Chapter 5
Religiosity, Secularism and Sexuality

5.1 The Triangular Configuration Between Religiosity, Secularism and Sexuality

Religiosity, secularism and sexuality, despite their apparent adversative nature, are interwoven in the Indian mindset. Religiosity is the totality of religious beliefs, values and practices including rites and rituals. Many Indians are deeply religious. A major part of their life space is occupied by religious fasting, festivals, individual and collective worship, frequent pilgrimages to proximate and distant places, massive congregations attracting millions of devotees, immensely rich temples and *mazar*s, enormous popularity of Godmen, respect for saints, sages, fakirs, mullahs and monks, a number of television serials on mythological events and characters, religious songs on radios, and numerous rituals and religious offerings. There are a variety of offerings to please a deity and evoke a "dormant benediction" for equally diverse requests and appeals. It could be "a lock of hair, a donation, a pilgrimage, a penance, a vow, a fast, an amulet, a *yajna*, a repetition of particular *sloka*, feeding of monkeys or cow …" (Varma 2004, p. 98), and so on. According to the 2001 Census, there were 2.4 million places of worship in the country compared to only 1.5 million schools and less than a million hospitals (Varma 2004, p. 96). The variety of forms that religious worships take is also amazing. "The religion is lived through ritualistic (*Bahminism, Tantrism*), devotional (*Bhakti*), spiritual-mystic (asceticism, yoga, meditation), and heroic … And yet, to a large extent all these forms are peacefully practiced beside each other. One can almost say that religious post-modernism has been realized in India (Axel Michaels, 1998 cited by Kakar and Kakar 2009, pp. 134–135).

Hinduism, the religion of the majority in India, formally accepts other religions as manifestly different but as valid paths to essentially the same ultimate reality.

Many ideas on religiosity and sexuality in this chapter have been drawn from Kakar (1978) and Kakar and Kakar (2009).

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As a result, it aims to foster a secularism that is not non-religious as in the West, but rests on the acceptance of other religions within its overarching framework believed to contain the essence of all other religions: "… the classical Hindu religious tradition, enshrined in the ancient texts from the Vedas through the *Smritis* … does not recognize a mutually exclusive dichotomy of the religious versus the secular, nor the idea of religion as a private activity …", but "more inclusive and synthetic than pluralistic" (Madan 1997, pp. 198–199). It is this non-discriminating, multi-religious secularism that was enshrined in the Indian Constitution and is formally followed in government policies and schemes, although their full implementation is not always satisfactory; nor do the people at large always go by the spirit of multi-religious secularism. The socio-political dynamics of the various religious communities are constant distractors, to which we shall return to shortly.

Similarly, Indian religiosity does not negate sexuality. Sexuality includes but is not limited to genital sex. It is also a source of the capacity for emotional and erotic relationships and for seeking sensuous pleasures with passion. Hence, it is a natural and indispensable part of living life fully. Similarly, dharma (religion) is conceptualized as the "natural laws" for holding together the societal structure and guiding human conduct. Naturally, in the wholesome perspective dharma encompasses sexuality: "… the sexual act in Hindu tradition does not lie outside but within the holiness of life" (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 82). Drawing on this broad, inclusive view, sexuality in ancient literature has been depicted as a joyful experience and not as constraining. But there was also a strong tradition of thought emphasizing the value of asceticism. Indian culture as a result is reported "to oscillate between the ascetic and erotic" (Roland 1988, p. 262)—and the balance in favour of either of the two has been tilting from time to time. The ancient period of joyful expression of sexuality was followed by a long phase of constrained sexuality for a whole millennium, which is now being challenged in globalizing India. The rest of the chapter traces the deep roots of this triangular configuration in historical experiences and its present unfolding in the contemporary mindset.

5.2 The Cultural Roots of Religiosity, Secularism and Sexuality in India

5.2.1 Religiosity

Ancient Vedic literature was fascinated and awed by the forces of nature, which were invested with divinity and personified as male and female (Thapar 1972). The lord of the Gods and ruler of heaven was Indra—the rain maker. His thunder symbolized supreme strength which he deployed to fight and kill demons and protect the rest of the universe. Agni, the God of fire, too, was attributed with many supernatural qualities. He was indispensable for life, a purifier of all impurities, destroyer if displeased, a witness to marriages and a source to reach out to other

Gods and Goddesses through fire sacrifices. Equally important was Surya (the Sun God) who provided light which was the symbol of wisdom overcoming ignorance. Gayatri, the five-faced Goddess, was probably the female counterpart, who controlled the five senses or *praanas* (vital breathing) and, if pleased, was believed to protect these five life-forces. Rudra (storm God) was to be feared. Another God was Soma (which was the drink of immortality, an alcoholic brew). There were 33 Gods and Goddesses during the Vedic period who had to be prayed to and appeased for prosperity, wealth and happiness. The hymns of the *Rig Veda* were dedicated to them. Some of them still resonate in the Indian mind. An example is the Goddess Gayatri, whose hymn (in Sanskrit) many Indians recite regularly. A rough English translation is as follows:

> Oh God! Thou art the Giver of Life,
> Remover of pain and sorrow,
> The Bestower of happiness,
> Oh! Creator of the Universe,
> May we receive thy supreme sin-destroying light,
> May Thou guide our intellect in the right direction.

Vedic people were eclectic in accepting some forms of religious worship that were popular perhaps during the earlier Harappan civilization. They worshipped the horned deity, the Bull, which symbolized the God of fertility, snakes, stones symbolizing various Gods and Goddesses, and sacred trees, plants and flowers such as *ashoka* (saraca indica), banyan, *bael* (aegle marmelos), banana, mango, margosa, *peepal* (ficus religiosa), basil, lotus and so on. They were associated with mythological characters and events. In order to appease Gods and Goddesses, Vedic people considered *yajna* (religious ceremony) a must and, therefore, performed it frequently in which all kinds of oblations and sacrifices were given. In fact, the *Yajur Veda* means "the wisdom of sacrifices" that laid down various sacred invocations for sacrificial rites and rituals and to pray and pay respect to the various instruments that were involved in animal sacrifice. The Brahmanas that were composed following the Vedas were primarily devoted to specify elaborately and meticulously how religious rituals and sacrifices must be performed.

The Puranas, written subsequently, created many more Gods. Some of them were Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), Shiva (the destroyer), Ganesha (the elephant-headed God known to be the remover of obstructions) and Shakti (the Goddess of power and energy). Eventually, about 33 million Gods and Goddesses were established and were placed in different strata ranging from the personal, through castes and communities, to a whole group of divine bodies. Although the Vedas posited polytheistic beliefs in the existence of many Gods and Goddesses, there were Vedic hymns and poems that hinted at the idea of henotheism. That is, there is one God—the Supreme Being—that takes many different forms. The Puranas, on the other hand, rendered the abstract ideas of the Vedas and Upanishads into stories about the life and events of Gods and Goddesses, narrating their superior qualities and upholding moral and not-so-moral conducts. There are 18 major Puranas: six devoted to the worship of the God Shiva, six to Vishnu and six to Brahma.

At times, tthe stories compete with each other to prove the superiority of one God over the others. During the *Mahabharata*, the *bhakti maarg* (devotional tradition) was initiated. It was about the time that temples started to be built and God images and idols were installed for ritualistic worshipping. Together, they resulted in a complex religious structure where a plethora of Gods and Goddesses occupied various positions of significance with meticulously drawn prescriptions of how they could be appeased through various rites and rituals.

5.2.2 Secularism in Indian and Western Perspectives

Despite this religious backdrop, the Vedas and Upanishads raised a profound question of how the world was created. The answer reflected their flight of creative imagination rather than a dogmatic expression of their religiosity. According to the *Rig Veda,* the world was not created by either the Supreme Being or Gods or Goddesses. They were themselves created later on. The world came into being out of *shunya*—emptiness—a non-religious conceptualization of the origin of the universe:

> Then even nothingness was not, nor existence.
> There was no air then, nor the heaven beyond it … .
> *The Gods themselves are later than creation* [Italic added],
> So who knows truly whence it has arisen![1]

A grand imaginative response of the non-religious nature to this curiosity appears metaphorically in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (vi, 13, transl. by Basham 1971, pp. 250–251). It is in the form of a dialogue between a teacher and his disciple:

> Fetch me a fruit of the Banyan tree.
> Here is one, sir.
> Break it.
> I have broken it, sir.
> What do you see?
> Very tiny seeds, sir.
> Break one.
> I have broken it, sir.
> What do you see now?
> Nothing, sir.
> My son,' the father said, 'what you do not perceive is the essence, and in that essence the mighty Banyan tree exists. Believe me, my son, in that essence is the self of all that is. That is the True, that is the Self …

Two parallel traditions that branched off from the Vedas, the religious codified in the Brahmanas, and another, largely non-religious, in the Upanishads, coexisted in the primordial mindset. The first emphasized the values of *yajna,* sacrificial rites and rituals to seek the blessings of Gods and Goddesses, while the second focused on comprehension, reflection and meditation for understanding the mystery of life,

[1] *Rig Veda*, x, 129, transl. A. L. Basham 1971, pp. 247–248.

death and immortality. In fact, the Sanskrit term *veda* simply means "knowledge" that may or may not have to do with either religion or sacrificial rites and rituals. Accordingly, the term was also used as a system of knowledge pertaining to a variety of other domains such as medicine (*Ayurveda),* music and sacred dance (*Gandharvaveda*), archery (*Dhanurveda*), agriculture (*Sasyaveda*), evil knowledge (*Durveda*), among others. The epics, *Valmiki Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, were originally composed as non-religious works, but were later given religious forms (Thapar 1972, p. 133).

There was another source through which an essence of secularism seeped into ancient Indian thought. The reformist movements of Buddhism and Jainism denied the existence of Gods and Goddesses, denounced Brahmanical religious rites and rituals, but retained the essence of religion in the forms of good personal conduct and proper behaviour with others. One of the six major schools of thought, *Saankhya*, went a step further. It was propounded as an atheistic view assuming dualism of matter and consciousness (see details in Chap. 4). Matter and consciousness were postulated to interact dialectally resulting in 25 principles of all creations. The *Caarvaka*s went to the extreme of being anti-religion and therefore secular in this sense.

More relevant for understanding ancient secularism was the emphasis placed on good personal conduct and amicable behaviour towards others. Jainism and Buddhism considered it the core of their religion. The Upanishadic dictum of *sarva dharma samabhava* (equal respect to all religions) laid the foundation for a multi-religious secularism. In one of the Upanishads, the sage Yagnavalkya is reported to have said, "It is not our religion, still less the colour of our skin, that produces virtue. Virtue must be practiced. Therefore, let no one do to others, what he would not have done to himself" (Nehru 1946/2001, p. 122). Emperor Ashoka (263–231 BCE), who played the most instrumental role in spreading Buddhism in the subcontinent, emphasized, besides nonviolence, tolerance of other religions. One of his famous rock edicts recommended the following:

> On each occasion one should honour another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other man, while by doing otherwise, one diminishes the influence of one's own sect and harms the other man's … therefore, concord is to be commended so that men may hear one another's principles … (Rock Edict xii, Thapar 1972, p. 87).

Thus, ancient Indian secularism was expressed in the coexistence of religious and non-religious beliefs and practices, good personal and interpersonal relationships, and tolerance and acceptance of other religions.

5.2.2.1 Secularism in the Western Tradition

Secularism in the Western tradition evolved as a cumulative impact of the Reformation, Renaissance, humanism, rationalism, individualism, mechanical concept of nature and a number of scientific discoveries starting from fourteenth-century Europe. It pertained to beliefs, values and activities of a "worldly" nature, which were not sacred. Rather, they were devoid of any religious meanings or rituals.

Secularism signified a departure from the worldview of the earlier period when the existence of God was taken for granted and there was an unshakable belief in the divine design for running the world. Following this worldview, the Church used to dominate the major domains of people's life as well as the functions of the State. Secularism reflected a new worldview where science and reason were supposed to guide human behaviour and religion was not allowed to interfere with the impulse to live life to its fullest. People were free to indulge in earthly pleasures, replace religious superstitions with reasons, facts and evidence, use their intellect and follow their dispositions to live the way they wanted to rather than conforming to the dictates of the Church. Therefore, public policy and State functions were required to be cleansed of religious views and discriminations. Religion was in fact required to be subtracted from culture in order to have a non-religious, worldly and scientifically defined enlightened society where individualism flourished.

An extreme view on secularism appeared in a best-selling book, *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006), where Dawkins, a British biologist, argued that a supernatural creator, God, almost certainly does not exist and the belief in a personal God is a delusion in the face of strong contradictory evidence. Further, religion is a "mental virus" that spreads across societies out of a misconception about how the world was created and how people become moral and altruistic. He refuted the theory of "divine design" by arguing that the world was indeed created through a natural selection process of nature evolving from simple to complex. Further, people do not need to be religious in order to be moral and virtuous. In fact, atheists can have a healthy and independent mind and can be happy, balanced, moral, virtuous and intellectually enriched. He accused religion of subverting science, fostering fanaticism, encouraging bigotry against those having different sexual preferences and misleading societies in many other negative ways.

Taylor (2007) on the contrary, argued that religiosity did not totally disappear in the secular age. In his classical work, *A Secular Age*, he traced the emergence of secularism in the Western world and the variety of options it created. He admitted that the major revolutions in Western thought starting from the Reformation resulted in the diminishing salience of the traditional religious mindset and the rise of secularism. However, secularism, he further argued, in fact led to create a vast space in which it became possible to pursue spirituality and even believe in God. He distinguished three facets of secularism: Political, sociological, and cultural. Political secularism refers to the arrangements in which the State remains neutral to various religious beliefs and affiliations without allowing them to dictate or dominate policies and functions. In the sociological sense, secularism means the decline of religious beliefs, values and practices in the day-to-day life of the common people who replace them with non-religious and down-to-earth ones. The cultural meaning of secularism refers to *a change in the conditions of a society* where people shift from blind and unchallenged faith in the existence of God and his design for running the universe to a condition where they are free to think and entertain whatever they like to. This freedom to think may indeed lead to the belief in the existence of God. Thus, a belief in God is one of the many options that cultural secularism allows. In other words, secularism, while demolishing the rigid

frame of Christian religion, promotes humanism that in turn generates an ever-widening variety of moral and spiritual positions as Taylor (2007) said, "across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond". Many people are now not quite satisfied with the atomized material day-to-day life and want to think what is beyond this worldliness. And, thus a new, open and flexible worldview has emerged that allows people to sustain, if they so want, their belief in God and engage in religious practices within the framework of secularism. Religiosity and spirituality seamlessly intermingle in such a broad secular worldview. It is essentially an entitlement of individuals to decide what he or she wants or does.

5.2.3 Sexuality

In the ancient Indian worldview, sexuality was an indispensable part of life. The source of this view goes back to the Vedantic belief in *moksha*—the *aatma* (soul) strives for a blissful union with the *paramaatma* (the Eternal Soul). In the *Saankhya* school of thought, the union of *purusha* and *prakriti* is the source of all creations. If such a union is so pious and fundamental, how could the union between a male and a female be anything but natural and even desirable? The scholar-mathematician Varahamihira (505–587 CE) in the *Brihat samhita* (see Bhat 1947) is quoted as legitimizing sexuality as part of life:

> The whole universe, from *Brahman* to smallest worm, is based on the union of the male and female. Why then should we feel ashamed of it, when even Lord Brahma was forced to take four faces on account of his greed to have a look at a maiden (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 82).

The Tantric tradition from the fourth century BCE interpreted sexual rites as passionless, sacred and as a means to achieve cosmic consciousness. The *bhakti maarg* (devotional tradition) drew on this theme of the union of *aatma* with *paramaatma* through heightened emotionality, which amounts, symbolically, to an erotic fusion with God. Thus, the experience of intense person-to-person emotional relationship paves a common ground between religiosity and sexuality.

However, there was a parallel tradition of thought that prescribed restraining sexuality. The *Bhagvad Gita* strongly advocated containing of all desires. Buddhism blamed desires as the source of human sorrows and hence recommended curbing them. In fact, abstinence has been a core value in ancient Indian thought. In the first stage of life, *brahmacharya* (spiritual and practical purity of celibacy and asceticism) was posited to be a must, and only in the *grihasthya* (householder) stage could one indulge in *kaama*—sensuous, including sexual, pleasures, which had to be transcended in the subsequent stage of *vaanaprastha* (going to the forest, or retiring from active life), and given up completely in the stage of *sanyaas* (renunciation of worldly life).

Even during the *grihasthya* (householder) stage, sexuality was prescribed ideally for procreation only. The physiology of *ayurveda* maintained that food is converted into semen in a 30-day period by successive transformations and refinement through

blood, flesh, fat, bone and marrow. One drop of semen is distilled from 40 drops of blood. On the other hand, each ejaculation causes the loss of half an ounce of semen which is produced by consuming 60 pounds of nourishing food. If semen is so precious a source of vitality, it has to be preserved diligently and used exclusively for the most important purpose of procreation, especially a son who is entitled to perform religious rites and rituals that can release the father from the cycle of births and deaths. Any frivolous misuse of it for sensuous pleasure was naturally believed to be sinful and in fact harmful to the body and mind. So, semen should be retained and converted by observing celibacy into *oja* (vibrant energy) that helps gain spirituality. Further, according to this belief, "Longevity, creativity, physical and mental vitality are enhanced by the conservation of semen …" (Kakar 1990, p. 119). There are numerous mythological stories of ascetics maintaining sexual restraint and celibacy in order to gain spirituality while *apsara*s (divine dancers) tried to seduce them to fall into a sexual trap.

Yet, Indian mythology is replete with accounts of sexuality. As early as the first half of the third century BCE, there were depictions of loving couples in temples, but they symbolically represented the union of the individual soul (*aatma*) with the Supreme (*paramaatma*). "The infusion of religion with sexuality is not limited to sculpture, but also extended to literature, pre-eminently to the poetry and songs in the *bhakti* …" (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 83). What was spiritual metaphor in the ancient texts was subsequently presented as explicit sexual intercourse. Kakar (1978) observed:

> The principal texts consistently attest to the primary importance of sexuality. In Hindu mythology, sexuality is a rampant flood of polyamorous pleasure and connection, disdaining the distinctions between the heterosexual, genital imperatives of conventional sex, and sweeping away incestual taboos (p. 23).

The *Mahabharata* had characters that did not refrain from venting their lust for women, nor were the women absolutely chaste before marriage. There were instances of pre-marital sexuality, polygamy, women seducing men and so on. Lovemaking was pure and simply a means of sexual gratification while marriage had mostly social and religious purposes (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 73). It was not unusual for an otherwise worthy king to fall in love with a woman and marry her simply because she was beautiful despite the disparity in their age, caste and status. The Puranas, particularly the *Shiva-Puranas*, give vivid descriptions of how vulnerable or lustful the Gods were. For example,

> The heavenly nymph Mohini fell in love with the Lord of Creation, Brahma. After gaining the assistance of the God of love, Kaama, she went to Brahma and danced naked before him. Brahma remained unmoved till Kaama struck him with one of his flower arrows. Brahma's protest that he was an ascetic who must avoid all women, especially prostitutes, steadily grew weaker. Mohini laughed and insisted that he make love to her and pulled at his garment, revealing his aroused state (O'Flaherty 1973, p. 51).

Lord Shiva was an ascetic and a yogi, but was equally vigorous in his sexual intercourse with Parvati as well as the wives of sages. There is an instance reported in the *Shiva-Puranas*:

> When Siva failed to be satisfied by making love to Gauri, his wife, he then went naked into the pine forest in guise of a madman, his *linga* (phallus) erect, his mind full of desire, wishing to obtain sexual pleasure with the wives of the sages (O'Flaherty 1973, p. 173).

There is another story. Shiva's elder son, Skanda, killed a demon and so was rewarded by his mother Parvati to "amuse himself", which he did by making love to the wives of the Gods who were helpless to stop him (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 100). Shiva also figures prominently in the Tantric tradition which has a philosophical frame similar to the *Saankhya* school of thought. In the Tantric tradition, the one living divinity (*Brahma*) separates Itself into Him (Shiva) and Her (Shakti), male and female, who engage in an eternal play of having sexual intercourse that symbolizes the union of Shiva and Shakti. Sexual rites between male and female Tantrics were a means to celebrate the union of their body, mind, heart and soul, culminating in the experience of *aananda*—the divine bliss. This is also manifested in the worship of Shiva's *lingam* (phallus) in Shakti's *yoni* (vagina). The union of the two represents the indivisible oneness of male and female creative energy from which all life originates (Jansen 2003).

The heightened emotionality in the *bhakti maarg* (devotional tradition) bridged whatever gap existed between religiosity and sexuality in the mainstream of Indian thought. The belief is that a *bhakta* (devotee) is an *aatma*, a female striving for blissful fusion with the *paramaatma*—the male principal—through total surrender. Sexual union (including but not limited to genital intercourse) symbolizes such a union. At the affective level, the heightened emotionality of devotees is quite similar to the peak experience of sex partners. An exquisite example of *bhakti* expressions in erotic practices appears in the form of Krishna's *raas-lila* (drama and dance of love) with thousands of women, especially his beloved Radha. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (written in the twelfth century) has descriptions of ecstatic lovemaking and orgasmic release between Radha and Krishna (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 83).

The communality between religiosity and sexuality may not be confined to only these worldviews. Neurological research (Newberg et al. 2001) shows that it is not only a matter of beliefs and emotionality. Some of the changes that occur in the brain during deep meditation and prayer are similar to changes that occur during sexual activities. This suggests that the relationship between sexuality and religiosity is much more basic than only a philosophical formulation. MacKnee (2002) found a communality between the profound nature of sexual and spiritual experience with the partner and in connections with God (respectively). In both experiences there is a disappearance of "dualism in all forms"—in body and spirit, male and female, spirit and nature (p. 241).

Sexuality in another stream of Indian thought has been viewed as part of a lifestyle that is independent of religiosity. Vatsyayana's *Kaama Sutra* (written in the third century) is a classical work on a holistic view of sexuality. Kakar and Kakar (2009) summarized it in the following words:

> What the *Kaama Sutra* is really about is the art of living—about finding a partner, maintaining power in marriage, committing adultery, living as or with a courtesan, using

> drugs—and also about positions in sexual intercourse. It has attained its classical status as the world's first comprehensive guide to erotic love because it is at bottom about essential, unchangeable human attributes—lust, love, shyness, rejection, seduction, manipulation—that are part of our sexuality … (p. 72).

Kakar and Kakar reported that not only the *Kaama Sutra*, but other Sanskrit poems and dramas that were written around that time were permeated with erotic lovemaking, playful enjoyment of ambiguities of lovemaking, delightful savouring of sexual pleasures, and a consummately refined suffering of its sorrows (p. 75). The temples of Khajuraho showcasing erotic art (tenth and eleventh centuries) depicted the variety of ways in which sexual activities could be performed and enjoyed—all highlighting that sexuality is part of a wholesome style of living for enjoying it to the fullest while still keeping the sacred at the centre of one's heart.

5.3 The Contemporary Formulation of Secularism, Religiosity and Sexuality

5.3.1 Political Secularism

The *Constitution of India* declares that India is a secular country prohibiting discrimination against or favour for anyone based on his or her religion, race, caste, gender or place of birth. The State professes to treat all religions with equal respect. Every person has the right to practice and preach any religion that he or she believes in and belongs to. In fact, it is a fundamental right even to get converted to any religion if one so desires. This professed secular commitment, despite the overwhelming majority of Hindus, grew out of a number of reasons. The tolerance ingrained in ancient Indic religions provided a fertile philosophical ground. There were many role models at different times in the cultural history of the country. Ranging from Ashoka, through Akbar, Kabirdas and Vivekananda to Mahatma Gandhi and many more were the exemplars of communal harmony and equanimity. The mystic modern sage Ramakrishna, the guru of Vivekananda is reported as proclaiming:

> I have practiced all religions, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects … I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths. You must try all beliefs and traverse all the different ways once (Ramakrishna cited by Rolland 1960, p. 79).

Mahatma Gandhi, for example, was a devout Hindu and had instilled religious devotion in the struggle for Independence, but was a strong advocate of harmony between Hindus, Muslims and other religious communities. He maintained, "My Hinduism teaches me to respect all religions".[2] He was thus secular in having a

[2] *Harijan*, October 19, 1947.

multi-religious perspective. Prime Minister Nehru too was secular, but drew his inspiration from European humanism hoping that secularism would cleanse Indians from religious orthodoxy and would foster a scientific temper in them. Secularism was also a political compulsion. The partition of the Indian subcontinent was based on the formula of religious segregation. Many Muslims migrated to Pakistan, but many more also decided to stay back. The country had an obligation to protect Islamic interests as Muslims in India tied their destiny with the rest. There were also Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and other religious communities which were living mostly in peace for centuries. The country had a moral obligation as well as a political necessity to safeguard their interests and protect them from religious discrimination. In fact, the British right from the very beginning recognized this ground reality of multi-religious communities living in close physical proximity, although religion, till then, was considered to be inseparable from the political and social life of Indians. In order not to dabble and create problems for themselves, they instituted separate civil laws for Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Parsis, creating a precedent for Independent India to follow the multi-religious tradition.

Indian secularism thus pertained to communal coexistence and parity in access to societal resources in contrast to the non-religious European secularism. By the same token, Indian secularism has run into a problem: How to treat all communities equitably when they are numerically, materially, socially and culturally disparate? According to the 2001 Census, Sikhs (1.90 %), Buddhists (0.80 %), Jains (0.40 %) are numerically very small minorities and share origins with Hindus. Christians (2.30 %), larger in size, are still a molecule. They are concentrated mostly in the south and in the north-east. None of them has either the critical mass or the beliefs and rituals to pose a threat to the Hindu identity. Yet, there are occasional instances of religious discriminations and violence against Sikhs and Christians. Muslims, constituting a sizable population (13.43 %) and assuming even a majority position in certain parts of the country, are a real test case for Indian secularism that has not always emerged with flying colours. Religious riots involving Hindus and Muslims have been recurring till today, in some of which political parties, their senior leaders and even State machineries are alleged to be either involved or complacent. Despite various efforts by the government as well as both communities, serious misgivings and trust deficits still exist and prevent people on both sides from maintaining untainted secularism.

Any minority community anywhere in the world, if it is less privileged and less affluent than the surrounding majority, feels insecure, discriminated against and deprived in the best of circumstances. It has to remain alert, cohesive and defensive in order to resist the majority's smothering influences. So are the Muslims in India. They are not only in minority, but also suffer from having, according to the Census (2001), lower literacy rate (59.10 %) and lower participation in work (31.30 %) compared to Hindus (with a literacy rate of 65.10 and work participation of 40.40 %). Worse, many Muslims apprehend that their allegiance to the country is suspect. Many Hindus indeed think so. Such a milieu of mistrust is further vitiated by extremist activities that are often alleged to have

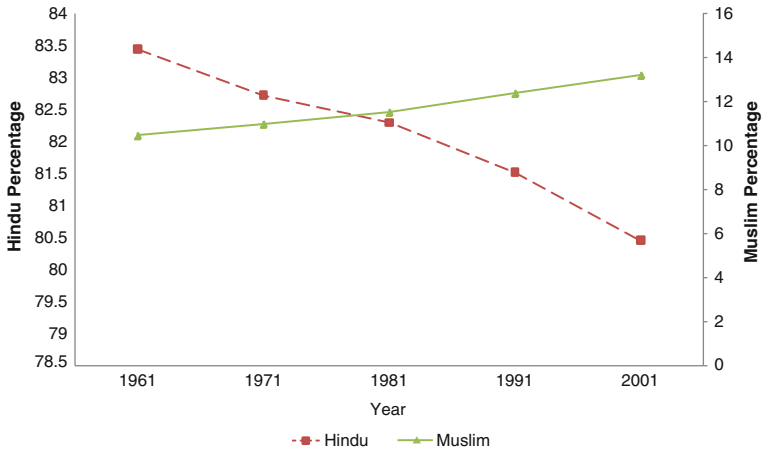

Fig. 5.1 Percentage of Hindus and Muslims in population

local Muslim connections. Unfriendly relations with Pakistan and its linkages with terrorists in India further antagonize Hindus and put a large chunk of Indian Muslims to the edge. Indian Muslims have one trump card, their vote bank, to extract favours from Hindu political leaders, who, it is alleged, exploit their sense of alienation and insecurity. They tend to do so in the name of secularism, but are criticized by many Hindus for their policy of appeasement while Muslims complain of their chronic neglect and implicit discrimination, which have kept them deprived compared to the majority of Hindus. Many Hindus notice with concern the rising proportion of Muslims in the population. They gloss over the fact that Muslims still constitute only 13.43 % of the population; rather, they exaggerate the falling percentage of Hindus and the rising one of Muslims in the total population over the last 40 years of so (Fig. 5.1). It is further pointed out that during the last decade (1991–2001) Muslims had a population growth of 36% compared to 20.3% of Hindus (The Census of India 2001): a trend many Hindus perceive to be a threat to the future of the country.

The extremists among Hindus ask for a uniform civil code in order to maintain equity, a control of disproportionate growth of population, reduction of gender inequality in the society, a ban on cow slaughter and the restoration of religious structures destroyed by the Muslims in the medieval period. Muslims construe this demand as a device of Hindu majoritorianism to assimilate the minority, undermine their religious practices and erode their identity. They consider a uniform code as a violation of the *Shariat* and hence an encroachment on their religious autonomy. Many of them seek, like the other backward castes, reservations in jobs and education in order to gain parity with Hindus. In such a milieu of misgivings and mistrust, it is difficult to really believe in secularity in its spirit and letters. There are instances where religious extremists created conditions that undermined secularity in thought and behaviour (see Box 5.1 on the next page).

Box 5.1. When Secularism Fumbled

- The Sambhaji Brigade ransacked the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI) Pune on 5 January 2004 because of the James Laine's book, *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India*.
- M. F. Hussain had to go in exile for his nude paintings of Hindu Goddesses.
- Because of his book, *The Satanic Verses,* Salman Rushdie was denied a visa and thus was prevented from participating in the Jaipur Literature festival in 2012.
- Taslima Nasreen, the author-poet, was exiled from Bangladesh in 2004–2007 and her autobiographical series, *Nirbaasan* (Exile) was banned in Kolkata, India.
- A professor's hands were cut off in Kerala on July 4, 2010 for asking an inappropriate question about the Prophet.
- A. K. Ramanujan's *Three Hundred Ramayans* was removed on November 27, 2011 from the Delhi University undergraduate syllabus under pressure from rightist extremists.
- The Symbiosis College of Art and Commerce, Pune postponed on January 30, 2012 a seminar on Kashmir that was to include director Sanjay Kak's film, *Jashne-e-Azadi* (the joy of freedom), because of Kashmiri Hindu pundits.
- Rohinton Mistry's book, *Such a Long Journey*, was banned on October 20, 2010 in Maharashtra to placate the Shiv Sena.
- And many other similar cases.

Secularism still holds though a shaky ground, partly because of the constitutional commitment, partly due to the expediency of electoral politics and partly compelled by the conditions of co-living. If it is badly shaken occasionally, the culprits are invariably those with vested interests.

5.3.2 Hindu Nationalism and Religiosity

Hindu nationalism sprouted in the nineteenth century in order to counteract the British denigration of Indians and their claim of Western superiority and the white man's supremacy. The nationalism was expressed in many forms, common to which was, besides social reforms, resurrection of ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas and Upanishads by way of positing Hindus' spiritual superiority over the materialistic Western worldview. Raja Rammohan Roy, for example, formed the Brahmo Samaj, a sect, by drawing on the Upanishads to envision a rational,

modern India that would combine the best of both—Eastern and Western—worlds. He was an exemplar of the Indian cultural tradition of adding new ideas to old ones. His intellectual approach led him to accept many Western ideas that he considered essential for injecting rationality into the Indian lifestyle. It is said that he maintained two houses—one in which everything was Indian except he who was a typical Western, and another house where everything was Western except he who was an authentic Indian. Another reform movement, the Arya Samaj of Swami Dayanand, opposed not only Christianity and Islam, but also Brahminism, which he blamed as corroding Vedic knowledge by creating superstitions, rituals and social evils such as idolatry, caste hierarchy, untouchability, child marriage and discrimination against women. Although he was mostly a social reformist, many of his disciples were among the champions of nationalism. Two others, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, envisioned freedom and glory for India in the spiritual richness and heritage of Hinduism. Swami Vivekananda defined spirituality through a systematic interpretation of Vedanta and integrated it with yoga and social services, through the Ramakrishna Mission, as a means to attain national revival. Sri Aurobindo's speech on May 30, 1909 pleaded for the fusion of Hinduism and nationalism:

> I say no longer that nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is the *Sanatan Dharma* which for us is nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the *Sanatan Dharma*, with it, it moves and with it, it grows. When the *Sanatan Dharma* declines, then the nation declines, and if the *Sanatan Dharma* were capable of perishing, with the nation would perish (1909).

Later on, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, another nationalist, popularized a religious event, Ganesh Chaturthi, to mobilize Indians for Independence and, of course Mahatma Gandhi evoked the metaphor of *Ramraajya* (akin to the virtuous kingdom of Rama) as an ideal future for India where everyone (including diverse religious communities) would live in peace and harmony. This tradition of multi-religious worldview has continued to the present, one of the expressions of which, for example, was seen in the symbol of the Sathya Sai Baba who was one of the most popular Godmen in contemporary India. The symbol is of a flower with the Hindu *om* (ॐ), the Christian cross, the Zoroastrian fire emblem, the Buddhist wheel and the Islamic crescent and stars marked on its petals (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 148).

5.3.2.1 The Politics of Hindutva

Hindu nationalism, however, was given a new political twist in the 1920s when Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1923/1989), an activist and author, introduced the term Hindutva as distinct from Hinduism. Hinduism is the dharma of Hindus, which, according to Savarkar, supports Hindutva as the attributes of Hindus turning into a social-political force to mobilize Hindus against other religions and cultural influences. Hindutva was defined as essentially the Hindu-ness or characteristics of Hindus whose religion originated in India (thus excluding Islam

and Christianity, but including Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhs). Hindu religion, Savarkar pronounced, is *sanaatan* (eternal) because of the following:

- Aryans have preserved it through the ages.
- It is universal, containing the essential elements of all other religions.
- It is not circumscribed by any time or space.
- It can triumph over Western materialism.
- It can anticipate discoveries of science and speculations of philosophy.

From this perspective, Hindutva was taken to be the foundation for building a Hindu nation that was believed to protect Hindus, their culture, and political and economic systems on the basis of native thought against the onslaught of other religions and Western values and lifestyles. There were two sets of incongruent thoughts that had to be reconciled in the formulation of Hindutva (Kakar and Kakar 2009). The first was, and indeed still is, an apprehension of the seductive effects of Western materialist culture and glamorous lifestyle, possibly causing the loss of Hindu identity. The fear attracted many Hindus to political parties and organizations that promised to realize the ideals of Hindutva by providing a worldview that claimed to restore and retain the superiority of Hinduism not only over Islam and Christianity but also over Western culture and lifestyle. As a result, a cluster of political, cultural and militant religious organizations emerged on the national landscape, notably the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS).

Hindu activism, however, had to align Hindutva with the second thought regarding the core features of Hinduism, namely its tolerance of other religions and belief in the universality of Hinduism (Kakar and Kakar 2009). How can Hindutva lead to a fight against other religions when it accepts them as valid paths to the same ultimate reality? Or why should there be any fight when all religions are essentially Hinduism at their core, and the differences between them are more in appearance than real? Hindutva, according to the RSS, is indeed sure to prevail upon them eventually, once the manifest differences are seen through. It is argued by the RSS that

> Hindutva will dawn upon the world as the supreme philosophy and way of life … [where] … the belief in the ultimate victory of Hindu thought is based not on blind faith but on a deep inner awareness that Hindu philosophy is based on laws which are not just Hindu laws but universal laws applicable to all (K. S. Sudershan and D. Idate, cited by Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 142).

However, in order to realize that ultimate possibility, the advocates of Hindutva feel that Hindus have to cultivate *desha-bhakti* (devotion to nation) and *Ram-bhakti* (devotion to Rama). Rama is deified and taken to be a rallying supreme divine for all socio-political and religious forces for national building that "have the ultimate goal of welding together a Hindu society that is fragmented in castes, sects and local traditions so as to prepare it to meet the challenges of globalization [onslaught of alien forces]" (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 136). Hence, *Ram-bhakti*, they argue, in essence is *desha-bhakti,* and thus Hindu religiosity is prescribed as an appropriate means to nation building, whatever form it takes—assertive in

terms of building religious artefacts, forming a political party and militant outfits, aggressive against other religions by destroying their religious structures and converting them, or subverting the professed national values of secularism.

Hindu extremists are not a majority; there are many more Hindus who are traditionalists. They are neither worried about the onslaught of Western influences nor aroused "to take up an ideologically committed activist stance" (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 141). They take Hinduism for granted and do not apprehend any threat to it. Hence, they hold on to the traditional beliefs and values, rites and rituals and have no problem in tolerating other faiths or interpreting them through their own frame of mind. For example, they believe that Jesus Christ was, like Lord Buddha, an avatar (incarnation) of the God Vishnu. Christian priests, Sufi saints and Sikh gurus are as respectable as Hindu saints and sages, and churches, *mazar*s, gurdwaras are as pious as places of Hindu worship. They pay respect to all of them and go through religious activities as part of everyday existence. Common folks in rural areas are mostly such traditionalists.

5.3.3 Religiosity of Modern Indians

Because of increasing urbanization, large-scale migration and a larger flow of regular visitors, the traditionalists now constitute a sizable population in urban areas also. They continue with their religious beliefs and values, carry on with various religious rites, rituals, superstitions and mythic orientations. There is another, expanding in size, educated, mostly urban middle class Hindus who were born and brought up in the traditional set-up, but were exposed to Western and modern global influences. They tend to retain their Hindu identity, but in a classical Indian style add modern worldviews and lifestyles. Kakar and Kakar (2009) called them "flexible Hindus" and have profiled them in detail (pp. 144–151).

The flexible Hindus have adopted traditional rites and rituals and religious beliefs and practices just like the traditionalists, but also share with the nationalists concerns about the socio-political rights and privileges of Hindus. However, they do not have the orthodoxy of the traditionalists, nor the religious activism of the Hindu extremists. They are eclectic in adding modernity to traditionalism as well as strands of nationalist concerns. They struggle to survive and prosper in the competitive milieu, adjust to work demands, are hooked onto the Internet, mobiles and television, relish new tastes and branded fashion products, enjoy modern comforts, but find time to participate, enjoy and celebrate their *vrat* (fasting and worship), festivals, pilgrimages, *guru-darshana* (glimpse of the guru) and discourse with him, and regularly watch TV channels that broadcast religious programmes. For example, they fast on auspicious days and go through religious rituals and worship, but take short cuts in these rituals; they go on pilgrimages but enjoy it like a holiday trip; they celebrate religious festivals and generously pay offerings to gurus and temples, partly to show off their affluence and status; they wear precious stones to regulate planetary forces as well as to display their

monetary power, and so on: "… a pilgrimage—like a *vrat* or a religious festival—may well become a sensuous and pleasurable experience as long as the 'purity of heart' and the sincerity of religious feelings are not absent" (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 146). Their religiosity is genuine, but is framed in modern activities.

A concrete expression of Hindu religiosity is the Mahaakumbha congregation that is held every 12th year at the confluence of the sacred rivers of Ganges, Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati since the Vedic period. It is recorded to be the biggest religious gathering in the world. Hindus bathe in freezing temperature on auspicious days in January for a stretch of 25–27 days for purification from their sins and earning religious credit. Not all stay there for the whole stretch. Probably traditionalists with stronger religious beliefs stay longer while modern urbanites spend a day or two, take a few dips, enjoy the change in their daily routine and then return to it. In 2013, more than 50 million people were estimated to take a dip at the confluence on the main bathing days.

Box 5.2. *Mahaakumbha Mela* (Congregation)

In 1895, Mark Twain visited the Mela and observed the following: "It is wonderful, the power of a faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining. It is done in love, or it is done in fear; I do not know which it is. No matter what the impulse is, the act born of it is beyond imagination, marvellous to our kind of people, the cold whites." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kumbh_Mela, retrieved on March 5, 2013)

Ordinarily, large gatherings are reported to develop a crowd-mind that is devoid of rationality and individual accountability leading to emotional outburst and destructive behaviour (LeBon 1985/1947). A field study of the Mahaakumbha held in the year 2006, on the contrary, showed that the congregation led to a positive social identity that reflected in the pilgrims' greater trust, respect and help for each other.[3] The investigators noted that those who came to the Mahaakumbha were driven by their religiosity and philosophical beliefs, but their social identity was formed out of the experience of collective participation involving the processes of recognition of the presence and needs of each other, connectedness through religiosity and validation of their being religious Hindus (see Box 5.2 for an earlier commentary on this). For example, the participants, particularly those who stayed longer, took daily bath, performed rites and rituals, listened to religious discourses and gave charity. Furthermore, they also engaged each other in intense and

[3] The study was conducted by a team of Indian and British psychologists under the umbrella of the University of Allahabad and their reports were published as the Special Section on Social Psychology of Collectivity in *Psychological Studies,* 2007, 52, pp. 273–331.

continuous interactions. They noticed others, responded to their greetings, shared limited space with them, yielded in order that they too could take a bath, lived and saw them living in hardships and experienced positive emotions for each other. In this process, they were reported to gain "collective self-realization" that "one can live according to group norms in the midst of the connectivity itself. A recurring theme throughout our studies was the ability to achieve some freedom from the everyday constraints of family, work, and society, and hence to live as 'good Hindu life' as a pilgrim" (The Prayag Magh Mela Research Group 2007, p. 298). This was indeed a validation of Hindus' aspirations to realize, at least temporarily, a religious and pious life while living in the material world and dealing with the mundane.

5.3.4 Contemporary Expressions of Sexuality

As stated earlier, religiosity and sexuality coexisted in the ancient Indian mindset and in fact drew on each other through metaphors, philosophical beliefs and heightened emotionality of the *bhakti maarg* (devotional tradition). As we approach the contemporary scenario, we find that religiosity gets explicit expressions in its devotional, ritualistic, social and political forms. But sexuality even now is largely suppressed in the Indian family, and is secretly indulged in with a certain degree of anxiety, fear and guilt by a majority of Indians. Kakar and Kakar (2009) felt that "Indian sexuality remains deeply conservative if not puritanical, lacking that erotic grace which frees sexual activity from the imperatives of biology, uniting the partners in sensuous delight and metaphysical openness." And, "… vast stretches of contemporary India remain covered in sexual darkness" (Kakar and Kakar 2009, p. 84).

The darkness is decreasing, but a full dawn is yet to appear. That is, sexuality is not completely suppressed, but remains devoid of its "erotic grace" (Kakar and Kakar 2009) and "sensuous delight" and is allowed to operate as "biological imperative" in a large part of the Indian population. Probably, the reason is historical in the increasingly impoverished conditions of living and the decay and degeneration of Indian society in the medieval and colonial periods. The shadow still falls on the majority of Indians, restraining them to live in survival mode. They regress to conservative social norms, acquire many superstitions and remain totally preoccupied with the bare essentials of life. Curbing temptations and curtailing needs and desires except those that are critically important for survival are the chief concerns. Thus, sexual pleasure is dispensable, but the biological impulse is not; and the conservative social norms do not allow a public display of sexuality. This is particularly true for higher castes in the middle class which hold on to socio-religious norms more rigidly than either the higher or lower strata of the societal spectrum. So, they compromise to act secretly, lest people talk! Even marital sexual intercourse has to be performed secretly.

In closely knit rural settings where most interactions are in public view, there is very little opportunity to cultivate long, romantic and erotic relationships. Hence, the biological impulse leads to quick-fix sex whenever someone is willing to yield

or unable to resist an imposing person (this mostly refers to male activity in the male-dominated Indian society) in a situation that permits some privacy. Naturally, the extended family provides a safe sanctuary where such sexual affairs are carried out with or without consensus or due to mutual attraction. There are reports of sexual affairs with cousins, uncles, brothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, uncles-in-law, fathers-in-law and similar others (Kakar and Kakar 2009; Roland 1988, p. 261). But this has to be kept a secret, and if someone in the family senses or catches people in the act, he or she looks the other way or resolves it amicably within the family. The family reputation is more important than the immorality of incestuous transgressions.

The rich, powerful and the landlords, however, are not constrained by social norms. In the pre-Independence era these classes had more than one wife, mistresses, generally from the low castes and a tradition of visiting prostitutes and nautch girls. As polygamy is legally banned in post-Independence India, they cannot have more than one wife, and due to other social sanctions cannot openly exploit lower claste (class + caste) women or openly visit prostitutes and nautch girls. Some still do all these, but more secretly and artfully. Others look for vulnerable and helpless women to exploit.

There used to be another group of Indians—smaller in number, better educated, middle class, urbanite Indians, both men and women—who would also have the opportunity of being attracted to and falling in love, but there was little opportunity by way of physical intimacy and often little hope of consummation of love in view of family arrangements of marriage with regard to caste, class and monetary considerations. Bollywood films till recently have been replete with the sufferings of misunderstood young love faced by an orthodox society! Such self-suffering romantics are less commonly depicted in popular culture. The trend is to move with the times, come out more openly to solicit love, and if not granted, to move on to the next suitable choice.

Global ideas and influences have turned the apple cart of Indian sexuality, which was only wobbling so far, upside down, at least for part of the population. The new philosophy is that sexuality is no longer to be kept secret, suppressed, truncated or stripped off erotic expressions; nor has it to be lived with self-suffering or fantasy. It is now to be indulged in freely and enjoyed fully. There are a number of factors responsible for this drastic change. First of all, increased economic activities and growth in the country have loosened the conventional control of the family and the community and have created new opportunities. A larger number of young men and women are entering into public domains, rub shoulders, compete and cooperate, and relate with each other on almost equal terms. Their academic achievements, high levels of earning, high-tech life and easy mobility away from the home have created a critical mass of young and not-so-young Indians who are distinctly different from their preceding generation. It is a common sight to see them in pairs or in groups in parks, streets, cinema halls, restaurants, shopping malls and similar other public places. They create an environment where sexual relationships are believed to be common and natural.

Second, they imbibe a Western lifestyle, buy branded fashion products, enjoy the arts and music, frequent restaurants and nightclubs, and above all have

acquired an individualistic orientation with a sharp assertive edge. They tend to live their life as they wish, and let others do the same without being judgemental about them. These young men and women are therefore relatively free of social constraints of what people would say, relate with each other without too many conventional hang-ups and assert themselves whenever their interests are at stake. As a result, if friends and colleagues are attracted to each other, they may take their social relationships to an intimate extent.

Third, this open mindset is exposed to the Internet, bringing in a whole new world including pornography to their laptop, alternative sexual orientations, social sites for sharing even intimate images, experiences and emotions. Mobile phones supported by the Internet have not only provided instant connectivity, but access to a virtual fantasy land. The devices have widened the scope of sexual explorations and ventures. Young Indians are behaving like entrepreneurs in aspiring to achieve the best in life. They know that there are now a variety of ways of sexual engagements and they are willing to try them. Not only heterosexual, but bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, trans-sexual and asexual orientations are all in the range of possibilities. There are now web-based associations for networking that promote different sexual preferences and practices in India.

In the wake of these changes, the institution of marriage has weakened and the chances of its break-up have increased. Marriage, which used to be the only legitimate context for heterosexual intercourse, is now redefined to fit even other sexual orientations. Premarital and extramarital sex of incestuous nature, as stated earlier, was confined to the extended family and was kept secret. But now with increased mobility, it is likely to occur more openly at other places. There is ample anecdotal evidence of serious and flirtatious affairs in workplaces between superiors and subordinates as well as between peers. Popular Indian movies display love and sexuality that defy most of the conventional norms regarding class, caste or religious barriers. In many instances, the hero does not keep suffering, but imposes, harasses and prevails upon his beloved to fall in line. The heroine too proactively seeks out the one she likes or loves. Universities and colleges, of course, are much more conspicuous in this regard. Young adults in colleges in metros can now indulge in sexual activity without feeling that there would be any long-term commitment or repercussions, and multiple sexual affairs are also rising. The age for engaging in sexual activity is also going down. In other words, sexual activity, at least in the bigger cities, is becoming detached from the marital frame and has assumed a credible legitimacy in urban India. A well-known Indian author, Khushwant Singh, for example, wondered why a Nobel laureate novelist, Salman Rushdie, of Indian origin married again and again[4]:

> I have not been able to understand [Salman] Rushdie's multiple marriages. If he desired to make love to women he liked, he could have done so without marrying them. He would not have to divorce them and pay alimony.

[4] *Hindustan Times*, Patna, January 22, 2012, p. 9.

How widespread this sexual liberalization is, is anybody's guess. There is no systematic documentation of it. However, there are widely held perceptions that large numbers of young men and women, boys and girls in metros and increasingly in towns are now sexually active outside of marriage. There is a psychological phenomenon called "imagination inflation" (Goff and Roediger 1998). That is, the more people imagine an event happening, the more confidently they believe that the event *actually* happened. The imagination turns into a reality of the make-believe milieu. Easily available pornography and adult friendship sites from the Internet show a variety of ways in which people indulge in sexual activities even without engaging in love affairs, building relationships or even knowing each other.

Reactions to this make-believe pervasive sexual permissiveness are varied. Some view it as a new freedom of choice, which is likely to promote healthy relationships, personal growth and a happy life. Others are worried particularly for the younger generation. They apprehend that younger ones are getting misguided about how they should live and prioritize their values. Still others take it as an assault on traditional Indian culture, which, according to them, values sex as a loving, emotional, self-dissolving and everlasting relationship. Extremists among religious minded people also take it as an assault on Indian culture and are resorting to moral policing. Still others see in it an opportunity to hunt around. They are mostly males who have made quick money or acquired power and position by hook or crook, and like other achievements, they take women (and sometimes men) to be objects to buy and enjoy sex, or to simply exploit in vulnerable situations. They feel, and often rightly so, that the Indian legal system has many loopholes and their money and clout can protect their reputation. Lastly, there are many others, young and not so young, who watch the sexual revolution from the periphery of society. They fantasize having sexual partners, but are ill-equipped to cultivate female friendship, uncouth in their socialization and unable to contain their biological impulses that get worse under intoxication. When they are in the company of like-minded friends, their impulses get out of control, their sense of consequences evaporates and they pounce on their victims. They kidnap, rape and murder.

In a group or collective, individual orientations and impulses are accentuated, calculation of gains and losses is diminished raising risk-taking propensity and actions are expedited (Kogan and Wallace 1964; Strauss 2001). Whether these changes take a positive or negative direction depends on what goals, orientations and impulses individuals bring to the group and how the interactions within the group reinforce them. Earlier, we discussed that collectives at the *sangam* during *Mahaakumbha* developed positive socio-religious identity because they were driven by their religious beliefs and orientations. They shared limited resources, helped each other, and realized their religiosity. On the contrary, a group of juvenile, young, or not-so-young men, who are biologically propelled, get together and drink alcohol, stoke their animal impulses, excite each other, and abuse the vulnerable sexually.

In sum, religiosity expresses itself in a variety of rites, rituals and activities that have continued from the ancient time, but are modified and accommodated into Indians' modern worldview. Extremists are turning religiosity into a political force that threatens the multi-religious secularism, which still holds the ground due to its cultural roots and societal imperatives. Openness in sexuality is still restricted in the middle claste (class + caste), and is a pastime of the rich and the powerful. For the modern youth, it is a newly found freedom. However, this freedom also leads to make-believe milieus of sexual permissiveness that can result in serious sexual crimes.

5.4 Summary

Religiosity, secularism and sexuality have been intermingling in the Indian mindset from ancient times. Indians are highly religious with a variety of rites, rituals, beliefs, values and practices, most of which can be traced to the primordial mindset. They are, however, being adjusted and framed in Indians' modern worldview and busy lifestyle. Hinduism, the religion of the majority, holds the belief that all religions are only manifestly different but are essentially the same, making space for multi-religious secularism. This is threatened by socio-economic and political disparities among the religious communities, misgivings about each other and the rise of extremism among both Hindus and Muslims. Sexuality flourished in the ancient Indian mindset and coexisted with asceticism. It was subsequently suppressed and restricted for most, except for the rich and powerful. Sexuality is now getting liberalized with economic affluence and global influences. Better educated, high earning and Westernized young men and women now have the opportunity of being open and expressive about their sexuality. Others react to them differently. Some are concerned about the future generation. Others regard it to be an assault on the Indian culture and resort to moral policing. Still others see in it an opportunity to hunt for their lust, and the criminally oriented do not hesitate to act in ghastly ways.

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