
Marriage and Sex in Hindu Dharm

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A society is built on relationships. Man-woman relationship is the foundation of family which is the basic building block of the edifice called society. Every major religion in the world has its own perspective and prescription on the way men and women should link up in erotic as well as non-erotic relationships. Hindu Dharm, the world's oldest surviving religion, is no exception.

In this article there is an attempt to understand the Hindu view of erotic man-woman relationships without being judgmental. It is very easy for our present-day biases (monogamy, gender equality, stories about oppression of women through ages etc.) to color our vision. Making a conscious effort to avoid any such distortions, let us try to understand sexual relationships and marriage as they existed in Hindu Dharm before the onset of Muslim invasion and also before moksha-centered Vedanta / Buddhism made all things worldly as sinful.

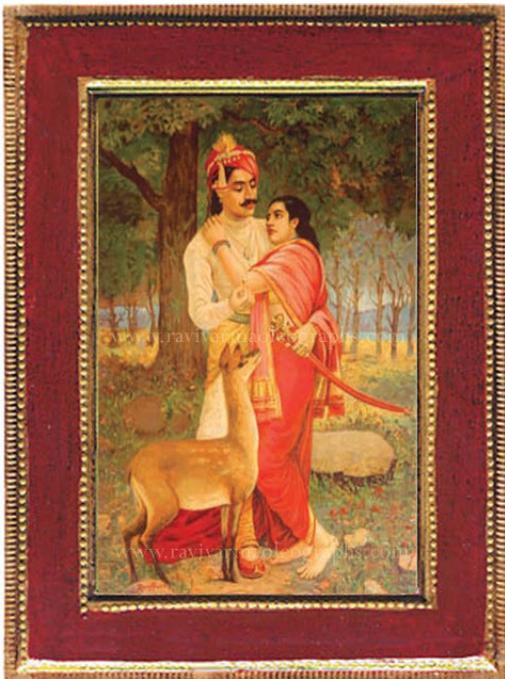
To begin the exercise of understanding Hinduism's perspective of sex and marriage, it is important to understand the philosophical framework of Hindu Dharm. Readers who have read the author's Manifesto of Hindu Renaissance (<http://www.samarthbharat.com/files/hindumanifesto.pdf>) will need no explanation on this account. Others may please read quickly through Annexure 1 where brief extracts from the same are reproduced.

The two essential features of philosophical framework of Hindu Dharm important for our discussions on marriage and sex are Trivarg and Dev Life. It may also be worthwhile at this stage to point out that unlike Christianity **Hinduism does not look upon human body or sex as sinful or dirty**. Religious texts of Hinduism (Valmikiy Ramayan and Mahabharat) often describe the beauty of human body in great detail. Especially in Valmikiy Ramayan, it is common to read about the large breasts, thin waist and elephant-trunk like legs of women. Ram often addresses Sita as the one with a small waist. When Sita asked Hanuman to describe the body of Ram (to make sure that Hanuman was referring to the same person as her husband), Hanuman describes every part of Ram's body including the one that will be considered a strict unmentionable in any decent discourse in today's world.

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With the philosophical framework in place, let us begin with understanding the essential characteristic of marriage in Hindu Dharm. In Christianity, marriage is a license granted by either the Church or the State to indulge in sexual activity. In Islam, marriage is a contract which is duly documented and recorded by the religious establishment. In contrast with the Christian and Muslim view, **Hindu Dharm treats each and every union of man and woman as a marriage**. Hindu marriage is based on the reality of the union and does not need either a document or a ritual or witnesses or any approval.

Texts of Hindu Dharm describe eight types of marriages. The most appreciated of the eight is the marriage which takes place with consent of both the families and with all rituals duly completed. Gandharv Vivah is one of the eight types of marriages. Under Gandharv Vivah - boy and girl see each other; fall in love and without any rituals move to consummate the marriage. The most famous instance of Gandharv Vivah is of King Dushyant and Shakuntala. The two had met in the forest. There was no priest or witness present to solemnize their alliance. Shakuntala gave birth to a son a few months later. The son was never treated as an illegitimate child and in due course became the King.



The concept of an illegitimate child does not exist in Hindu Dharm since each and every union of man and woman is treated as a marriage. Even rape, though strongly condemned, is considered as a form of marriage. Children born as a result of rape acquire the same rights as children from any other form of wedlock.

Rape or a marriage where the girl does not freely consent is viewed as a typically Danav way of life. For a Danav man, a woman is a property on which he exercises rights by virtue of the power that he holds or by virtue of his strength. In total contrast, in the Dev culture, a women's will is supreme. Ravan abducted Sita, wife of Ram. In the ethics followed by Ravan and members of his court, the will of woman was an irrelevant detail. One of Ravan's ministers argued with him that Ravan

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should follow the example of rooster and climb over the hen whether the hen likes it or not. Ravan agreed with him and said that the rooster's way was what every man with strength and power should follow. Ravan expressed his inability to do so since he was under a curse that if he ever raped a woman his head will burst into a hundred pieces. Ravan was too willing to rape and thus forcefully marry Sita if it was not for this curse.

In contrast with the Danav attitude to consent of woman being trampled as a matter of right, **in the Dev way of life a woman's will is supreme**. A woman may be abducted but even after abduction the abductor has to respect the woman's wishes. Krishn abducted Rukmini. Krishn's closest friend Arjun abducted Subhadra, Krishn's sister. However, in both cases the abduction was with the consent and even active participation of the women abducted. Abduction had become necessary because the relatives of the girls were imposing their will on the girls.

The classic instance of respecting a woman's will or choice in case of even abduction comes in the case of Bhishm abducting the three sisters – Amba, Ambika and Ambalika – for king Vichitraviry. After abduction, Amba said that she had already chosen King Shalv to be her husband and therefore she could not marry Vichitraviry. Amba's wish was honored and she was respectfully sent back to King Shalv (the fact that Shalv did not accept her, is another story). Noticeable fact is that for those following the Dev or Hindu way of life, a woman's wish, even as an abductee, is sacrosanct.

The supremacy of a woman's wish in Hindu way of life is taken to an extent that is indeed surprising for us today. If an unmarried woman likes a man (whether married or unmarried), it is the duty of the man to oblige her and marry her. A woman has a right to refuse while the same right is denied to a man. The classic instance of a woman exercising her right is seen in Mahabharat when Hidimba, sister of a Danav named Hidimb, falls for Bhim. The five Pandavs were moving around in forest along with their mother Kunti. Bhim was on guard duty while others were sleeping when Hidimb attacked them with the intention of eating them. Bhim fought with Hidimb and killed him. Hidimba who watched the fight, got attracted to Bhim and kaam rose in her for Bhim. She told Bhim about the fact that she was suffering due to the kaam and asked him to marry her. Bhim refused saying that since his elder brother had not yet married, he did not want to get married. Hidimba did not accept his refusal and complained to his mother Kunti. She told Kunti that as a woman she would understand how kaam is very painful for a woman. Hidimba argued that the only person who could relieve her of this pain and suffering is Kunti's son Bhim and

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Bhim's refusal is against the principles of Dharm. Hidimba pleaded with Kunti to order Bhim to follow Dharm and marry her. Kunti conceded the point and ordered Bhim to follow Dharm and marry Hidimba. At this point, Bhim's brothers talked about the whole situation to Hidimba and a compromise was worked out whereby Bhim married Hidimba and lived with her for a year. Ghatotkach was born out of the wedlock of Bhim and Hidimba. In the war of Mahabharat, Ghatotkach fought on the side of Pandavs and played a very crucial role in the war.

There are innumerable instances, in both Ramayan and Mahabharat, of a woman getting kaam rising in her for some man and the man immediately marrying the woman. Krishn and Arjun, both married many times. Without exception, in each instance, the woman chose Krishn / Arjun and he had to satisfy her. Even in Ramayan, when Shoorpnakha approached Ram in the forest with a proposal, Ram did not refuse her directly. Ram only suggested to Shoorpnakha to instead choose Lakshman, his brother, since he already had Sita with him and Lakshman was moving around alone. The chopping of Shoorpnakha's nose and ears that subsequently followed was not because she had proposed but because she had attacked Sita. Under Hindu Dharma, **right to select a man is once-in-a-lifetime right for every woman. This right is available against any man whom she chooses. The moment the right is exercised the woman is as much under compulsion to be bound for life to the man whom she has chosen as the man is bound for life to satisfy her and take care of her.**

In contrast, man has no such right to choose. A man's choice carries no weight and a woman is not obliged to give any consideration to the man having fallen for her. It seems harsh for men, but in a way there is a balancing of sorts. A woman can choose her man, but only once in her life time. So she can marry only once in her life time under normal circumstances. **A man can marry many times but he has no right of choice.**

Polygamy is well accepted in Hindu Dharm. Acceptance of polygamy must be viewed in the light of the fact that if a man has sexual intercourse with any woman, it is a marriage. A man cannot have any sexual relationship with a woman without accepting responsibility for her and without acknowledging the fact to the world. Sometimes, due to circumstances, the man may tell the woman at the outset that he shall live with her for a short time only, giving her the option of changing her mind. At least two of Arjun's alliances were of that type. Even in case of Bhim-Hidimba, it was clearly agreed that the couple shall stay together for one year only. Even though they ceased to live together after the agreed time, they continued to be husband-wife.

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If Hindu Dharm scoffs badly at something it is the concept of Free Sex. Without exception, sex for a Hindu (man or woman) comes with commitments that are life-long and cannot be broken. For a Hindu, sexual relationship is always a serious matter. Hindu Dharm abhors the notion of one-night stands and irresponsible sexual behavior. Disposable (or use-and-throw) sexual partner is the worst possible behavior for a man as well as a woman.

Rule-bound approach is a strong feature of all sexual behavior in Hindu Dharm even though polygamy and polyandry, both are well accepted. Five Pandav brothers shared a wife – Draupadi. The rule about sleeping with Draupadi was very clearly laid down. Each brother lived with her for one year. During the period that one brother was with Draupadi, none of the other brothers was allowed to step into the room where the couple was present. Once, the eldest brother Yudhishtir was with Draupadi; Arjun needed to go into the room to pick up his arms to defend some Brahmin's cows. Arjun stepped into the room, picked up his arms and later went for a twelve-year exile as punishment for his wrongdoing. Such strict rules are a feature of Hindu Dharm even though it is very liberal and pragmatic.

Even in present-day India, there are some communities where polyandry is common. Two brothers, instead of getting separate wives, get a common wife. In such communities the rule of sleeping with the wife is very well-defined. It may vary from community to community but in all communities rules are such that the woman can pinpoint the father of each of her children.

Talking of rules, even a man who has many wives is bound by rules that determine his behavior. He has **to take care of each wife better than the way he takes care of himself**. More wives surely mean higher responsibility and commitment. For example, it is said that a man must check that there is adequate food for all his wives, children, servants and other dependants before he puts the first morsel in his mouth. A man who eats without ensuring this is considered guilty of the worst form of sin. No wonder, even though polygamy was legal in India till just six decades ago, the percentage of men who chose to have more than one wife was very small.

Talking of polygamy and polyandry, it may be also worthwhile to mention about the matriarchal society of Devdasis, the women who were married to a deity. A Devadasi also had a patron who was chosen by her or her mother. The patron had to be always a married man. The patron supported the devadasi financially as well as emotionally. The devadasi had sexual relations with her patron but did not live with him and her children did not inherit his property. There is no mention of Devdasis in

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either Valmikiy Ramayan or Mahabharat. But that has to be expected since there is no mention of temples in either of the two ancient texts. Probably, temples and devadasis who were an integral part of all temples were a later-day development.

The freedom granted to a married man to have relationship with a woman, who is otherwise married to the God is something that no one except a Hindu can understand. (Please read my book – “Devadasis – Sinners or Sinned Against” <http://samarthbharat.com/files/devadasihistory.pdf>)

Freedoms under Hindu Dharm are always accompanied by limitations and responsibilities. It must be understood that for a Hindu the priority order of Trivarg – Dharm, Arth and Kaam is fundamental and beyond any question. Even in sexual relationships, one must give priority to dharm over arth and to arth over kaam. The American slogan of “Do as it pleases you” is despised. One can do all that pleases as long as it is within the limits imposed by one’s relationships (dharm) and resources (arth). One has to also be guided in determining one’s dharm by the preaching of the learned and scholarly. One cannot do a sexual act just because it pleases one.

At this point, it may be worthwhile to mention about the discussion that Bali had with Ram after Ram had defeated him and Bali was dying. Bali had thrown his younger brother Sugreev out of the house and married Sugreev’s wife. Sugreev and Ram became friends. Sugreev came to fight Bali. In the middle of the fight, Ram intervened and killed Bali. It is often said that Ram did not behave in a proper manner since he shot Bali without giving him a notice and while hiding behind a tree. Bali told the same to Ram. In his reply, Ram clarified that he was doing the duty assigned to him by the King Bharat – of establishing Dharm and punishing those who violate Dharm. **Any man who goes near his daughter, sister or younger brother’s wife with the purpose of kaam is like an animal that must be killed.** The niceties of giving a notice of war are not for animals. When one goes hunting one does not bother whether the animal is shot from the front or the back. A man like Bali who had sexual relations with his younger brother’s wife must be treated like a wild animal and killed in the same manner as a prey is hunted. This principle is an essential and fundamental one in Hindu Dharm regarding marriage and sex.

Talking of prohibitions and giving priority to Dharm over Kaam, it may also be worthwhile to mention about the reference to orgies in Ramayan. When Hanuman reaches Lanka searching for Sita, he goes at night to Ravan’s palace and discovers the after-scene of a grand orgy and party. The other instance of orgy is described in

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Bali's palace. Both, Bali and Ravan, are killed at the hands of Ram. Though, there is no direct reference condemning group sex and such other sexual aberrations, the inference is clear. These activities that place kaam at the focus ignoring dharm are typical of Danav way of life and have no place in the dev or Hindu way of life.

Hindu Dharm based on Trivarg and Dev way of life applies to every aspect of human existence. Marriage and sex are essential to human life. Hindu Dharm accepts this reality. It neither hides these issues in the closet nor treats them as necessary evils. In Hindu Dharm, an individual, whether man or woman, has some freedoms along with some limitations, responsibilities and commitments.

To understand the essence of Hindu Dharm, one must keep in mind that Ram fought the war in Lanka, risked his and his brother's as well as all his army's life to fulfill the commitments that he had given to a woman – Sita. Even the war of Mahabharat would have never taken place if Draupadi's modesty had not been violated. Keeping up one's lifelong commitments to one's sexual partner or spouse is a fundamental foundation stone of Hindu Dharm. No, a Hindu can never worship the one who walked away from his wife in the middle of the night to search for some self-proclaimed goal.

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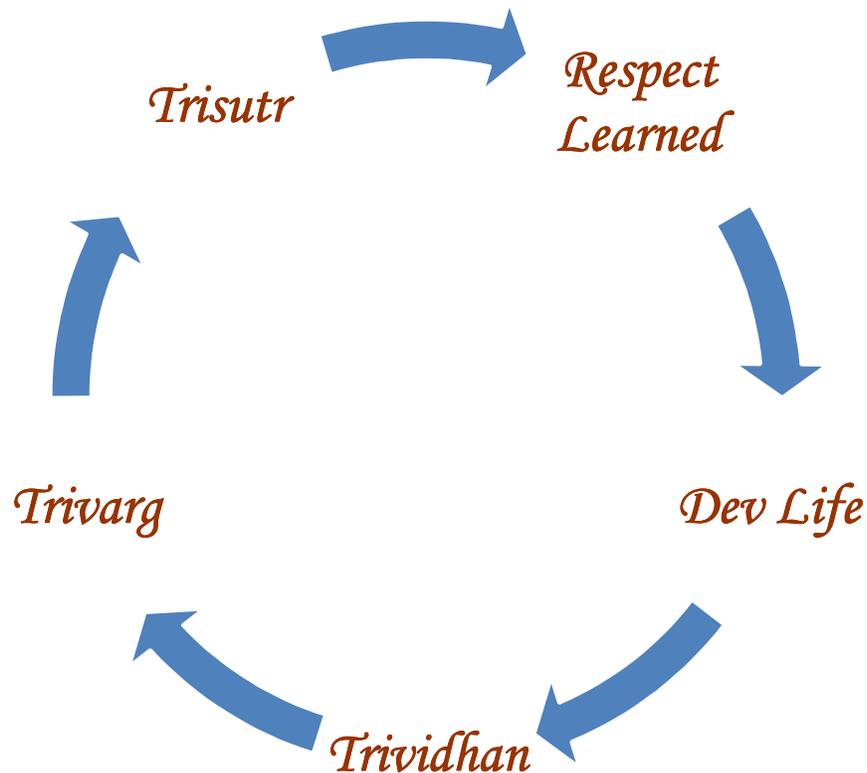
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Extracts from Manifesto of Hindu Renaissance



The direction of arrows may also be reversed.

Hinduism is a comprehensive holistic thought system that covers every aspect of human life. The above diagram illustrates the fundamental foundation blocks of Hindu thought system. As shown in the diagram given below, the five fundamental foundation blocks of Hindu Dharm are as follows:

- **Trisutr** – Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram – Truth, Goodness and Beauty
- **Respecting the Learned** also called Brahmin. Notably, the Brahmin is never worshipped. One respects the Brahmin and follows the path shown by the learned one.

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- **Dev Life** refers to living life like a dev. One must not confuse dev with the concept of God as seen in all one-book religions. It is also important to understand that the focus is on living life of a dev and not worshipping a dev.
- **Trividhan** – The Three Fundamental Laws – The First Law refers to oneness of the cosmos. The Second Law can be summed up as – What you sow is what you reap. The Third Law is the Law of Divine Paradox.
- **Trivarg** – The Trivarg (Dharm, Arth, Kaam) are the three acceptable reasons for any action of an individual. An individual is supposed to accord top priority to Dharm, second priority to Arth and the lowest priority to Kaam. While one is advised to accord different priorities, one must not ignore either of the three. While keeping one's focus on Trivarg or the three acceptable reasons or inspirations for human actions, one must always take care of avoiding the negative list - *Lobh* (Greed), *Krodh* (Anger), *Ahamkar*, *Maan*, *Abhimaan* (Ego, Status, Conceit), *Moh* (Delusion), *Pratishodh* (Revenge), *Eirshya* (Jealousy), *Bhay* (Fear), *Ghrina* (Hatred)

The concepts of Dev and Danav are central to Hinduism. Synonyms for the two words in Sanskrit are **Sur** and **Asur**; or **Devta** and **Daity**. The two words are wrongly translated into English as Gods and Demons. Such translations distort not just the meaning of the words but also the cultural context and philosophical paradigm in which the words are used.

Dev or Devta is someone who gives without any direct expectations in return. A dev becomes divine by his selflessness. Sun, moon, fire and water are devs. But the phenomenon of being a dev is not restricted merely to these natural bodies or forces. Every human being, as and when he or she, indulges in giving selflessly, acquires the property of being a dev (or devi, for women).

In contrast to the daivik (derived from dev) relationship, a danav is self-centered and tries to maximize what he can grab. A dev gives out of love, compassion and because giving is a pleasure. A danav does not derive any pleasure from giving. For him the pleasure is from acquiring or possessing. He gives only when he is forced to.

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Dharm can be best understood as the obligation that falls upon one due to the existence of a relationship. It is not proper to use the term “duty” for *dharm* since duty connotes a burden, while *dharm* can often be a pleasure. For example, having sexual intercourse with one’s wife is a *dharm* for a married man – this *dharm* is surely a pleasure and will hardly fit into the narrow meaning of the word “duty”.

The word *arth* refers to all types of resources including material, human, animal, land etc. Examples of material resources include house, grains, foodstuff, vehicles, furniture, equipment, clothing, jewels, ornaments, money in the bank, cash in hand, etc. Human resources include son(s), unmarried daughter(s), wife (wives), younger brother(s), soldier(s), servant(s), and even friends. Animal resources include cattle, horses, elephants and other domestic animals.

Kaam literally means desire. Very often, in common usage, the word refers to erotic desire. But in its true sense, it refers to all types of desires including erotic.

The two rules with reference to Trivarg can be summed up as follows:

Rule 1 – One must follow all three - Dharm, Arth and Kaam. Ignoring any of the three leads to loss of the other two also, leading to all round destruction of the individual concerned.

Rule 2 – The order of priority must be Dharm (1st priority), Arth (2nd priority) and Kaam (3rd priority).