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Sex Education: Need of the Hour

SAHAJ SHARMA¹

ABSTRACT

Sex education, despite the everlasting force of modernisation in other regards, has remained a contentious issue, especially in India. This short note attempts to briefly explore the history of sexuality and how societal perspectives and expectations have evolved with time. The importance of sex education and sensitisation cannot go ignored for much longer. This paper makes reference to the recommendations of prominent international organisations and makes recommendations of its own, all with the objective of limiting stigma and precipitating sexual/reproductive welfare.

Keywords- Sex Education, Reproductive Health, WHO, UNICEF

¹ Sahaj Sharma, student at Jindal Global School, Sonipat, India.

Sex education aims to promote sexual health by raising awareness about sexual intercourse and reproduction. It also seeks to educate people on sexually transmitted diseases (HIV/AIDS), unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortions, gender inequality and sexual abuse and violence. Sexual health is considered to be a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Shajahan et al. 2015, 333). Sex education is essential as it empowers people to make informed choices and promotes safe-sex practices. An informed person can maintain healthy sexual relationships which improve the quality of life.

Sex education has always been viewed as a taboo in Indian culture. People purposefully restrain themselves from discussing sexuality amenably. Modern Indian society imposes restrictions on imparting sex education under the guise of preserving Indian values. People believe that imparting sex education will not only go against religious and moral values but will also corrupt the innocence of the youth. They also have the belief that conversing about sexuality will feed fuel to the flame of the youth's interest in sexual matters. More often than ever, the backward thinking of ancient Indian society is blamed to foster such a poorly informed mindset. However, the facts do not hold true, thus such a justification is flawed.

Popular literary texts on sexuality such as *Kamasutra* and the *Ananga Ranga* and erotic sculptures and paintings at Ajanta and Ellora caves, Khajuraho temple and Sun temple (Khanna et al. 2016) indicates the admiration and deep interest that our ancestors had towards sexuality. These sculptures portray the respect our ancestors had towards this natural process and were not at all ashamed to portray their appreciation for sexuality through the medium of art. Had our ancestors ever considered it taboo, such literary texts and sculptures would have never seen the light of the day. Gandhi and Jawahar Lal Nehru have elegantly written about their own sexual experiences.

It is the need of the hour to openly discuss sexuality and revive the comfort and eloquence that our forefathers had for the safety and the right kind of development of our future generations. The Indian society needs to understand that imparting sex education is not a western concept and does not inculcate western values. Contrarily, it is an ancient Indian belief that lost its place due to foreign invasions as many important literary texts were lost in that time and were

gradually replaced by the new norms set by the colonizers.

Indian society is multi-cultural with a rigid meaning of ethos and traditions. Everything that occurs in our daily lives revolves around these. The primary question we ask ourselves before deciding on something is not, 'Is it the right thing to do?', 'Will it help me?' or 'Do I enjoy it?' rather we ask, 'What will the world think about it?'

The National Youth Policy of the Government of India defines adolescents as the age group that ranges between 13 and 19 years of age, and this is the period when physiological, psychological, behavioural, and emotional changes take place (Gupta and Shukla 2016, 13). Adolescence is the phase when sexual desires arise, and there is a strong tendency to get into intense relationships with the same/opposite sex. Maturation is a natural process. Developmental changes in adolescents make them feel anxious about the sudden development and cause them to explore about sexuality.

During this period, adolescents are more likely to experiment and engage in intimate relationships and risky sexual practices. Young minds are curious to explore. Turning a blind eye towards these changes does not stop developmental changes in adolescents. Due to a lack of proper knowledge, they are not able to make informed choices. Therefore, the stigmas in society pertaining to sexuality makes them vulnerable to a complex emotional state. Society needs to understand that imposing restrictions on sex education does not delay the curiosity in adolescents to acquire information. It is a natural tendency to explore the changes that are occurring in their bodies which leads them to explore their sexuality. Due to the stigma, adolescents refrain from talking to their teachers and parents about sexuality. Thus, not able to acquire the exact knowledge from the right people and resort to unregulated, uninformed and easily accessible sources such as social media. Additionally, adolescents may even rely upon pornography as a source of knowledge about sex further leading to false knowledge about the same.

The fragile minds of teenagers start developing according to the material they are exposed to on the internet, which further aggravates the problem. This often reflects and affect their mental health. Furthermore, owing to fear and shame, teenagers prefer seeking advice from their peers, who themselves are unaware of the right answers. With incorrect and incomplete information, confusion takes over their minds which eventually leads them on the wrong path. Due to

incorrect information, teenagers also develop a careless and dangerous attitude towards sexuality and therefore, often indulge in inappropriate sexual practices, leading to health and social problems such as sexually transmitted diseases (HIV/AIDS) and unplanned pregnancies. Contrarily, sex education will provide knowledge in a systematic and age-appropriate manner, so that young adults can make the right and informed decisions.

In 2006, the Union Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) in collaboration with National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) introduced sex education as a co-curricular subject in all schools across India. In 2007, the Adolescence Education Programme was made compulsory in all schools across India (S 2007, 3367). The programme aimed at teaching primary and secondary students about safe-sex practices and life skills in a strategic manner. The programme also aimed at dealing with physiological and psychological issues that adolescents face due to developmental changes. The introduction of the programme was criticized and supported by many at the same time. Before the students could benefit from the programme, many states banned it in the name of preserving Indian culture and values. Due to disparities in the implementation of the programme, and consequential protests, the Central Government dissolved the initiative. The proponents, on the other hand, supported the initiative since it would have protected the students from the misinformation that is collected from unfiltered and uncensored media. They also believed that it would enable them to maintain the quality of their sexual health and sexual relationships in their lifetime. With this fact established, let's go further to see what issues does the curriculum face when it involves sex education.

Indian society has two broad categories of education. First is the private education system, where schools have the right to choose whatever extra syllabus they want to add to the curriculum. Then comes the public education system, which follows an array of state-wise education curriculums prescribing no one specific method of education. These two systems lead to two primary yet external problems; the political and the socio-economic problem. In the country, the politics and ideals of the governments play a critical role since it is the education and other ministries that form policies governing the curriculum. We have seen sex being politicized on the grounds of immorality, against cultural heritage etc., at several instances for political benefit (Jha 2014).

Apart from the fact that the topic was politicized, the material published was sufficiently reflecting the insensitive attitude of the administration and the mindset of the public. The programme covered issues such as body image, violence and abuse, gender and sexuality and STIs, substance abuse, especially drugs and other unhealthy attitudes. Yet the notion of consent and attraction was neither introduced nor incorporated (Mahajan 2020). Moreover, due to socio-economic disparities, the quality of education in the country gets affected. Insufficient funds lead to a lack of competent teachers, insufficient quality material and many other materialistic problems.

Further, society repressing the concept of sex education with the excuse of it being a personal matter and not something that needs to be taught adds fuel to the fire. Acceptability issues towards sex education are not just seen amongst parents and teachers but also lawmakers and officials. The thought that it is immoral to discuss and use the word 'sex', paired with wrong ideas about homosexuality, gets compounded by taboos that proclaim that sex education promotes homosexuality and distorts children's thinking. Furthermore, the concept that education is pure, and schools are temples, leads people to believe that discussing sexual topics, corrupts the purity and traditional values of education.

Another majorly discarded issue when teaching sex education is the youth's emotional stability and mental health. These unresolved conflicts and unanswered questions in the minds of the youth leads to deteriorating and disturbing thoughts which may affect their personality. Yet again, this is not considered to be worth addressing on an average, by parents and teachers. It is often taken for granted that it will pass or even at times, goes unnoticed.

Keeping in mind all the above reasons, parents and teachers resist sex education in the curriculum terming it as unnecessary and leaving it to happen with the natural course of time. How can parents expect a healthy and safe life for their children in the absence of the right knowledge? How can children properly learn about sexuality without proper guidance? India has the largest adolescent population, 243 million, which comprises one-fifth of the total population (21.4%) (Vikaspedia 2017). This signifies the importance of sex education. Catering to the needs of adolescents in a well-planned manner is the need of the hour and will thus aid in improving the sexual and general health of adolescents. Sex education will help adolescents to regulate their sexual urges and desires in a healthy way.

Reports of UNICEF, UNAIDS, and the United Nations Population Fund, support the effectiveness of sexuality education program in the USA and other parts of the world in recent decades (Shajahan et al. 2015, 335). Sex education has been successful in fostering positive sexual behaviour and has increased the use of contraceptives. Therefore, India can also benefit from the implementation of the Adolescent Education Programme. It is vital that sexuality education is imparted to young adults before they become sexually active or before their marriage, whether it is through their choice, necessity, or coercion (Das 2014, 216). Female adolescents comprise 46.9% of the total population. If sex education is provided at the right time, the social issue of teenage pregnancy can be avoided by using the right kind of contraceptive method. The maternal mortality rate due to teenage pregnancy is 9% (2007-2009) (Vikaspedia 2017). A high risk of pregnancy and childbirth results in a high level of female mortality in the reproductive age group. Maternal mortality of teenage mothers is a serious cause for concern. Sex education can help female adolescents make informed choices by educating them about conception, contraception, and family planning.

In a country like India, with so much diversity tackling a sensitive issue like sex education is a complicated task. Presently, some teachers lack the knowledge and are not comfortable discussing sexuality. Therefore, special training programmes and workshops should be held so that teachers become comfortable with the topic of sexuality and can tackle the queries of their students. Content of the programme and implementation techniques determine the success of the programme. While imparting sex education, teachers should be mindful of the local culture and the sentiments of people. Innovative approaches and methods like quizzes and short movies should be used to teach sensitive issues with ease. The terms used while explaining sexuality should be clear, age-appropriate, and not vague. Teachers should be knowledgeable enough to resolve any misconceptions or myths and should foster a positive attitude towards sexuality. The programme should also be comprehensive so that it can cater to people belonging to various gender and sexual identities. Psychologists and psychiatrists should be efficiently trained to deal with the emotional challenges faced by adolescents. Further, the government should also provide students with a list of websites from which they can access correct and verified information about sexuality.

To conclude, sex education helps an adolescent to develop into a well informed and responsible

adult. Hence, it is the role of the government and the informed citizens of the country to spread knowledge about the same in society. It is time to come out of the bubble of conservative ideas and remove the social stigma attached to the subject of sexuality and think about the future of India as healthy youth is the foundation of a strong nation.

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