

Kamasutra, Sex and Change: Have we learned any new moves in the last seven hundred years?

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The Kamasutra has held the fascination of the masses since the 1800's. It is a sex book made in the third century, which still applies today! What a discovery! The book is set up as a dramatic play by Indian standards, but the content is a how-to book on all phases of a relationship. The different acts of the Kamasutra take the reader through a general life of an upper-caste male. A bachelor sets up his pad, becomes a connoisseur of the sexual act, learns how to court and bed a virgin, marries one or more wives and then tires of her (them), seduces other men's wives, tires of that activity and moves on to courtesans. The last act depicts what options an old man has when he is no longer able to hold an erection. It states different magic spells and aphrodisiacs that are available to him. Now, this may not be an ordinary life for people in the 21st century, but many of the same concepts apply. Men still deflower virgins; people have affairs. Old men buy Viagra! Do you know that the new medication can help maintain an erection for up to four hours? In any case, the average person might not follow all the steps of this book, but he or she will encounter a few. For this reason alone, the Kamasutra has remained the textbook of all textbooks about sex.

Countless versions and sex manuals have been based off this text since the 1960's. The first printing of the Kamasutra occurred in 1883. However, it was printed by Sir Francis Burton with the help of the Kama Shastra Society, a very exclusive and mysterious club that published erotica. There were extensive censorship laws in place in England during the Victoria era. Utmost caution and discretion were necessary to protect the individuals of the society from harm. For these reasons, while the book is considered to be "one of the most pirated books of the English language"¹ its content was not part of the common knowledge of the public. The 1960's provided an open and welcoming atmosphere for the

Kamasutra to become a topic of conversation for the masses. This spurred the many resulting versions of the text.

The Kamasutra was meant to be read by men and women. During the third century, only upper-caste men were allowed to read Sanskrit. However, texts dealing with punishments for women and lower-caste men who were caught reading have been documented. Therefore, we know that some women did know how to read during this time period. Scholars in the third century argued that women should not be able to read, since they would never be able to understand the information. It was beyond their capabilities! Vatsyayana, the author of the Kamasutra, argued though, that women understand the act of sex and should read his book or at least be given a synopsis or lecture on it. His reasoning was that if a woman has lost her husband and has no relatives to support her, the teachings of the Kamasutra would provide her with an edge in the only profession available to her - prostitution. Also, possessing knowledge of the Kamasutra's teachings will only augment a man's pleasure. What would it hurt for his wife or courtesan to learn a skill that would benefit him?

This is why Vatsyayana added parts to his book directed solely to women. For example, he gave women the information on how to fake an orgasm, in order to not injure the gentlemen's feelings of prowess. Information on how to seduce your husband, how to send signals of willingness to copulate, and how to behave if your husband cheated on you is all provided within the text. Also, he supplied information on how a woman can rid herself of a lover. The information is actually pertinent and applicable today. Here is an excerpt:

She does for him what he does not want, and does repeatedly what he has criticized. She curls her lip and stamps the ground with her foot. She talks about things he does not know about. She shows no amazement, but only

¹ Doniger, 27.

contempt, for the things he does know about. She criticizes men who have the same faults. She does not offer her mouth. She keeps him away from between her legs. When he tries to hug her, she repels him... her limbs remain motionless... she wants only to sleep... when she sees he is exhausted, she urges him on and laughs when he cannot do it...²

All of these actions women continue to do today. When she wants to make a man (lover) miserable, she can ignore him or insult and degrade him. She can withhold sex. If she does have sex with him, she can provide him with a limp body that gives no response. I think he will get the picture very fast! What is so amazing about this list is the applicability of the material today. It brings home to the reader how civilization has remarkably remained unchanged in the aspect of relationships.

The Kamasutra contains no male equivalent for how a man can rid himself of a lover. In this way, society has changed. Men can no longer simply toss a woman out of his house and life. Well, he can, but beware of an enraged woman! Most men now must have strategies themselves on how to properly “dump” a lover or girlfriend.

Vatsyayana spent a great deal of time on the proper technique and procedure to use on wooing a virgin wife. Remember in the Indian culture the wife is often completely a stranger to the husband upon marriage. In many cases they do not meet until the wedding day. For this reason, the bedding of the wife is a lengthy process that occurs in stages over a few days.

If you apply it to today’s equivalence of dating, there are some remarkable parallels. The first three days of marriage are spent sleeping on the floor together, but little interaction occurs. The wary strangers are essentially getting used to each other’s faces and habits. The next seven days are spent dining together, getting to know the relatives, listening to music and “decorating” each other. Our equivalent would be going on the first few dates where we learn about each other. Meeting the relatives shows that the relationship is getting serious. Decorating each other, I translated into

dressing each other. Hence, they are getting familiar with each other’s bodies and learning to become comfortable with the other person’s touch.

On the night of the tenth day, the man should find a “lonely” spot and speak soft words. He should be tender, loving and create confidence in the girl. He should embrace her in the chest region and in a dark secluded area. Also, he should urge her to talk about subjects he does not know about. If he does have some learning on the subject, he should pretend that he is ignorant about the subject. Today’s dating rituals can be pretty much the same. Dark areas make people feel more secure and confident. Talking while a man actually listens does make a woman feel valued. Her guard does come down with positive familiarity. If she despises a man, there is no hope for familiarity to breed willingness!

The eleventh and twelfth night is filled with full body caresses and kisses. He should stroke and shampoo her thighs, touch her private areas, but still not have sex. He should do this sporadically throughout the day to keep her always on edge! No translation in today’s language necessary. After the twelve nights he can begin teaching her all the different positions and consummate the marriage. He should also reassure her of his love and faithfulness. If all wooing is enacted correctly, the wife should be a devout, chaste woman who loves her husband and the marriage bed. She will willingly take care of his family, keep the house spotless, and create an appealing garden. The ultimate ideal for wives has not changed a great deal! The same stereotype of the appealing wife remains the same.

Society and perceived understandings about men and women have changed to some degree. During the third century, women were seen as weak and passive in the act of sex. A typical female behavior is described as “dress, chatter, grace, emotions, delicacy, timidity, innocence, frailty and bashfulness³.” Men were the strong, active leaders in

² Doniger, 21.

³ Doniger, 22.

all things. This is an interesting contradiction, because women are supposed to be passive, but also not a limp body in bed. They were discouraged to take charge, though, during sex. If women were on top during sex, they were playing the man's role. Other texts from the period state the position of a woman on top was perverse or reversed. One commentator on the book said that children produced from a liaison when a woman was on top have "reversed natures." This reversed nature is believed to have meant a change in behavior. Girls would act like men and vice versa. Some infer that homosexual children are the result.

This passage definitely shows how society has changed! Women are no longer looked on as the weaker sex, and have many varied personalities. Some women are the gentle, gracious lady. Others are the strong leader who dominates the relationship. Women are a mixture of strength and weakness. We have not changed, but are simply viewed differently. Instead of constraining all of our dominant leadership skills to the home, the take charge side of women is now expressed in public. Men are no longer perceived to always be the strong, take charge individuals, either. We have men who like to cook, sew, decorate and enjoy some of the so called "feminine" activities of life.

Homosexuality was even mentioned in the text. It was deemed as despicable in the eyes of

Vatsyayana, but an act that does occur. Interestingly, it was more accepted for men to be homosexual than women. Women had oral sex or used a dildo. This was only done if the women were in a harem and had no other recourse. If a man was available, they would prefer him to a dildo. Hence, according to Vatsyayana, women were not homosexual in the sense that they preferred women to men. They simply fulfilled their needs in whatever ways available. Of course, one should remember a man is writing this play. He would probably never admit that women would prefer a dildo to a man! Vatsyayana did mention, though, that the lesbian practices were deemed "Oriental" and part of the colonized part of the Gupta Empire only. Thus, there were very few lesbians in India, and they were all in one small area.

Men who followed homosexual practices were generally perceived to be bisexual. These men of the "third nature" were referred to in the feminine sense. Also, they "were bound to one another by discriminating affection rather than promiscuous passion⁴." The book seems to treat homosexual behavior as an act that men do to each other as a service. It was not to be a passionate encounter. They had oral sex and fellatio with a select few men who they trusted. However, these men did not refrain from enjoying the opposite sex. They were bisexual and enjoyed both types of sexual encounters.

As one can see, civilization has not changed to a great degree in relation to relationships and sex. Women are now given a more powerful role in relationships. Homosexuality has become more acceptable in the eyes of society. However, women still use the same tactics to discourage lovers. Men follow the same strategies on how to talk a woman into bed. We have courtships (of a sort), get married, have affairs, and struggle with impotency. Life continues to remain the same in some crucial areas. Is this comforting to know or not?

⁴ Doniger, 24

References

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