

## **GENDER DYNAMICS AND SOCIETAL PERCEPTIONS OF ADULTERY**

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### **Gender Notions of Adultery in India: Stereotypes, Double Standards, and Societal Expectations**

In India, discussions surrounding adultery are often fraught with deeply ingrained gender notions, stereotypes, and societal expectations. Despite legal reforms and changing social norms, prevailing attitudes towards adultery continue to reflect traditional patriarchal values, resulting in disparities in how men and women are perceived and treated in cases of marital infidelity. This article explores the gender dynamics of adultery in India, shedding light on the stereotypes, double standards, and societal expectations that shape perceptions and responses to extramarital affairs.

Adultery, defined as voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than their spouse, has long been a taboo subject in Indian society. While adultery was decriminalized in India by the Supreme Court in 2018, attitudes towards infidelity remain deeply influenced by cultural and societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles and expectations. Stereotypical notions of masculinity and femininity play a significant role in shaping how adultery is perceived and judged.

In traditional Indian society, men are often viewed as the dominant figures within marital relationships, with expectations of sexual prowess, virility, and control over their wives' fidelity. Adultery committed by men may be normalized or even condoned as a sign of masculinity or sexual conquest, reflecting the notion of male privilege and entitlement. Men who engage in extramarital affairs may face minimal social repercussions and may even be celebrated for their sexual exploits, perpetuating a culture of impunity and double standards.

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Conversely, women who commit adultery are subjected to harsher scrutiny and judgment, often labeled as morally corrupt, promiscuous, or morally loose. Adultery by women is seen as a betrayal of marital vows, family honor, and societal expectations of female chastity and fidelity. Women who engage in extramarital affairs risk social ostracism, stigmatization, and even violence, reflecting the deep-seated patriarchy and control over women's sexuality.

Double standards in attitudes towards adultery are evident in the differential treatment of men and women in cases of infidelity. While men may face limited consequences for their extramarital affairs, women are often blamed, shamed, and held responsible for the breakdown of the marriage. Legal proceedings and societal norms often place greater emphasis on policing women's behavior and upholding patriarchal notions of female purity and morality.

Societal expectations surrounding adultery further compound the challenges faced by individuals, particularly women, navigating extramarital relationships. Cultural norms dictate that women should prioritize the sanctity of marriage and family honor over personal desires or autonomy. Women who seek divorce or separation due to their spouse's infidelity may be discouraged or stigmatized, further perpetuating the cycle of silence and submission.

The evolving landscape of adultery in India reflects shifting dynamics of gender relations, changing social mores, and legal reforms aimed at promoting gender equality and individual autonomy. Initiatives such as marital counseling, legal aid services, and awareness campaigns seek to challenge stereotypes, empower individuals, and promote healthy relationships based on mutual respect and consent.

However, overcoming entrenched gender notions of adultery requires collective efforts to challenge patriarchal attitudes, dismantle double standards, and promote gender equality at all levels of society<sup>2</sup>. Education, advocacy, and dialogue are essential tools for challenging stereotypes, fostering empathy, and building inclusive communities where individuals are free to make choices based on their own values and aspirations.

In conclusion, the gender notions of adultery in India reflect deep-seated stereotypes, double standards, and societal expectations that perpetuate gender inequality and constrain individual

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<sup>2</sup>Brady, B., Rosenberg, S., Newman, C.E. *et al.* Gender is dynamic for all people. *Discov Psychol* **2**, 41 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44202-022-00054-2>

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agency. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that addresses cultural norms, legal frameworks, and social attitudes to create a more equitable and inclusive society where individuals are respected and empowered to live authentically and freely.

### **Cultural and Religious Perspectives on Extramarital Relationships**

Extramarital relationships, characterized by romantic or sexual involvement outside the bounds of marriage, have been a topic of significant cultural and religious discourse in India. Rooted in the complex tapestry of traditions, beliefs, and societal norms, the perspectives on extramarital relationships vary widely across different regions, communities, and religious traditions in India. Exploring the cultural and religious perspectives on extramarital relationships offers insights into the values, norms, and moral codes that shape interpersonal relationships and marital fidelity in Indian society.

**Cultural Context:** In Indian culture, marriage is often considered a sacred union, symbolizing not only the union of two individuals but also the merger of families and communities. The institution of marriage is deeply entrenched in societal norms, familial expectations, and traditional values, emphasizing fidelity, loyalty, and commitment between spouses. Extramarital relationships are generally frowned upon and condemned in mainstream Indian society, as they are perceived as a betrayal of trust, a violation of marital vows, and a threat to family harmony and social cohesion.

However, cultural attitudes towards extramarital relationships may vary based on factors such as socio-economic status, urbanization, education, and exposure to Western influences<sup>3</sup>. In urban centers and among the younger generation, there is often greater acceptance of non-traditional relationship dynamics, including open marriages, consensual non-monogamy, and extramarital affairs, reflecting shifting social mores and evolving notions of individual autonomy and personal fulfillment.

**Religious Perspectives:** Religion plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes towards extramarital relationships in India, as religious beliefs and scriptures often provide moral guidance and ethical principles governing human conduct, including marital fidelity. Here's a glimpse into the perspectives of major religions practiced in India:

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<sup>3</sup>Fernandez, Luiz. (2023). Unveiling Gender Dynamics: An In-depth Analysis of Gender Realities. INFLUENCE: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE REVIEW. 5. 61-70. 10.54783/influencejournal.v5i3.182.

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- **Hinduism:** Hinduism, the predominant religion in India, upholds the sanctity of marriage and family life as essential pillars of dharma (righteousness) and societal order. The concept of pativrata dharma (devotion to one's husband) emphasizes a wife's fidelity and devotion to her husband as a sacred duty. While Hindu scriptures extol the virtues of monogamous marriage and condemn adultery, historical and mythological narratives often depict instances of extramarital relationships among deities and mythological figures, leading to nuanced interpretations and debates within the Hindu tradition.
- **Islam:** In Islam, marriage is regarded as a sacred covenant between spouses, governed by the principles of mutual respect, love, and fidelity. Extramarital relationships, including adultery, are strictly prohibited in Islamic law (Sharia) and are considered sinful and morally reprehensible. The Quran and Hadith emphasize the importance of marital chastity and the severe consequences of engaging in extramarital affairs, including social stigma, legal penalties, and spiritual consequences.
- **Christianity:** Christian teachings emphasize the sanctity of marriage and the importance of marital fidelity as a reflection of Christ's love for his Church. Adultery and extramarital relationships are condemned in Christian doctrine as violations of the marital covenant and moral transgressions against God and one's spouse. Christian ethics prioritize forgiveness and reconciliation but also emphasize repentance and accountability for moral failings, including infidelity.
- **Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism:** Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, which originated in India, share common principles of ethical conduct, compassion, and non-violence. While these religions do not explicitly address extramarital relationships in their scriptures, they promote virtues such as self-restraint, integrity, and respect for human dignity, which are incompatible with adultery and infidelity.

The cultural and religious perspectives on extramarital relationships in India reflect a complex interplay of traditional values, moral norms, and contemporary realities. While mainstream Indian society largely condemns extramarital affairs as morally wrong and socially disruptive, there is growing recognition of the diversity of human relationships and

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the need for empathy, understanding, and non-judgmental support for individuals grappling with marital challenges and relationship dilemmas.

As India continues to undergo social, economic, and cultural transformations, attitudes towards extramarital relationships may evolve, reflecting changing dynamics of gender relations, family structures, and individual aspirations<sup>4</sup>. However, the enduring influence of cultural traditions and religious teachings underscores the significance of fidelity, trust, and commitment in marital relationships, serving as guiding principles for navigating the complexities of human intimacy and moral responsibility in Indian society.

In the pursuit of personal happiness and fulfillment, individuals are called upon to reconcile their individual desires and freedoms with the ethical imperatives of their cultural and religious heritage, fostering a society grounded in respect for human dignity, moral integrity, and compassionate understanding.

### **Public Discourse and Media Representation of Adultery in India: Reinforcing or Challenging Gender Norms**

In recent years, discussions surrounding adultery in India have become increasingly prominent, both within public discourse and through media representations. This contentious topic not only delves into the realms of personal relationships but also intersects with broader societal norms, particularly regarding gender roles and expectations. Examining the portrayal of adultery in Indian media offers valuable insights into how these narratives either reinforce or challenge prevailing gender norms.

Adultery, defined as a consensual extramarital relationship, has historically been a taboo subject in Indian society, often associated with shame, betrayal, and moral transgression. However, as societal attitudes evolve and conversations around gender equality gain momentum, the discourse surrounding adultery has undergone significant transformations.

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and influencing social norms. Through various mediums such as newspapers, television, films, and online platforms, the representation of adultery reflects the broader cultural values and power dynamics prevalent in Indian society.

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<sup>4</sup>Kartika, Aprilianita et al. "Societal Perception on Female Subject of Adultery in The Scarlet Letter." *Proceedings of the 2nd World Conference on Gender Studies (WCGS 2021)* (2022): n. pag.

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Historically, media representations of adultery in India have tended to reinforce traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Women engaging in extramarital affairs are often depicted as morally corrupt, promiscuous, and deserving of condemnation, while men may be portrayed as victims of temptation or driven by uncontrollable desires<sup>5</sup>. These portrayals not only perpetuate gender-based double standards but also contribute to the stigmatization and marginalization of women who transgress societal norms.

However, contemporary media portrayals of adultery in India have begun to challenge entrenched gender norms and offer more nuanced narratives. Increasingly, there is a recognition of women's agency and autonomy in matters of love and desire. Media representations now depict women as complex individuals with their own desires, motivations, and vulnerabilities, rather than mere objects of male desire or societal judgment.

Furthermore, the depiction of adultery in Indian media has also been influenced by legal and social developments. The landmark Supreme Court verdict in 2018, which struck down Section 497 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalized adultery, sparked widespread debate and reflection on the relevance of traditional marital norms in modern India. Media coverage of this judgment provided a platform for discussing issues of marital autonomy, gender equality, and the evolving dynamics of relationships.

While media representations of adultery in India have become more diverse and inclusive, challenges remain in dismantling deeply ingrained gender norms and stereotypes. The sensationalization of adultery scandals, particularly involving public figures or celebrities, often reinforces patriarchal narratives of male entitlement and female victimhood<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the tendency to focus on individual moral failings rather than structural inequalities perpetuates a narrow understanding of adultery and its implications for gender relations.

Nevertheless, there are encouraging signs of progress in media representations of adultery, with narratives increasingly challenging traditional gender norms and advocating for greater gender equality. Through thought-provoking films, television shows, and journalistic

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<sup>5</sup>Bag, Amartya, Adultery and the Indian Penal Code: Analysing the Gender Neutrality of the Law (June 20, 2010). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1627649> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1627649>

<sup>6</sup>Wróblewska-Skrzek, J. Infidelity in Relation to Sex and Gender: The Perspective of Sociobiology Versus the Perspective of Sociology of Emotions. *Sexuality & Culture* **25**, 1885–1894 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-021-09845-6>

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investigations, Indian media are shedding light on the complexities of human relationships and the diverse experiences of men and women navigating issues of love, desire, and fidelity.

In conclusion, the public discourse and media representation of adultery in India play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes and perceptions regarding gender roles and relationships. While historical representations have often reinforced traditional gender norms, contemporary media portrayals are increasingly challenging these norms and advocating for more inclusive and equitable narratives. By amplifying diverse voices and embracing nuanced storytelling, Indian media can contribute to fostering a culture of empathy, understanding, and respect for individual autonomy in matters of love and intimacy.



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