates itself in the no man's land between the world of possibilities and the world of observations, between 'should' and 'is'.⁵³

In his commentary on the *Kāmasūtra*, Devadatta Shastri underscores that this aspect of a scientific treatise must be kept in mind while attempting an ethical analysis of *Kāmasūtra*: “In writing his treatise, Vatsyayana was always vigilant in paying due attention to the character and the inherent principles of a treatise... Even when the author of a treatise considers something as base, he gives it a place in his treatise because there are all sorts of people in this world with different characters and inclinations.”⁵⁴ Justifying Vatsyayana's inclusion of adultery in *Kāmasūtra*, Shastri elucidates further this key concept in understanding its ethics:

The treatise on religion requires a man to look at another man's wife as if she were his own mother. The *Kāmasūtra*, however, tells us how to seduce another man's wife... A treatise never turns its gaze from reality. The *Kāmasūtra* is not a religious text but it does not transgress social and ethical boundaries.

Based on human psychology, the *Kāmasutra* is a way of looking at the world. After analysing the inclinations of men, good and bad, its conclusions are guided by a concern for human welfare. A treatise incorporates a discussion of both the good and the bad, but one should act only on the good. In the eyes of the author of the *Kāmasūtra*, adultery is a great sin. But how could he deny its

⁵³Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), xvii.

⁵⁴As cited in Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), xix.

pervasive reality? How could he not discuss this human tendency which has manifested itself throughout the whole of human history?⁵⁵

8.2.1. Personal and Cultural Variations

Kāmasūtra acknowledges cultural variety regarding sexual intercourse and various ways of heightening pleasure. Universal norms and rules valid for all places, persons, and times are not insisted or recommended by him. Acceptability of different practices depends on the practice in the locality, on the person and on the mutual enjoyment of the partners. Even sadomasochist practices are acceptable, if they are mutually enjoyable and if undertaken with respect for the partner. It may be worth noticing that even in modern times such practices are considered to be perversions and that modern sexology only begins to accept that such practices can be beneficial at least in some cases when they are mutually pleasurable. However, here also Vatsyayana cautions us: “In the same way anything that is a local peculiarity should not always be adopted elsewhere, and even in the place where the practice is prevalent, excess of it should always be avoided.”⁵⁶ Further, he continues: “The sexual techniques cannot be used at all times and on all women. The method must be chosen according to the part of the body, the region, and the time.”⁵⁷ Regarding such practices, the principle is given as follows:

The emotions and fantasies conjured up in a moment in the midst of sexual chaos cannot be imagined even in dreams. For, just as a horse in full gallop, blinded by the energy of his own speed, pays no attention to any post or hole or ditch on the path, so two lovers blinded by passion in the friction of sexual battle, are caught up in their fierce energy and pay no attention to danger. And so a man who understands the text will apply it only after he has come to know the delicacy, ferocity, and strength of his young woman, and his own strength.⁵⁸

Thus, *Kāmasūtra*, though it bases itself on Dharma, acknowledges and accepts the cultural, social, and personal differences and variations as valid in the matter of sexuality and sexual behaviour. It does not challenge

⁵⁵As cited in Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), xx-xxi.

⁵⁶Vatsyayana, *The Kama Sutra* (Burton), 64.

⁵⁷Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 2.7.35, 60.

⁵⁸Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 2.7.32-34, 59-60.

universal norms, nor does it refuse all other values. However, it does not consider personal and cultural variations as violations of the Dharma or the natural order of things. Spontaneity and variety that do not contradict other values and goals of life are acceptable. Rather, they enhance pleasure which promotes human wellbeing.

8.2.2. The Value of Pleasure

Sexual pleasure in different traditions, both secular and religious, was considered to be oriented towards procreation. Legal systems in general insisted upon procreation as a duty to the state. Religious traditions often considered sexual pleasure as nature's device to induce man to take up the difficult task of procreation. As a result, the intention to procreate was made a necessary condition for the experience of sexual pleasure. Moreover, sexual pleasure was thought to be a distraction for spiritual experience. *Kāmasūtra* seems to put in question the traditions which consider the goal of sexuality merely as procreation and sexual desire and pleasure as aids to procreation. Pleasure itself is considered to be a goal of life, and sexual pleasure as a goal of sexuality, both enriching and necessary for the human person, though not discarding or overlooking the other goals of life. Pleasure is not an enemy of the ultimate ends of life, but a natural and necessary step towards it. The human person cannot think in terms of the soul alone, he/she is body and soul, of which desire and pleasure are necessary and natural. The value of sexual pleasure does not depend on its utility for some other end of sexuality. It is good in itself, because it is necessary for human wellbeing. The ways to heighten sexual pleasure have as their basis this philosophy of pleasure. Moreover, pleasure is not damaging to God-experience; there is no conflict between pleasure and moral life. This does not mean, as already pointed out, that it recommends hedonism. Besides, speaking about marriage, it underscores procreation as its goal. Only that the goodness of pleasure is not defined exclusively in terms of procreation. Similarly, sex is an art, it is a play, and it is an aesthetic engagement and experience. It is not merely the meeting of bodies, but sharing and flowering of different capabilities and aspects of human persons. Human persons in their totality involve in it and are enriched by it.

8.2.3. Sex: An Art and Play

Sex was not just a release of the emotional tension or was it just a hurried activity of a few seconds or minutes; it was an art, a play, in which not

merely the body of the partners, but the whole of their persons involved. This is clear from the fact that much time was spent on the preparation of love activities and for preparing the right ambience. The man and the woman were supposed to master different arts and man-woman relationship and sexual intercourse take place in this overall context. The aspects of play and art liberate sexuality, on the one hand, from visualizing it as oriented to the sole purpose of procreation and, on the other, from its aggressiveness and uncontrollability. As a result, refinement of impulses, personal dimensions of love, tenderness, communication, relationship, and mutuality become more important meanings of sexuality. *Kāmasūtra* is not a treatise on hedonistic sexual pleasure, but a treatise on culturing sexuality, conceiving it as an art and play, which promotes human wellbeing.

8.2.4. The Importance of Love

To speak about love as central to sexual ethics and marital life may not sound something new today. However, considering other traditions of his times, both Indian and others, the importance that Vatsyayana gives to love in man-woman relationship is something unique. As mentioned above, after describing all the qualities of the bride, Vatsyayana gives love as the ultimate norm.⁵⁹ Marriage and procreation were often considered as duty to the society. On the contrary, Vatsyayana considers it first of all as a loving union of man and woman. Moreover, the love that Vatsyayana speaks about is not in the context of a mystical concept of sexuality; neither is it the romantic love as presented in literary works. Love, according to him, is central to his science. Doesn't it sound something strange when today many speak about 'making love' without love and without 'sentiments'?

8.3. Gender Ethics in *Kāmasūtra*

8.3.1. *Nāgaraka* and His Wife

The life of the *nāgaraka* is one of pleasures, whereas that of his wife is one of duties: She attends to him with all love and devotion; she ministers to his personal needs; does everything according to his likes and dislikes; takes care of his friends, relatives and servants; welcomes with joy when he comes home; accompanies him in his games and sports; attends an

⁵⁹This may sound revolutionary even in the present day Indian context of arranged marriages, where money, social status, etc., are more decisive than love!

assembly only with his permission; does nothing without his permission; should avoid everything that raises suspicion about her fidelity to him; should be moderate in talks and never talk or laugh aloud; should be moderate in her dress and ornaments, but adorns herself in her best when she is to meet her husband; when he is away she puts away all the ornaments, fasts and does not visit others; looks after the performance of daily worship to gods; with the permission of the husband administers the household.⁶⁰ Moreover, unconditional fidelity from the part of the wife is demanded, whereas it is not demanded from the husband. He is free to have sexual enjoyment with the courtesans, prostitutes, unmarried women, widows, and even wives of other men. Besides, polygamy is presented as an accepted practice. True, Vatsyayana speaks about polyandry, which was very rarely practised. Here also, he follows his style of just narrating the different customs rather than giving ethical judgements. However, the picture that we get is not that of a society which had practised gender justice and equality of man and woman as we understand today. *Kāmasūtra* may be more feminist than many other works. However, it may be too much to ascribe to it the ideal vision of gender equality. “Even Vatsyayana’s description of man-woman union, even of the prevalent or recommended techniques, is more from the point of view of the male than from that of the female.”⁶¹

8.3.2. Women’s Desire

Vatsyayana recognises women’s desire and women’s capacity and right for sexual enjoyment. This may not sound something new in the present context. But we have to consider the fact that for centuries many cultures and traditions doubted whether women had sexual desire, or whether they had the pleasure at all. Women’s role in sex and sexual pleasure was considered to be passive only. She was just to respond to the need of the man. Women’s desire was something unthinkable and unacceptable. That is why often the role of the woman in sexual play and intercourse was considered to be only ‘passive’ and ‘receptive’, and any initiative from her part was considered to be unnatural. Even today, perhaps it is worth noting, many view women’s desire as predominantly oriented towards motherhood. *Kāmasūtra*, on the other hand, acknowledges and approves

⁶⁰Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 4.1, 94-97.

⁶¹Prasad, *A Conceptual-Analytic Study*, 257.

women’s initiative and active role in sexual play and takes for granted their desire and pleasure:

The *Kamasūtra* emphasises equality, which does not necessarily mean being alike in any way. What is emphasised is the fact that both men and women have similar desires; therefore, the pleasures they gain should also be equal. However, the experience and intensity of satisfaction differ. The ideal manner of attaining this state of supreme bliss comes about when each partner reciprocates with equal ardour. It reinforces the fact that intimate togetherness leads to complete erotic pleasure. In fact, the *Kamasūtra* – though it does not use the word – is aware that women have orgasms. It even stresses that the man, if he is to be the ideal partner, put his pleasure second to hers.⁶²

Similarly, in contrast to traditions which do not accept women’s active role in sexual act, Vatsyayana recommends women taking initiative in sexual intercourse. In the section on sexual union, he describes different kinds of union in which women take active role.⁶³ “The inclusion of the woman as an equal partner and equal facilitator of sexual pleasure also establishes the fact that she is an equal, with rights, demands, desires, and needs.”⁶⁴ That is, “women were seen as equal partners in sexual activity and had equitable rights of pleasure.”⁶⁵ The woman is not a mere object, but a subject, having her own individuality. Sexual attraction, play, and intercourse are not between one subject and one object, but between two subjects. Or, both man and woman are objects of desire and enjoyment to each other. This recognition of women’s desire and their active role can be said to be a great contribution of Vatsyayana. However, here also we should avoid idealization. *Kāmasūtra* has an official male voice, since the author is a man. It is mainly concerned with the life the *nāgaraka* and his enjoyment. The life of the *nāyikā* and other women are treated mostly in relation to his life. Even woman’s pleasure seems to be important because her pleasure heightens the pleasure of the man.

⁶²Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 52.

⁶³See Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra* (Doniger and Kakar), 2.8; 2.9, 60-61; 65-69.

⁶⁴Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 52.

⁶⁵Pande and Dane, *Indian Erotica*, 45.

9. Conclusion

Although there are a number of popular manuals on sex, and sexology has greatly developed, why *Kāmasūtra* has created a renewed interest today? The rediscovery of and interest in the classical wisdom in general seems to be one reason. Especially, in the West, there is a great interest in the wisdom of the Orient and particularly in the Indian tradition. Moreover, the apparent religious context in which *Kāmasūtra* is set gives it a greater authority and acceptance. No doubt, though *Kāmasūtra* was never classified among the sacred books, it was never condemned nor was its authority questioned. It was accepted as an authoritative work in the science of love. Moreover, it inspired a lot of religious literature and art. However, it has to be considered that the purpose of *Kāmasūtra* was not to promote a hedonistic search of pleasure or the search of pleasure for its own sake forgetting all other aspects of life. *Kāmasūtra* says clearly that *Kāma* is to be sought taking into consideration Dharma and *Artha*, and Dharma is the guiding principle. There is no attempt to question the religious authority or the wisdom of different traditions. Besides, while going to details Vatsyayana does not intend to make ethical analysis of different practices, but as a scientific observer wants to record different practices and customs of different places of the time, giving only occasional comments whether those are acceptable or not. Everything is not meant for everyone. It is up to the reader to discern what is meant for him/her taking into account one's person, socio-cultural context, and religious practice. Added to this, we have to consider that Hinduism is not a unified system of doctrine; different traditions existed side by side. What was good in a particular tradition or science was accepted by other traditions and integrated into them without trying to evaluate whether everything in that particular tradition or science was completely acceptable; what could not be accepted was generally overlooked. Hence, to ascribe to *Kāmasūtra* a religious and ethical authority – for all times and places and to whatever is said in it – seems to go beyond the intention of the author.

Kāmasūtra is neither merely a book on lovemaking, nor a mere sex manual, but a reflection on the social and cultural practices of the period as well. Going beyond sex, it aims at making a more complete and holistic society. The *nāgaraka* is not a man who lives in isolation, but is well-integrated into the society. It never refuses the social structures, but demands to regulate the experience of pleasure according to the prevailing social structures and customs. *Kāmasūtra* is a systematic study of the

emotional and sensual nature of human impulses and of man-woman relationship. It is an understanding of human life in its different expressions – personal, interpersonal, and social.

On the one hand, conceiving *Kāmasūtra* merely as a sex manual that recommends hedonistic search for pleasure for a post-moral world will be denigrating its wisdom and real purpose. On the other hand, considering it as a complete book on sexual ethics would mean to attribute to it a role and position that Vatsyayana himself did not claim or want. It may be worth remembering that although the wisdom of *Kāmasūtra* was never challenged in the Indian tradition, it has never been considered in the Indian tradition as a basic work on sexual ethics. *Kāmasūtra* has a philosophy of life and of pleasure; it affirms the goodness and value of sexual pleasure; it underscores the need of culturing sexuality; it points out the importance of love and mutuality; it defends woman’s desire and pleasure. All these help us even today evaluate our understanding of the mystery of sexuality and the norms that we follow in sexual ethics. The basic principle of *Kāmasūtra*, that *Kāma* is to be practised taking into account its relationship with other *Purusārthas*, however, is to be kept in mind. Finally, *Kāmasūtra* is very clear that everything is not meant for everyone. One has to take into consideration one’s social and religious context. *Kāma* enhances real wellbeing only when it is in agreement with other values of life.