

Attitudes Toward Sexuality Among Indian Youth: A Rural-Urban Comparison

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines the attitudes toward sexuality among Indian youth aged 18–25, contrasting rural and urban settings. Drawing from studies conducted over the past 15 years, it explores factors influencing sexual attitudes, including education, digital exposure, gender norms, and cultural taboos. The review highlights disparities in sexual knowledge, behaviors, and access to sexual health resources between rural and urban youth, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive interventions. The findings are essential for informing policy, educational reforms, and health initiatives targeting Indian youth.

Keywords: *Sexual attitudes, Indian youth, rural-urban comparison, sexual health, sex education, adolescence*

Sexuality is a multidimensional concept that includes biological, emotional, social, and cultural elements (World Health Organization [WHO], 2006). It encompasses sexual orientation, sexual behavior, identity, intimacy, and reproduction. Adolescence and early adulthood are critical phases in developing sexual identity, attitudes, and behaviors (Santrock, 2019). In India, the social and cultural context shapes sexuality significantly, often marked by conservatism, stigma, and lack of formal sexual education (Jejeebhoy et al., 2014).

India is home to one of the largest youth populations globally, with significant sociocultural diversity between rural and urban settings. While urban youth have greater access to education, digital media, and health services, rural youth often grow up in environments with strong traditional values and limited exposure to open discourse about sexuality (Verma et al., 2020). Understanding sexual attitudes among youth is essential because these attitudes influence decisions related to sexual behavior, contraceptive use, sexual risk-taking, and overall reproductive health.

This review aims to explore the attitudes toward sexuality among Indian youth aged 18–25, comparing rural and urban settings. It focuses on themes such as sexual knowledge, risky behaviors, digital influence, gender norms, and access to health services. By synthesizing empirical studies and national data, the paper contributes to an informed understanding of how young Indians perceive and engage with their sexuality.

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METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive review of peer-reviewed journal articles, national health surveys, and academic research published between 2010 and 2025 was conducted. Databases such as PubMed, SpringerLink, and ResearchGate were searched using keywords including "sexual attitudes," "Indian youth," "rural-urban comparison," "sex education," and "adolescent sexual behavior." Studies were included if they focused on Indian populations aged 18–25 and provided comparative or thematic insights on rural and urban differences.

Thematic Literature Review

1. Sexual Knowledge and Misconceptions: Sexual knowledge among Indian youth remains fragmented and often riddled with myths, particularly in rural areas where sex education is minimal. Yogesh and Karthikeyan (2023) reported that students from rural regions and non-science academic backgrounds exhibited significantly lower levels of sexual knowledge than their urban and science-stream peers. This discrepancy is largely due to the absence of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) in Indian schools and the discomfort surrounding open discussion of sexual topics.

2. Risky Sexual Behaviors: The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) found that 14% of Indian youth initiated sexual activity before the age of 18, and 68% reported not using condoms during their last sexual encounter (Sharma, Singh, & Khan, 2023). Rural youth were found to be more prone to engaging in risky behaviors due to lack of awareness and poor access to contraceptives. In contrast, urban youth, while more sexually active, also displayed slightly better knowledge and usage of protection due to greater exposure to information and services.

3. Digital Exposure and Premarital Sex: Digital technology has emerged as a powerful force shaping youth attitudes toward sexuality. Nanda and Gupta (2020) found that access to the internet and mobile phones among urban youth facilitated exposure to sexual content, increased curiosity, and led to more liberal attitudes toward premarital sex. Urban youth are more likely to use digital platforms to seek information on contraception, STIs, and relationships, whereas rural youth often lack access or are limited by language and digital literacy barriers.

4. Gender Norms and Sexual Behavior : Gender norms continue to play a dominant role in shaping sexual behavior, particularly in rural India. According to Mishra and Behera (2015), rural young men often perceive premarital sex as acceptable for males but not for females, reinforcing patriarchal double standards. Rural women face strict social control over their mobility and expression, leading to suppressed sexual agency. In contrast, urban settings show emerging egalitarian trends, although remnants of traditional values persist.

5. Access to Sexual Health Services: Access to youth-friendly sexual health services remains limited, especially in rural India. Kumar, Desai, and Mehta (2022) highlighted that rural youth often avoid seeking help due to fear of judgment, confidentiality concerns, and lack of trained personnel. Urban youth, although better served, also face stigma and embarrassment, particularly when accessing services related to contraception and STIs. The gap in services further reinforces misinformation and risky practices among youth.

Gaps in Literature

Despite growing research, there is a notable lack of longitudinal and intersectional studies exploring sexual attitudes among Indian youth. Many studies focus on heterosexual populations, neglecting the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. Additionally, the influence of caste, religion, and regional diversity remains underexplored. These gaps highlight the need for inclusive, community-specific research to better understand evolving youth sexuality

CONCLUSION

This review underscores the complex and context-dependent nature of sexual attitudes among Indian youth. Urban youth benefit from relatively greater freedom, access, and awareness, whereas rural youth are constrained by traditional norms, stigma, and lack of services. Bridging this gap requires comprehensive, culturally sensitive sex education, improved health infrastructure, and destigmatization campaigns. Policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals must work collaboratively to foster safe, informed, and empowering environments for young people to explore and express their sexuality.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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