Woman's Sexuality :

A Portrayal from Ancient Indian Literature

by
Surabhi D. Sheth

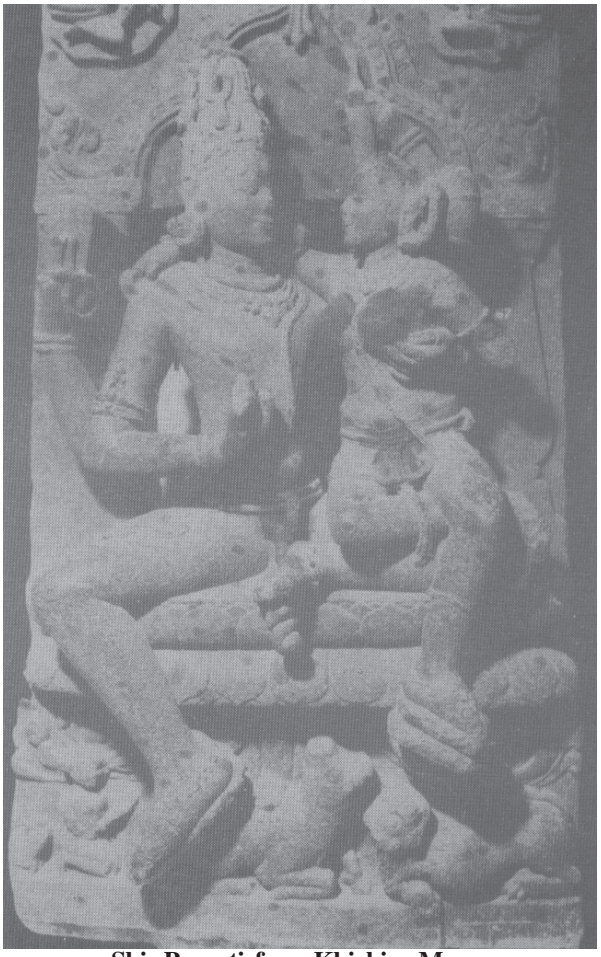
In a patriarchal society, woman is deemed as subservient to man. This, however, does not mean that the male-female relationship is always antagonistic. On the contrary, a patriarchal social order seeks to ensure a semblance of harmony in this relationship through making the woman's status in society appear 'naturally' inferior toman's. A woman indeed earns 'respect' and 'admiration' in such a society by performing her assigned roles as a wife, a mother or a daughter. Her role in procreation, her innate ability for nurturance and the physical attraction she holds for man, however, make it difficult to contain these roles in a simple relationship of dominance and subjugation. These qualities imbue her with immense inner strength which provokes in man contradictory feelings of security and an acute sense of anxiety about his own power and identity. As detached from her assigned roles, woman *qua* woman is therefore both feared and worshipped. It is not surprising that there has been a great deal of preoccupation about the generalised image of woman as the 'other' verging on obsession, in the literature of this patriarchal society. The construction of such an image is probably a means by which the patriarchal man tries to overcome his fears about his gender identity and autonomy. The split within the psyche of a patriarchal man which prompts him to fear as well as worship the woman is projected in the portrayal of woman in our ancient literature and law.* In a curious way, it seems to me, such a portrayal mirrors patriarchal man's own split-image of his gender identity. In this image woman's sexuality and fecundity remain irreconciled. Her forbearance and capacity for nurturance are idealised but her sexual powers are feared. A woman is respected, for example, as a Sita, a Savitri or an Anasuya *(satis,* symbolising devoted wives) but is feared as a Rambha, an Urvashi or a

Tilottama (nymphs, symbolising free, unattached women). Her sexuality is adored for fertility but her physical characteristics that make her sexually attractive to men are often looked upon as a threat to man's self-control and autonomy. For example, an umpteen number of gods, sages and kings have been described in our ancient literature as unwilling victims of a woman with 'irresistible' physical charms. A frequent outcome is that these 'victims' place a curse

** I have not followed any chronological se-quence, per se. Dating of texts is anathema for scholars, a difference of two three centuries is an admissible range for 'accuracy for some texts. Instead, I have chosen a broad canvas of litera-ture covering roughly the period between the 6th century B.C. and the 4th century AD. (which includes reference to epic-Puranic texts, Jain texts, classical kavyas) and also reference to some Vedic texts to illustrate the growth of what I view as an ideology offender in ancient India. For ancient India, this is one of the important ways to know Indian traditions.Ina text one can discover both statements of ideal as well as indications of practices of the time. In this con-text, the ideal, even the spiritual ideal of marital life, a woman's divine status etcetra, is under-mined by the continuous and relentless expecta-tion that the woman must beget a male child.*

on the women who aroused them. Much is made of woman' s supposed fickleness and unpredictability, as well as her supposed implacable determination about getting what she wants. Her strength and resilience are countered by emphasising her physical fragility and sexual vulnerability. She is supposed to perpetually need the protection of a man in her roles as daughter, wife and mother. It is not surprising that an unmarried adult woman or a widow has remained an enigma for our legists. A brief scanning of our ancient literature, when done from this perspective, throws interesting light on the problem of the gender identity of a woman in the patriarchal society, especially as it is expressed in the depiction of woman's sexuality. The evolution of this image, it seems, is inextricably linked with the growth of a patriarchal society.

There is a marked differ-ence in attitude towards woman's sexuality from the *Vedas to* the *Dharmasastras*. The Vedic texts regarded sexual union as aprime model of creation and creativ-ity. Prajapati split himself into two, not for the purpose of *prajanana* (procreation) only, but also because he could not experience joy in being alone *"ekaki na ramate sa dvitiyamaicchat" (Brhadaranyaka Upanishad4.3)* that is, onealonedoes not enjoy, he desired for a second. Thus, in the Vedic period, woman's sexuality was associated not only with fertility but also with an idea of companionship.



Shiv Parvati, from Khiching Museum

The girl child in the age of the *Rig Veda* was allowed to choose her own husband when she was a fully grown up mature woman. Girls and boys were allowed to mingle freely at a festival called *Samana* with a view to find a spouse of their own choice. However, after her marriage a woman became the bride of the family. The conjugal aspect of the marital rela-tionship remained subdued in the sub-sequent period. *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* states that a bride is given not to an individual but to a 'family of broth-ers'. Manu laid down that in the *Kalyug* 'one must not give away a girl to a family', implying thereby that the practice was in vogue in an earlier age. There are certain other indications in the/Wg *Veda,* which suggest a close relationship between the wife of the eldest brother and his other brothers. There was a clear rule that the eldest brother must marry first and that if the younger brother married before the elder one it was considered a sin. In the *Rig Veda* (x.18-7-8) it is sug-gested that at a time when the bereaved wife is sitting near the dead body of her husband she should be urged by the deceased husband's younger brother *(devr)* to get up, put her hand in his, and ask her to join the world of the living by becoming his wife. (Cf. Av. x-301-2). In the marriage hymn of the/? ig *Veda* the gods are particularly urged to make the wife loving and dear to the *devr.* It seems that this special status of the younger brother vis-a-vis the wife of the elder brother indicated in the *Rig Veda* was used to fa-cilitate the practice *ofniyoga* in thelaterperiod.Myoga was the ceremonial sexual intercourse with one of the kinsmen of the husband, for achieving the son for the family. The use of the terms *pita* (generic term for father) *andjanila pita* (biological fa-ther) also suggests the recognition of a sociological fatherhood as distinct from biological.

With growing insistence on male progeny, woman became a variable entity whose own lineage was an erasable line. She (rather her body) served as a vehicle for the continuity of the male lineage. The very idea of historical memory and continuity thus be came confined to the male lineage. The idea of ancestry became

singularly paternal; the memories of the past, the rituals and invoca-tions of the past, and the oblations of fered to ancestors to nurture one's heritage, all began to centre around the male lineage. The three *rnas* (debts) which one owed for one's existence as humans were all to the male figures, *namely, pitrs, rsis* and *devas.* Only a son could offer obla-tions to ancestors and thereby save them from suffering in the hell calledpuf. A sonless father lived a cursed existence and went to hell upon his death. The fecundity of woman naturally became a big ob-session. It began to be viewed as a source for obtaining sons, a *ksetra* whose fertility had to be maintained and exploited. Perpetuation of males became the purpose of woman's body. Thus, in the *Mahabharata,* King Pandu, who was prevented by a curse from consorting with his wives, asked his wife Kunti to procreate sons by summoning gods. In order to con-vince her, Pandu cited an ancient practice : "I shall now tell thee the practice of old, indicated by illustri-ous sages fully acquainted with every rule of morality. Women in the olden days, were not immured, within their houses, nor were they dependent on their husbands and kins. They went about freely enjoying themselves. They did not confine themselves to their husbands and yet they were not considered sinful, for that was the sanctioned custom of the age. This practice, sanctioned by the precedent is applauded by great *Rsis.* This cus-tom is even now regarded with re-spect among the northern Kurus. In-deed, that custom, so lenient for women, has the sanction of antiquity. The present practice of

Kunti by Badrinarayan

a woman be-ing confined to one husband for life has beenestablishedbut lately." *(Mbh.* Adi 113). This peroration of Pandu, should not be mistaken as bestowing freedom on his wife in matters of sex. Rather it is an argument to make her accept his demand to continue his lineage through this other route.

Two generations earlier Kunti's grandmother-in-law (Kunti's mother-in-law is Ambalika, Ambalika's mother-in-law is Satyavati-Matsyagandha) Satyawati, however, had faced no such problem. When sage Parasara saw this fishermaid Matsyagandha (one smelling of fish) sporting in water, through his occult power, he realised that the girl was in her *rtu* 'the most appropriate time to beget a child* and that the conjunction of heavenly stars was the most auspicious for the birth of a prodigy. The sage expressed his desire for an immediate union. The girl was embarassed at the prospect due to the foul smell emanating from her body but the sage turned the foul odour into fragrance. Then, the fishermaid felt shy of copulating in the open, whereupon the sage cre-ated a screen of smoke. The result was the birth of the most illustrious genius Vyasa. Matsyagandha, however, did not feel guilty about having premarital sex. Nor was she, unlike Kunti, overawed by the in-terest expressed in her by a sage. She instead stipulated some condi-tions before she agreed to fulfill the sage's desire. She is completely composed and cool headed and strikes a bargain with the sage, obtaining many boons including getting him to permanently free her from the foul odour emanating from her body. She does not feel any need to unburden herself of this affair to anyone before her mar-riage. She, in fact, is so confident that she recalls this child of hers (who turned out to be a great ascetic) only when she needs him. At a later point in her life she occupied the illus-trious position of a *rajamata*. Never-theless, she had no qualms about making public her relationship with Vyasa, her son. This premarital ad-venture did not adversely affect her marriage. When king Santanu felt at-tracted towards her, she again put forward another condition, evaluat-ing her own favourable bargaining position to full advantage, asking Santanu to agree to give the throne to a son born to her, though Santanu already had a very able, well-trained, fully groomed son by his first marriage with Ganga.

In the *Mahabharata,* there

areclear statements indicating a stage in the development of society in which marriage had little to do with restricting the sexual freedom of women. But this ancient usage permitting greater freedom and independence to women in sexual matters was later altered by the sage Svetaketu. His mother was led to the bed-chamber by a Brahman guest in full view of Svetaketu and his father. Svetaketu considered the act as an insult to his mother. The father tried to calm him down by saying "this is the eternal law— just as the cows do, so do the creatures, each in its class." *(Mbh,* Adv. 113). But Svetaketu finding unacceptable for humans the law valid for animals, promulgated aj* new law "from this day on, if al woman is proved faithless to her husband it shall be considered a sin equal to aborticide." *(Mbh,* Adi. 113). Aborticide was one of the lesser sins, an *upapataka;* the punishment for this sin was in the form of *Prayascitta,* that is, ex-piation which consisted of per-forming a *vrata* called *Prajapatya*. Thus, in the period that the *Mahabharata* depicts there was a great deal of confusion about sexual norms in and out of marriage. Various practices were prevalent (polyandry, polygyny, levirate, etc) simultaneously. At the same time, the trend towards patriarchisation of sex norms and of various forms of mar-riage was evident; traces of matriar-chy in polyandry were removed, po-lygyny was accepted simultaneously as a legitimate practice, *niyoga* was permitted for lineage continuity. S till, the norm of *bahu-patnitva* (many wives) for man

Gandhari by Badrinarayan

and *ekpatitva* for woman (that is one man in the entire life of a woman), the very epitome of patriarchy, was not yet universally established.

It was towards the end of the period described in the *Mahabharata* that the institution of marriage began to be viewed in terms of sexual faithfulnessof the wife to her husband, and not *vice versa.*

Thus standards of socially acceptable conduct altered. The model of male dominance got perfected. It ac-companied the almost total transformation of the forest and nomadic life of the ancients to a settled life of agriculture. The family became the unit of property based economy. Men became the leaders and patriarchs, formulating laws governing the modes of conductof that social organisation. Rules governing the transmission of property from generation to genera-tion required that patrimony be fixed. Besides providing heirs for property, the religious purpose of saving ances-tors from hell by performing *sraddhas* (oblations to ancestors) increased the importance of sons in family. Wives giving birth to sons became crucial to the successful repayment of the *pitrrna* (debt to ancestors). The ascetic Jaratkaru who met his forefathers hang-ing upside down in a cave for want of *pindas* (offerings)and languishing without getting lib-erated because of the celibacy of Jaratkaru is a telling example of a belief in the demands exerted by one's ancestors upon one's procreatiye life. The dreadful possibility of their total demise convinces the celibate to take a wife.

The writers of *Dharam-sastras* viewed the female sexual powers with even greater trepidation. Even the institution of marriage was not in itself considered sufficient to contain women. Several other injunctions were made and a special code of sexual behaviour for a married woman was prescribed, different from that for a married "• man. While married women were singularly tied to this *dharmasastric* code, men could avail themselves of different kinds of behaviour code's as described in the *Kamasastra.*

The *tv/opurusarthas, dharma* and *kama,* almost acquire two different lives of their own, one in the *Dharmasastra* and the other in the *Kamasastra.* Vatsyayana, the author of the *Kamasutra,* for example, deals with the life of a Nagaraka and his mistress and

legitimises a wide vari-ety of carnal pleasures including : prostitution, adultery, group sex, ho-mosexuality, biting and making nail marks on a woman's body to increase sexual pleasure and the use of aphrodisiacs. Woman here equals man in her capacity for sexual pleasure. The *Kamasutra* even advises a man how to court a wife, how to win her confidence and to introduce her to love. The woman in the *Kamasutra* and the woman in *Dharmasastra* appear as two different beings, but both are constructed for the single purpose of sustaining man's freedom and dominance. Juxtaposing these two types of texts reveals a third inner text the mind of a patriarchal male.

The concern for effective and lawful means to determine one's rightful progeny, especially one's sons, undermined over time the woman's right over her body, so much so that her sexuality began to be perceived more and more in instrumental terms and the idea of her spiritual being got confined primarily to her marital status. The widely known but nevertheless controversial practice of *niyoga* is one such instance. *Niyoga* is defined as the appointment of a wife or widow to procreate a son on behalf of her husband from intercourse with an appointed male. (Kane, 1974). Obedience to her husband's request to submit to *niyoga* in order to give him heirs came in conflict withthegrowingexpectation of wifely devotion and monogamous sexual relations with him. The standard of obedience embodied *inpativrata,* total devotion to one man, was however stretched by making her agree to submit to another man at her husband's instance, merely as a duty without any emotional involvement in the act. Both *niyoga* and *sati* use the analogy of a woman as a *ksetra* owned by her husband. "A man might lay claim to his *ksetra* by having it tilled andfertilisedby another kinsman after his death or he might burn the field and make it unusable." (Sutherland, 1990). The controversial practice of *niyoga,* tolerated and encouraged for the compelling necessity of producing sons, was later outlawed by the lawmakers in favour of a strictly monogamous marital ideal for a woman.

An Amorous Couple from Khajuraho Temples

Thus viewed, the issueof woman's right to decide on matters where her own body is at stake, reflected today in the debate on contraception or other methods of birth control, artificial in-semination or in legislation about abortion and the controversy on am-niocentesis, is an old problem in the patriarchal society. *Niyoga* was one way to exercise man's right to control the use of woman's body. A similar attitude towards woman's body is also reflected in several stories regarding birth, some of which are extraordi-nary in character, reading like present day science-fiction. (PrakashN. Desai, 1989). In the story of the birth of the sons of the blind king Dhrtarastra and Gandhari, for example, their embryonic development takes place in pots not unlike incubators; similarly, we have the story of the birth of Balarama where the embryo was re-moved from the womb of Devaki and implanted in the womb of Vasudeva's other wifeRohini. Hence Balarama is also called Sankarsana (one who was dragged). Similarly the birth of Mahavira in Jain mythology provides an interesting ex-ample of embryo exchange. In order to give a halo to the origin of Mahavira, the em-bryo in the womb of a poor Brahmin woman was trans-ferred to a woman of Ksatriya caste. All such sto-ries sound familiar in today's patriarchal society

in which 'ovum donation' and im-plantation of a fertilised ovum are viewed as prob-lematic situations for deter-mining a woman' s right over her body. The ancient *smrtis* prescribe specific days for the birth of girls as well as boys in an attempt to find a to prevent the birth of girls. Amniocentesis today has made the difference only in the technology used, not in society's attitude towards female births.

Men saw a woman as potentially a fertile ground, a receiver and con-server of man's seed. This was one reason why early marriage of girls was prescribed to make full use of her fertility span. Inability to arrange the marriage of a girl before her first menstrual period came to be regarded as a sin. A daughter so neglected was allowed to marry ac-cording to her choice three months after her menstruation. This pe-riod was extended to three years by Manu. The menstruation of an unmarried daughter was seen as a kind of abor-tion or a wasted oppor-tunity and the father was held responsible for it; he incurred the sin of destroying an embryo at each menses of an un-married daughter. While a childless wife felt a sense of tremendous in-security about her womanhood, a widow without sons was viewed as a useless and inauspicious object un-worthy of any meaning-ful place in the family. Detached from her procreational role, the woman aroused deep seated fear in man about her sexuality. It was to overcome such fear that the patriarchal man probably sought control over woman's body.

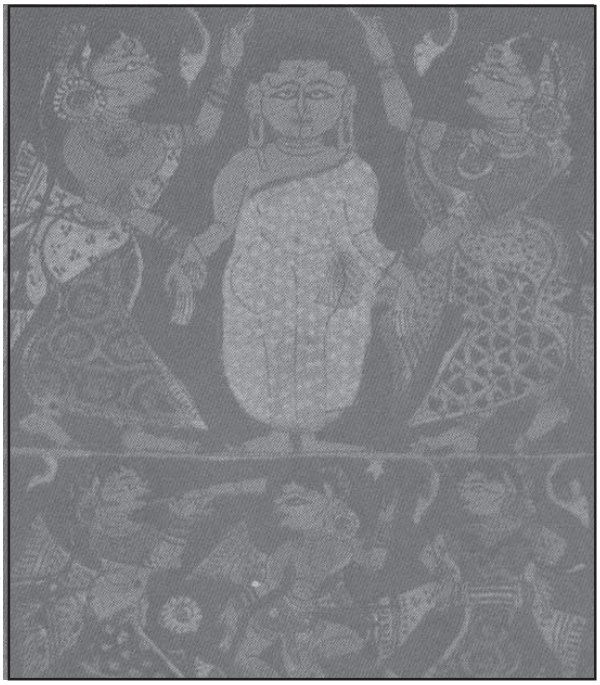
Morality in married life in the Indian tradi-tion ideally consists of conjugal fidelity. But here too, it is the woman who is expected to be de-voted, faithful and loyal to the hus-band, not only during her marital life but also in the premarital stage, in consideration of a prospective husband and after her husband *s death, as a widow. There are no such constraints for man especially after his wife's death. Without inviting any censure he can happily marry again, sometimes even showing unseemly hurry by arranging the second marriage while the mortal remains of the first wife are being consigned to fire. This second marriage is not regarded as a matter of lack of love or disloyalty to the first wife.

The treatment of nymphs *(apsaras)* in Indian mythology symbolises man's fears about woman's sexuality. The *apsaras* represent unattached wom-anhood. The services of the *apsaras* like Urvashi, Rambha, Tilottama, Menaka and other's were utilised to disturb the concentration of ascetics trying to destabilise Indra's stronghold on the divine domain through their spiritual powers. A Vishvamitra runs away from Menaka leaving her pregnant, though earlier he had resisted the 'on-slaught' of another *apsara,* Rambha and re-duced her to a stone by the power of his ascetic merit. An interesting story is of Urvashi. Significantly, she was born of Narayana's thigh. She is worshipped for success in love affairs, though she herself was rejected by Arjuna when she fell in love with him. (She how-ever did not curse Arjuna to be a stone but cursed him to become a woman!) With the deities Mitra and Varuna who fell for her charm, the story gets even curiouser. On merely see-ing Urvashi, they could not hold their *virya* (se-men) from which were born the sages Agastya and Vasishtha. For this lapse they held her re-sponsible and cursed her to live on earth. Another nymph Tilottama was made to suffer in one way or other through a curse. In the view of the legists, a woman's body is considered as polluting and demeaning for man. The lawgivers thus provide an end-less list of do's and don'ts to men to guard them against a woman's physi-cal charms; as if a woman's sexuality was a problem *in itself,* whereas, in fact, the problem was man's own ob-session about his sexual

An Apsara from Belur Temple

autonomy.

The picture one gets from the Puranic literature is of a man awaiting his fate as a prey of woman's physical charms and lacking any kind of inner control. At the same time, the image of woman which is projected is of a seductress trapping the man as if against his will. The moral derived from the story thus often remains ex-traneous to the story. It is probably for this reason that greater emphasis is placed on external controls in these stories as well as in codes of sexual behaviour devised by the legists. Internalised controls were considered too difficult to cultivate given the kind of attitude the Puranic man be-



A monk avoids the lures of women. From a manuscript of the Uttaradhyayana Sutra

created on Brahma's order by Vishvakarma from finest por-tions of every kind of grain (hence her name). She is pro-jected as an ultimate symbol of man's vulnerability to woman's physical charms. Vishvakarma's creation turned out to be sexu-ally so powerful that to continue to gaze at her from all directions when she walked around them even the lord Shiva gave himself three more heads and Indra ac-quired a thousands eyes. The sage Sharadvata was born when the vital seed of the sage Dadhyanca fell in the river Saraswati on seeing the nymph Alumbusa. It is not an irrelevant element in the story that all these nymphs had emerged from the ocean of milk when it was churned for nectar. Like the poison obtained from the ocean, they were not accepted as wives by gods or demons. Unacceptable as wives they became acceptable to all as *Sumadatmajas,* that is, daughters of pleasure. They were beautiful and well versed in fine arts like singing and dancing and their main function was to lure the sages away from their aus-terities. They were fond of dice, bringing luck to those whom they favoured, and could change their shape according to their requirements and convenience.

In the event of a clash between spiritual power and physical power which the writers of *Puranas* were fond of depicting in the form of a high drama between powerful ascetics and seductive women, the spiritual force in man always won out, not by transcending sexual desire (most often sage and women engage in some sexual behaviour) but by afterward destroying the object of such desire, that is the woman. She was often burnt to ashes, turned into a stone or trayed towards woman's sexuality. Hence woman is blamed for *causing* sexual desire in man by what has been described as her 'overtures' in many such stories. Men are advised to avoid situa-tions where these overtures might occur. Sexual desire in man, it seems, was viewed as episodic and situational, not an inner force needing resolution within some longterm relationship. As the emphasis of cultivation of harsh ascetic practises grew and renun-ciation of all worldly desires be-gan to be considered as the only means of achieving higher spiri-tual goals, man's fear of woman's sexuality became even more pro-nounced. She was now viewed as a major distracting influence, even an intrinsic evil. The worldly pleasures and indulgence of the senses were all associated with woman. Spirituality became a legitimate pur-suit for man; woman was an obstacle, a fetter which tied man to the world. Man's emancipation became depen-dent on his ability to tear this fetter. The mechanistic view of sex evi-dent in some ancient texts is also another aspect of the same attitude. Not only *iorzbrahmacharin* (celibate) was sex a taboo, hindering his efforts to achieve higher goals. Even for the householder in most religious texts sexual pleasure was not particularly valued as joy in itself. It was acceptable only as a duty for procreation. A *Vanaprastha* could treat his wife with equanimity as the passions of both husband and wife were expected to have cooled down. As for the *sannyasin,* attraction to women was supposed to become inconsequential. The emphasis was on the renunciation of all worldly attachments. Thus woman was considered as a threat and challenge throughout life.

This preoccupation in our literature with overcoming sexual desire has pro-duced, paradoxically, an opposite effect. We come across long, detailed and microscopic descriptions of woman's body which

are in marked contrast to a complete absence of similar description of man's body. And in real life, this resulted in a woman's almost total ex-clusion from the public sphere and a confinement within the domestic sphere. This led to the confirmation of procre-ation as the be-all and end-all of woman's existence. She was described *as jaya,* one who gives birth — *jananat jaya.* This idea was further stretched by Manu when he described the *jaya* as one whose womb her husband en-tered through his semen and by means of which he was reborn to her as son. This ensured continuity, rather immortality, to man.

The *ideal* of marriage as presented in these texts involved mutuality, but it remained unrecognisable in practice. According to the *Dharmasastras,* the purpose of marriage is threefold : *dharmasampatti* (acquiring religious merit), *praja* (progeny) and *rati,* (fulfillment of sensuous pleasures). In this ideal, men and women were complementary to one another, and lifelong companions. The man was considered incomplete without a woman and vice versa. This ideal is symbolised in the divinity of *ardhanarisvara,* where the divinity itself is conceived as half-male, half-female. Nevertheless even this conception of completeness and complementarity of man and woman collapsed when the woman failed to beget sons. If she failed, the man was free to seek 'completeness' in another woman.

The fear of woman's sexuality turned woman into a sort of phan-tom— the other, almost a non-human species. The *Mahabharata (Anushasana Parva* 38. 12 & 19), for example, states that "woman possesses the combined qualities of the edge of

a razor, poison, snake and fire." It further adds that, "she is really uncontrol-lable in her passions and remains within limits only because she is watched by servants in the house." Manu states that "women are lascivious, fickle minded, devoid of love and tend to dislike their hus-bands and resort to other men, whether handsome or ugly, simply because he is a man." *(Manusmriti* IX. 14. 15) "It is in the nature of a woman to tempt men, therefore the wise do not act heedlessly with young women, who are able to lead a man astray, whether he be learned or not." *(Mahabharata, Anush-asana Parva* 48. 37-38). *Brhatparashara* says that the passion of a woman is eightfold to that of a man. (Kane, P.V. 1974).

Ardhanarisvara form of Shiva, from Pali, Gwalior Museum

In this almost unanimous though undeserved censure of woman, the lone voice of Varahamihira (6th century A.D.) protested the injustice inherent in these accusations and made a spirited defence of women. He states that since both men and women are equally prone to committing mistakes in life, there is no reason why women should be singledoutfor all condemnations. Also, the delicate, urbane, sensitivity of the classical poets like Kalidasa *(Raghavamsha,* VIII. 66), and Bhavabhuti *(Malati Madhava,* VI), recognised the rightful place of woman as a companion to man, a co-sharer of pleasure and pain arising in the arduous but exciting course of life. In today's India, for this image of a woman as a Mend and companion of man, to prevail over the other dark image which occupies a large space in our tradition, the patriarchal man will have to overcome his own fears about his gender identity and autonomy.

Despite pressures of a patriarchal society, which restricted woman's sexual freedom, there are instances in ancient Indian literatureof women whoresisted unwanted sex.

Pradweshi, wife of sage Dirghatamas, decided to teach a lesson to her husband when he attempted to manipulate her. The story, in the *Mahabharata,* is as

follows: The sage Dirghatamas who was born blind had married a vivacious young woman called Pradweshi. As the sage was un-able to support the family Pradweshi took to entertaining people as a means of subsis-tence. When Pradweshi's behaviour created a scandal in the village, she decided to stop and asked her husband to took after the family. The husband, instead of protecting his wife, insulted her by saying that she should either see that her extra marital relations bring profit, or she should restrict her sex relations only and ex-clusively to her husband. When Pradweshi found that her husband had no sense of responsibility towards her and their children, but only wanted to control her, she decided to punish the unworthy, selfish, old, blind Dirghatamas and with the help of her children, threw him in the river Ganga.

Draupadi by Badrinarayan

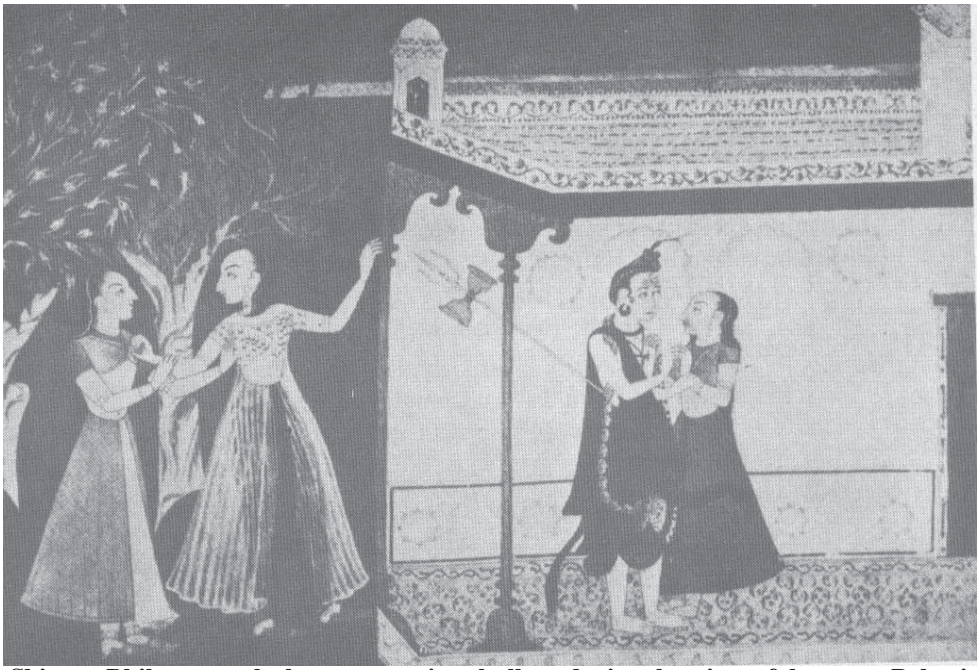
Jabala provides an example of touching simplicity against prevalent norms of society. The story in *Chandogya Upanisad* is oft-quoted for its charming innocence. Satyakama, a small child, went to a Brahmin teacher to study under him. Before enrolling him as his student, the teacher naturally asked him about his family name. Satyakama went to his mother to get the necessary information. She very simply said, "When I got there, I was attending on many guests and had no opportunity to find out your paternity, hence lknow not of what go frayouare, Jabala is my name and Satyakama thine. Say therefore of thyself 'Satyakama, the son of Jabala.' " The strength of the society of her times lies in the fact that neither Satyakama nor his mother were looked down upon due to his uncertain paternity. The teacher declared Satyakama to be a Brahmin for me virtue of his adherence to truth and accepted him as his pupil. The nymph Urvashi is another example of an as-sertive woman who before marrying the king Paruravas made a contract with him that if ever she saw him naked, she would leave him. The Gandharvas who wanted to get Urvashi back, contrived to steal at night the two little lambs dear to Urvashi and when Urvashi cried for help, Pururavas rushed without putting on his clothes and at the same instant the Gandharvas caused a flash of lightning in which Urvashi saw Pururavas in a naked condi-tion. All the pleadings of Pururavas failed to convince her to change her decision. *(Shatapatha Brahmana* XI. 5.1).

Draupadi managed to get Kichaka killed at the hands of Bhima when he tried to molest her. Though earlier, when she was abducted by Jayadratha, husband of Duryodhana's sister Dussala, the Pandavas desisted from killing him out of consideration for Dussala. But her spirited comment at that time is noteworthy: "If you care to do what is agreeable to me, you must slay that mean, despicable wretch, that stupid, sinful, infamous chief of the Saindhava clan. The foe who forcibly carries away a married woman should never be spared." *(Mahabharata).*

With the systematisation of social codes in the *Dharmasastras,* the foundations of a patriarchal society were firmly laid in India. While it is true that this model of patriarchy has always been contested by some groups at the level of local practice, it has remained a predominant principle of Indian social organisation.

In such a society, the life of a woman from her birth to her death is determined by norms and rules made by men. Her birth is resented, prayers are said to prevent her birth, rites are

performed for her to beget only sons, provisions are made for the husband to remarry if the wife gives birth to only daughters. As a daughter, she is considered an 'outsider' in the family of her birth, to be given away to another family. The ulti-mate responsibily of parents is limited to giving her away in marriage at the proper time. Beyond her socialisation as a permanent, non-adult ward to remain in the custody of father as a daughter, of husband as a wife, of sons as a mother or of kins as a childless widow, rarely was much attention paid to equip her to live by herself, for herself. In marriage, she can succeed only by her service and obedience to elders and devotion to her husband. Develop-ment of her personality as an adult is stunted for fear of her being indepen-dent minded. Giving birth to a male child brings her some respect, but losing her husband without having borne him sons makes her subsequent life inauspicious and meaningless. In brief, her entire life is constantly monitored from the viewpoint of her utility for the male world.



Shiva as Bhiksatana, the beggar, wearing skulls, seducing the wives of the sages, Pahari painting, Basohli style

This is not to undermine the filial emotion and care felt by individual parents for daughters, love felt by husband for wife and respect by chil-dren for their mother. We indeed have several instances of loving fathers of daughters like Janaka, loving husbands like Rama and devoted sons like the Pandavas. The point to be noted, however, is that despite such counter examples in the traditional religious literature, the patriarchal system evolved over centuries has created durable patterns of attitudes and behaviour which make for the widespread practice of treating woman as property. Also engendered are le-gal and social disabilities for women of various strata and in different stages of the life cycle. As a result those few oft-cited traditional examples, de-scribing humane relationships be-tween men and women can only be viewed as exceptions proving the rule. Much has been written on this issue during the recent wave of feminism, but little attention is paid to how an evolving ideology of the Hindu family resulted in such a stringent patriarchy in India. ❐

Bibliography

Apastamba Dharma Sutra, edited by Umeshchandra Pandeya, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1969.

Atharvaveda, edited by S.P. Pandit, Varanasi, Krishnadas Academy, 1989.

Brhadaranyaka Upanishad, Prachya Bharati Prakashan, Varanasi, 1965.

Brhatsamhita of Varahamihira.

Chandogya Upanishad, Prachya Bharati Prakashan, Varanasi, 1965.

Contributions to Ihdian Sociology, Vol 24, No. 1 Gail Hinich Sutherland, January-June 1990.

Health and Medicine in the Hindu Tradition, Prakash N. Desai, Crossroad, New York 1989.

History of Dharamashaslra, Vol. TJ, Part 2, P.V. Kane, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona, 1974.

Hymns ofRgveda edited by by Max Muller, Kashi Sanskrit Series, 167.

Kamasutra of Vatsyayana, Chowkhamba, Sanskrit Series, 1982.

MahabHarata, edited by S.D. Satavalekar, Svadhyaya Mandal, Pardi, 1968.

Malatimadhava by Bhavabhuti, edited by M.R. Kale, Delhi, Motilal Benarsidas, 1983.

Mann Smrti, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1979.

Raghuvamsha of Kalidas, edited by C.R. Devadhar, Delhi.

Salaptha Brahmana, edited by A. Weber, Hindi translation edited by Satyaprakash Saras wati, Delhi, 1988.