

Understanding Attitudes of Indian Youth towards Homosexuality: A mixed method study

Ananya Pant¹ & Kanika Khandelwal²

Abstract: In a landmark ruling in 2018, homosexuality was decriminalised in India. This was the first step not just towards equality of homosexual individuals and their rights, but also towards reducing stigma and restoring dignity. In another turn of events, India also denied rights of same-sex marriage to these individuals in the latest Supreme Court judgement of 2023. While these events happened at the apex level, the ground reality remains unexplored. Through this study, we aimed at measuring attitudes of Indian Youth towards Homosexuality based on their gender and education, and to develop a deeper understanding of the same, using Attitudes towards Homosexuality Scale for Indians (AHSI) developed by Ahuja (2017). The scale was administered on 211 individuals out of which 6 individuals, 3 high scorers and 3 low scorers, were contacted for telephonic semi-structured interviews to gain more insight on their attitudes. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics while the qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. Results indicate a significant difference between males and females, and those studying liberal arts and science on attitudes towards homosexuality. The study also taps into the basis of the formation of such attitudes and suggests that cultural influences, social environment, educational environment and personal factors play an important role.

Keywords: Beliefs; Homosexuality; Youth; India

Homosexuality as a term was coined by Karoly Maria Benkert in the late 19th century (Pickett, 2002). It may be simply defined as sexual, emotional or romantic relationships between people of the same sex (e.g., Cardoso & Werner, 2013). The first traces of the existence of individuals from the LGBT community in India takes one back to ancient India where different religious texts have mentioned the existence of individuals from the third gender [that] includes people who have conventionally been called homosexuals, bisexuals, transgender people and intersex people. Ancient books like Baudhayana Dharmasutra, Kamasutra, Arthashastra, Mahabharat, Ramayana, Puranas etc. have all directly or indirectly acknowledged the presence of people from the community, whether it is in a positive light or a negative one. Mediaeval ages epics also present tales of homosexuality in prominent figures like Sultan Mahaud of Ghaznaha and Ayaz, Mubarak Shah Khalji and Khusri, Alauddin Khalji with Malik Kafur etc. (Kumar & Gupta, 2023). The scriptures and carvings of several temples like Khajuraho, Ambernath Shiva, Bhuvaneshwar Rajarani, Bagali Shiva and

Konark tell a story of their own (Ahuja, 2017). Despite this, a common societal narrative that we've seen over years is how homosexuality is a foreign concept. Little is known about how banning homosexuality was a foreign concept as it was "morally unethical" in the eyes of the British, leading to a legal censorship of such acts in 1861, with the introduction of Section 377 in IPC. With this also began attacks, elimination and execution of individuals from the LGBT community. Human Rights Watch reported harassment against HIV/AIDS prevention activists, sex workers and men who have sex with men and other LGBT groups (Dagras, 2021).

Srivastava and Singh (2015) examined the psychosocial factors that contribute towards the stigma of homosexuality and found that the idea of homosexuality was a direct threat to how society views the world. This becomes even more pronounced in a country like India which is a collectivistic society. Indian society also expects the child to be responsible towards their parents in some sort of way and lead a life in accordance with not just theirs but also their family's

¹ Trainee Clinical Psychologist, Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences, Delhi

² Clinical Psychologist, Mental Health Foundation India

³ Corresponding Author: ananyapant972@gmail.com

wishes. Deviation from this expectation especially in homosexual individuals makes them more vulnerable to stigma and mental health consequences due to lack of family support (Srivastava and Singh, 2015).

A recent survey found that 52% of gay men without peer support suffer violence in India. More than half of men who faced violence (52.4%), sexual abuse (55%) and emotional torture (46.5%) lived with their parents and were in the closet (Chaturvedi, 2018). Multiple such studies make it evident that while law making is done at the apex level of the society, the time taken for these changes to trickle down to the masses and cause actual societal changes in much more. A study by Sahni et al. (2016) tapped on the implicit attitudes of college students using the Implicit Association Test and found that about 60% of the participants had an automatic preference towards heterosexual individuals over homosexual individuals. This was explained by how mainstream attitudes influence personal beliefs. Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954) was also used here to explain how individuals in contact with homosexuals had a more positive attitude towards homosexuality as compared to those who do not.

As noted by Ahuja (2017), key factors like gender, contact with homosexuals, and education can influence attitudes towards homosexuality. A key factor that can be noted here, especially when taking youth into account is the role of pop culture. Ayoub & Garretson (2017) noted how younger people have been trailblazers when it comes to making space for homosexual individuals. They add how representation of gay characters in mass media added to societal change. Some research has highlighted the role of religion too. For instance, a multilevel analysis of 79 countries done by Jäckle and Wenzelburger (2014) showed how religiosity explains an individual's homonegativity.

Therefore, the rationale of the present study is to understand the sources of biases, stereotypes, prejudice and thereafter discriminatory attitudes towards homosexual. Such discriminatory practices not only impact the mental health of queer individuals but also increase the burden of mental health in the system. It further deepens the gaps between minorities versus majority and might disturb the society as whole. Hence exploring the attitudes among college going youth in the Indian context becomes important.

The objectives of the current study are as follows: (1) To find difference between the attitude of male and female participants on attitudes towards homosexuality; (2) To find difference between Liberal Arts and Science pursuing participants on attitudes towards homosexuality; (3) To explore factors that play a role behind the attitudes of participants towards homosexuality.

Null hypothesis of the study is as follows: there will be no significant difference between male and female participants, and those students pursuing liberal arts and sciences on attitudes towards homosexuality. The alternative hypothesis of the study is as; there will be a significant difference between male and female participants, and students pursuing liberal arts and sciences on attitudes towards homosexuality.

Method

Design

The study follows a mixed-method approach and collects data using a standardised questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Quantitative data is analysed using SPSS version 21.0, while qualitative data is analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun, Clarke, & Gray, 2017).

Measures

The study collected basic demographic details of the participants including their email ID, age, sex, field of education, contact with homosexual individuals and taking informed consent. A standardised questionnaire called Attitudes towards Homosexuality Scale for Indians (AHSI) developed by Ahuja (2017) was used. It is a 5-point Likert type questionnaire with 20 questions, with a strong split-half reliability of 0.91.

The study also uses semi-structured interviews to get an in-depth understanding of how the participant's attitude towards homosexuality was formed. The open-ended questions were formed in line with the literature procured, for example, "How was your first encounter with information regarding homosexual individuals?", "How do you think your society/culture around you have impacted your attitudes towards homosexuality". To analyse this, we used Thematic Analysis ((Braun, Clarke, & Gray, 2017) in order to get clear themes with

rich quantitative codes.

Participants

The questionnaire was administered to 211 participants using Google Forms. Inclusion criteria included individuals who are Indian residents, are above the age of 18, are cisgender and heterosexuals. A semi-structured interview was also carried out with six participants, three of whom were high scorers on the scale and the other three were low scorers to get an in-depth idea about how their respective attitudes got shaped. About 76% females and 24% males participated in the study. The mean age was 25 years and 73% pursued liberal arts and about 27% pursued science courses.

Procedure

The Attitudes towards Homosexuality Scale for Indians (Ahuja, 2017) questionnaire was administered and participants with high and low attitudes on AHSI were identified and contacted for their interview to understand their attitudes in-depth. A semi-structured interview schedule was created and validated by four clinical psychologists and administered on these six

individuals after which the verbatim was analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to generate broader themes on how these attitudes were formed. Based on focused group discussions various themes were put under one broad theme and subsequent sub-themes and later coding was done.

Results

The data obtained was analysed statistically using percentages, t-test for independent means using SPSS version 21.0. The results are presented here as per the hypothesis of the study. About 76% females and 24% males participated in the study. The mean age was 25 years and 73% pursuing liberal arts and about 27% pursuing science courses. Amongst the participants, 57% reported being in contact with homosexual individuals while 43% reported having no contact. A significant difference was found on attitude towards homosexuality between male ($M=79.62$, $SD=19.1$) and female ($M=90.44$, $SD=11.8$) participants $t(212)=3.78$, $p<.001$, Cohen's $d=0.68$ as evident in Table 1. Female participants had a more positive attitude towards homosexuality as compared to male participants.

Table 1

Difference between male and female participants on attitude towards homosexuality

Measures	Males (n=50)		Females (n=162)		t(212)	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD		
Attitude	79.62	19	90.44	11.86	3.78*	0.68
High (%)	72		74			
Medium (%)	2		7			
Low (%)	26		22			

*Note: * $p<.05$, Attitude towards homosexuality*

A significant difference was found on attitude towards homosexuality between students of liberal studies ($M=90.39$, $SD=12.32$) and science courses ($M=81$, $SD=17.92$), participants $t(212)=3.62$, $p<.001$, Cohen's $d=0.61$ as evident in Table 2. Students pursuing liberal studies showed more positive attitudes towards homosexuals than students pursuing science studies, as evident in Table 2.

Table 2

Difference between Liberal Arts and Science pursuing participants on attitudes towards homosexuality

Measures	Liberals (n=155)		Science (n=57)		t(212)	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD		
Attitude	90.39	12.32	81	17.92	3.62*	0.61

*Note: *p<.05, Attitude towards homosexuality*

As per demographic details taken, about 57% of participants were in contact with homosexuals, that is, they either knew someone who is homosexual on a one-on-one basis. More females (61%) are in contact with homosexuals than males (42%), as evident in Table 3.

Table 3

Males and females who had contact with homosexuals on attitudes towards homosexuality

Measures	Yes (%)	No (%)
Contact (n=212)	57	43
Males (n=50)	42	58
Females (n=162)	61	39

Table 4 shows the qualitative analysis conducted on data derived from interviews. A qualitative means of analysis was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the attitudes of youth and their sources. The analysis was done using Braun & Clark's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis. For phase one, interviews were transcribed, read and re-read to develop a familiarity with the data and broad observations were made. For phase two, initial codes were generated keeping in mind the fourth objective of our study which was to explore factors that play a role behind the attitudes of participants towards homosexuality. For phase three, generated codes were analysed, interpreted and themes were generated. During this process, similar codes were put together into one sub-theme and similar sub-themes were put together into one theme. For phase four, all of these generated themes were reviewed to see if they were relevant to the objective of the study or not and how well they explained the

phenomenon at hand. For phase five, themes were given appropriate names to make the data set more coherent to understand under simple headings. Finally with phase six, generated results were reported in the results section of this study.

The first theme that was generated was 'Cultural Influences' which includes the sub-themes of religion and societal norms. The theme taps into how cultural values, expectations and traditions impact one's attitude towards homosexual individuals. The prominent sub-themes noticed within this theme were one's religion and the values that one learns from the society that they live in, and how these shape their attitudes.

The second theme that was generated was 'Social environment' which focuses on one's immediate social surroundings and environment which is generally

included in their day to day interactions. Here three prominent sub-themes explored the role of familial attitudes, peer influence and media influence on one’s attitude towards homosexuality.

The third theme explored how one’s educational background affects their attitudes towards homosexuality. Sub-themes here explored institutional atmosphere, that is, campus environment and collectivistic attitude of an educational institute and how that affects attitudes towards homosexuality. It also explored how one’s curriculum, as noticed by the quantitative analysis also between liberal arts and

science students, impacts their attitude towards homosexuality.

The fourth theme finally explored ‘Personal Factors’ keeping into mind how despite being surrounded by a society, there’s some influence that an individual and their thoughts and experiences can have on shaping up their attitudes. This included sub-themes of Personal experiences, which is a person’s first-hand experience with a homosexual individual and Perceived Stigma towards individuals from the LGBT community.

Table 4

Themes and sub-themes from Thematic Analysis

Themes	Codes
Cultural influences	Religious expectations and implications Adherence to standardised norms of heterosexual society Personal autonomy despite cultural influences Emphasis on fixed gender role
Social Environment	Nature of one’s work being liberal Nature of one’s education being liberal Exposure to queer friendly media Access and understanding of feminist theories Access to social media Being in touch with someone with lived experiences Adherence to parental expectations
Educational environment	Exposure to education that emphasises importance of biology over other aspects Lack of access to spaces providing accurate information Inculcating empathy through experiences
Personal factors	Having one on one interaction with people from the community Having friends who are homosexuals Sensitivity towards perceived stigma Personal willingness to learn more about the community

Discussion

The goal of the study was to measure and attitudes of Indian youth towards homosexuality based on gender and education. Through this paper we aimed to explore the attitudes of youth and also gain an in-depth understanding of these attitudes and how these attitudes have been formed.

Gender differences in Attitude

As observed by Ahuja (2017), our study also found a significant difference between attitudes towards homosexuality in males and females with females having a more positive attitude towards homosexuality than male participants. Similar findings have been observed in several studies like those conducted by Ilango et al. (2020) and Miller et al. (2021). Based on our qualitative analysis, we found that women tend to explain homosexual experiences by stepping into their shoes and exhibiting empathy. For example, a participant was noted saying *"they are also human and they also deserve basic human dignity"*. This can be attributed to how women are interpersonally oriented, especially in a collectivistic society like India.

Differences based on education

As observed by Ahuja (2017), our study also found a significant difference between attitudes towards homosexuality in participants from liberal studies and science courses, with participants from liberal studies showing more positive attitudes towards homosexuality than those pursuing sciences. Similar findings are shown in studies conducted by Yr, Sutrave, and Hegde (2022) and Banwari et al. (2015).

Qualitative data from the interviews made this aspect even clearer. Following are some relevant verbatims from the interviews. For instance, one female with a positive attitude towards Homosexuality, from liberal studies said, *"I think it adds a lot because umm... My education never took me to an orthodox thinking. I have my masters in mass communication and there we are always dealing with new challenges of society and it's our work to normalize. I normalize myself though my professors. By watching films like ritu perna gosh they have made films on these aspects only and reading books written by them on them and by watching films like moonlight which won Oscar also... I think these kinds of films, magazines, research papers*

and feminist theories have helped me a lot."

One male with a negative attitude towards homosexuality, from engineering, in sharp contrast said, *"My education has always taught me that the root of everything is 2 chromosomes which is x and y. I don't think it matters much, even if I was from medical I would say this, even if I was from non-med I would say this, even if I was from accounting I would say this because it's a fact."*

Formation of Positive or Negative Attitudes

Based on the qualitative data analysis, it was noted that culture can influence one's attitude towards homosexuality through the medium of religion and norms that are widely followed in the Indian subcontinent. Following verbatims are an example to help understand these themes further, *"My religion doesn't allow it and I can't go against it. It's very simple"; "They just don't fit in. How will a family function without a mother and a father? I don't mean to demean anyone but I personally am not able to see it happen"; "My religion doesn't really support homosexuality. I am religious but I can separate myself from it when needed. I think the world has also moved on."*

It was also noted that social environment can influence one's attitudes towards homosexuality. The subtheme of media influence was heavily filled with codes about pop-culture. Following are some examples to explain these sub-themes further: *"I had a bad circle in school and college. I think Insta gave me a sense of what's right and what's not otherwise I would've still been in my bubble"; "On social media I am reading lot of success stories about them and in web series I have seen such characters in positive light so I feel comfortable around them and I feel that's why I have a positive attitude for them"; "I will feel awkward taking a homosexual to my home because I know my parents won't be comfortable."*

Participants were also seen expressing how their attitudes were shaped by the atmosphere around which they had grown up and expressed concerns about the need to update the curriculum. *"I think no one is talking about these things. There is no knowledge and we don't know what they are facing. If we knew then we would want to change our view point"; "Streams of education don't matter. Medical students know about XY chromosomes, non-medical also know, accountancy also know. It's a fact that no one can*

change or be unaware of”; “In our school we used to make fun of their way of saying and how they clap and if any boy has a girlish voice we used to make fun and all people laughed but as I entered college there I had lot of discussion with my friends, teachers and in societies I realised that they also have problems in this society and I started feeling bad for them then I read lot of articles about them”.

Lastly, while environment and society definitely shape our attitudes, one’s personal experiences and individual’s personal encounters with people from the community, in person or otherwise, and how that adds to their perception about them. The following examples may illustrate: “Yes I have my friend they are equally competent good in studies very loyal to us and understanding. I feel that they still don’t share much feelings with us but as friends we are connected and helpful to each other”; “Yeah of course I have friend they are homosexuals I have been with them I never felt any difference with them”; “I don’t think I will feel comfortable if my close friend opens up about such things. I don’t know how I will react. I’ve never even had an encounter so I can’t even imagine.”

All in all, formation of these attitudes can be attributed to unique experiences of an individual ranging from their cultural influences, social environment, educational environment and personal factors. This can be well understood in the Indian context where we exist in a collectivistic society because of which aspects like religion, family, friends and norms act like adhesive to our identities, binding them together in a larger social context.

Limitations and Future Directions

The sample size was small and students from various courses and streams were not included in the study. Comparisons of t-independent tests also have disproportionate sample sizes. The future studies could include attitudes of professionals or stakeholders in the society.

Conclusion

The results of the present study showed a significant difference in attitudes towards homosexuality between not only male and female participants but also participants who had different areas of education, that is, liberal arts and science. Qualitative analysis of the interviews showed how factors like cultural influences,

social environment, educational environment and personal factors can play a role behind an individual’s attitudes towards homosexuality. Youth being an asset of our country should be encouraged to have discussions about gender at home, school and community level. Parents should also include gender neutral practices in their daily lives.

Acknowledgements: We would like to extend a special thanks to Dr. Kanika Ahuja for granting us the permission to use her scale for this study. We would also like to thank Praggapti Gosh, Consultant Psychologist at Mental Health Foundation India for her guidance in bringing this paper together.

References

- Ahuja, K. K. (2017). Development of attitudes toward homosexuality scale for Indians (AHSI). *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(14), 1978-1992.
- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Psycnet.apa.org. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1954-07324-000>
- Ayoub, P. M., & Garretson, J. (2017). Getting the message out: Media context and global changes in attitudes toward homosexuality. *Comparative Political Studies*, 50(8), 1055-1085.
- Banwari, G., Mistry, K., Soni, A., Parikh, N., & Gandhi, H. (2015). Medical students and interns' knowledge about and attitude towards homosexuality. *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine*, 61(2), 95–100.
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Gray, D. (2017). Innovations in qualitative methods. In B. Gough (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of critical social psychology* (pp. 243–266). Palgrave Macmillan/Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-51018-1_13
- Cardoso, F. L., & Werner, D. (2013). Same-sex behavior of heterosexual men: A cross-cultural comparison. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 13(3), 310-328
- Chaturvedi, S. (2018, October 9). 52% of gay men in India without peer support suffer violence: Survey. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/52-of-gay-men-in-india-without->

- peer-support-suffer-violence-survey/story-HKOutVLK7YbLieafqsTrwL.html
- Dagras, M. (2021). Victimization of LGBT community in India. *Social Science Research Network*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3866184>
- Ilango, T. S., Karthikeyan, S., Devi, S. S., Arumuganathan, S., Usaid, S., & Sethumadhavan, V. (2020). An online survey of education, knowledge and attitude toward homosexuality in adults. *Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 36(4), 344-350. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijsp.ijsp_43_20
- Jäckle, S., & Wenzelburger, G. (2014). Religion, religiosity, and the attitudes toward homosexuality: A multilevel analysis of 79 countries. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 62(2), 207–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.969071>
- Kumar, S., & Gupta, M. (2023). The discourse of homosexuality in Indian scenario. *Jodhpur Studies in English*, 21, 80-91.
- Miller, R. K., O'Neill, D., & Bhuyan, D. J. (2021). Sex differences in the attitudes of Australian and Indian heterosexual individuals toward gay men, lesbians, bisexual men and bisexual women. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 21(3), 332–356. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2021.1992328>
- Pickett, B. (2002). Homosexuality. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved April 10, 2024, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/homosexuality/>
- Sahni, S., Gupta, B., Nodiyal, K., & Pant, V. (2016). Attitude of Indian youth towards homosexuality. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 4(1-83), 59-69.
- Srivastava, S., & Singh, P. (2015) Psychosocial roots of stigma of homosexuality and its impact on the lives of sexual minorities in India. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 3, 128-136. doi: 10.4236/jss.2015.38015
- Yr, N., Sutrave, R., & Hegde, S. G. (2022). Attitude towards people with same gender attraction among medical students: A cross-sectional study in Southern part of India. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 69(3), 700–704. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00207640221133942>