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Perceptions and awareness of live-in relationships in contemporary society

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Abstract

In modern India, live-in relationships are becoming more common, reflecting shifting views on marriage, intimacy and family life. However, cohabitation still encounters social and cultural opposition despite growing acceptance among some societal segments. The current study looks at the body of research on Indian perceptions, attitudes and awareness about cohabitation. Using secondary sources, a narrative review of published research, papers and legal literature was carried out. To find significant trends in attitudes and awareness of live-in relationships, a thematic analysis of the examined papers was conducted. The results show that working professionals, urban dwellers, and educated young generally have more positive opinions toward cohabitation. Cohabitation is becoming more and more acceptable due to a number of factors, including education, urbanization, economic independence, globalization and media exposure. Before getting married, many young adults see living together as a way to test compatibility and make their own decisions. However, acceptance is still constrained by societal expectations, religious convictions, and traditional family values, especially among older and conservative communities. The analysis also shows that although people are more aware of live-in relationships, they still do not know much about the legal rights and protections that cohabiting couples have. The review comes to the conclusion that traditional and modern viewpoints coexist in India, where relationship patterns are gradually changing. Increased legal literacy and public awareness are necessary to dispel myths and advance knowledge of this new type of partnership, even as awareness and acceptance of live-in couples are growing.

Keywords: Live-in relationships, perception, awareness, cohabitation, marriage

Introduction

As the cornerstone of family life and social order, marriage has long been considered one of India's most significant social institutions. It is typically seen as a sacred and culturally significant connection upheld by societal norms, religious principles and familial traditions in addition to being a legal union between two people. However, the nation's family structures and relationship patterns have changed as a result of swift social, economic and cultural developments (Akarshita, 2022) ^[1].

The live-in relationship, often known as cohabitation, is one such new type of relationship. The phrase "live-in relationship" originated from the idea of cohabitation, which comes from the Latin *cohabitare*, which means "to dwell together." According to Khanna and Kaur (2023) ^[2] and Malatesh and Dhanasree (2018) ^[3], it often refers to a situation when two unmarried adults live together in a relationship that resembles marriage without going through a formal legal or religious marriage ceremony. An anthropological definition of a live-in relationship is when two people share a common home, live together on a regular basis, and maintain a close relationship without being legally married.

Even while live-in partnerships are frequently thought of as a relatively recent development in India, historical data

indicates that comparable arrangements may have existed in prehistoric Indian civilization. According to ancient writings, Gandharva marriage was based on a man and a woman's mutual consent without the need for complicated rites or parental sanction. It is often mentioned as an early type of consensual union based on personal choice, even if it is not the same as modern cohabitation (Akarshita, 2022) ^[1]. The attitudes of young adults about personal relationships have been greatly impacted in recent decades by factors such as increased urbanization, educational attainment, economic independence, delayed marriage, globalization, and mass media exposure. Many people put off getting married in order to pursue further education, launch careers, and achieve financial security. As a result, before committing to a long-term marriage, some young adults see live-in relationships as a chance to determine compatibility, share companionship, and exercise personal liberty (Akarshita, 2022) ^[1]. Cohabitation has been more visible in modern Indian society due to the increased emphasis on personal autonomy and self-fulfillment.

In India, live-in relationships are still socially controversial despite their growing popularity. Marriage is still viewed as the most acceptable type of union by traditional cultural standards, religious convictions, and family expectations. At the same time, judicial rulings have progressively given

some live-in partnerships legal status and protection, especially with regard to women's and children's rights, raising public awareness of this type of union (Narayan *et al.*, 2021) ^[4]. Nevertheless, societal acceptance and awareness of the legal implications of cohabitation remain uneven across different sections of society.

Because attitudes toward developing family forms impact relationship choices, social acceptance, and policy debate, it is crucial to comprehend public perspectives and awareness of live-in relationships. Previous research has documented differing degrees of awareness and acceptability among age groups, genders, educational backgrounds, and sociocultural contexts. Therefore, in order to integrate existing knowledge and identify prevailing patterns, a thorough assessment of the available literature is required.

The present review paper aims to examine the existing literature on perceptions and awareness regarding live-in relationships in India. It specifically aims to determine the factors impacting public opinions of live-in relationships, study shifting attitudes toward cohabitation, and gauge awareness of its social and legal aspects.

Materials and Methods

The current study was carried out as a review of the literature to investigate how live-in relationships are seen in modern Indian society. Peer-reviewed research articles, dissertations, review papers, and reports accessible via electronic databases including Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Shodhganga, PubMed and other scholarly sources were used to gather pertinent literature. The following keywords were used in the literature search: "live-in relationships in India," "perception of live-in relationships," "attitude towards cohabitation," "awareness of live-in relationships," "youth perception of live-in relationships," and "live-in relationship and Indian society." In order to capture current trends and shifting public attitudes, studies published mostly between 2018 and 2026 were taken into consideration. Studies carried out in the Indian context that looked at attitudes, awareness, acceptance and social perspectives about cohabitation were included in the review. Duplicate research, non-academic sources and studies that had no bearing on the review's goals were excluded. The selected literature was critically analysed and synthesised to identify major themes related to awareness, acceptance, gender differences, social and cultural influences, media impact, legal perspectives and changing attitudes toward live-in relationships among different sections of Indian society.

Results

Perception and attitude towards live-in relationships

The examined literature shows that attitudes toward cohabitation are gradually changing in modern Indian culture, especially among young adults, educated people, urban dwellers, and working professionals. According to a number of studies (Malatesh & Dhanasree, 2018; Ghosh, 2023; Kulkarni, 2024) ^[3, 5, 6], live-in relationships are increasingly seen as an alternative to marriage that offers personal freedom, independence, emotional compatibility, and the chance to evaluate partner suitability prior to entering a marital union. Cohabitation is seen by young adults as a sensible arrangement that enables couples to

share duties, better understand each other's behavior, and assess long-term compatibility before getting married.

The results also imply that sociodemographic characteristics have a significant impact on acceptance of cohabitation. Positive attitudes toward cohabitation were consistently linked to higher levels of education, urban living, professional work, and exposure to modernization and globalization (Mandava & Banu, 2018; Chaturvedi & Dubey, 2022; Rani, 2024) ^[7, 8, 9]. By normalizing non-traditional relationship patterns, media exposure, particularly through social media, movies, and digital platforms—was also found to be a significant impact in shifting teenage perspectives (Manizia *et al.*, 2024; Rani, 2024) ^[10, 9].

The literature shows that live-in relationships are still not widely accepted in many facets of Indian society, despite growing openness. Acceptance is nevertheless significantly hampered by traditional family values, cultural standards, religious convictions, moral concerns, and fear of social rejection (Mandava & Banu, 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2024; Raj & Tiwary, 2025) ^[7, 11, 12]. Live-in relationships were often viewed negatively by older folks and people from traditional backgrounds, who frequently saw them as incompatible with Indian cultural customs and the institution of marriage.

Studies also showed that attitudes varied by gender. While female respondents frequently expressed more caution and hesitation due to worries about social stigma, family acceptance, commitment, and personal security, male respondents generally showed more positive perceptions of live-in relationships (Malatesh & Dhanasree, 2018; Manizia *et al.*, 2024) ^[3, 10]. Additionally, a number of studies revealed that opinions regarding cohabitation were frequently conflicting and ambiguous, with many respondents still unsure about whether they would personally decide to enter a live-in relationship despite being aware of its possible advantages (Manizia *et al.*, 2024) ^[10].

The results also show variations between cultural and geographic situations. Indian society still views marriage as the ideal and socially acceptable form of intimate connection, despite the fact that Western societies often show higher levels of acceptability for cohabitation (Sharma & Singh, 2024) ^[11]. In a similar vein, research done in semi-urban areas showed that while awareness of legal recognition has grown, social acceptance is still comparatively low, with many people still linking live-in relationships to cultural resistance and social taboo (Raj & Tiwary, 2025) ^[12]. This finding is corroborated by Prabhavathi *et al.* (2025) ^[13], who found that a sizable percentage of respondents thought cohabitation was unethical, demonstrating the persistence of conventional views in the face of continuous social change.

Overall, the examined research indicates that attitudes on cohabitation are gradually changing in India. Modern and conservative viewpoints on cohabitation coexist because traditional cultural values, family expectations, and societal standards continue to impact public perceptions, despite the fact that younger, educated, and urban populations are becoming more supportive of cohabitation.

Knowledge and Awareness about Live-in Relationships

According to the reviewed literature, there has been a

significant growth in knowledge of live-in relationships in India, especially among educated youth, working professionals, and urban populations. According to a number of studies (Mandava & Banu, 2018; Ghosh, 2021; Sepaha, 2021)^[7, 14, 15], urban young adults are more familiar with live-in relationships as a new type of intimate connection and have a significant understanding of the notion of cohabitation. Higher education, globalization, urbanization, migration, financial independence, and exposure to digital media are some of the factors that have significantly increased modern Indian youth's awareness and familiarity with live-in relationships (Chakravorty *et al.*, 2022; Akarshita, 2022)^[16, 1].

According to the research, live-in relationships are becoming more common, particularly in urban areas and metropolitan cities, as a result of modernization and shifting lifestyles (Bansal, 2022; Ganapathi Raju, 2022)^[17, 18]. Young adults' awareness and comprehension of cohabitation have increased as a result of their increased exposure to different relationship types through social media, movies, and digital platforms. However, it was shown that awareness levels differed among various socioeconomic groupings, geographical areas, and cultural contexts. Compared to rural populations, where conventional family structures and cultural norms remained to influence relationship preferences, urban residents generally showed higher awareness and openness toward live-in relationships (Chakravorty *et al.*, 2022; Singh, 2024)^[16, 19].

The analyzed research consistently revealed insufficient knowledge on the legal elements of live-in relationships, even while awareness of the concept itself is expanding. Legal provisions pertaining to inheritance concerns, maintenance rights, protection under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, and the legal status of children born through cohabiting unions were not well known to many respondents (Narayan *et al.*, 2021; Bansal, 2022; Saxena *et al.*, 2022; Bhatnagar, 2026)^[4, 17, 20, 21]. A significant issue was found to be low legal literacy, especially among women and middle-aged individuals who frequently lacked adequate knowledge about the rights and safeguards provided in cohabitation (Sepaha, 2021; Bhatnagar, 2026)^[15, 21].

Additionally, a number of studies highlighted the necessity of expanding public education and awareness initiatives to enhance comprehension of the social and legal aspects of cohabitation (Saxena *et al.*, 2022; Bhatnagar, 2026)^[20, 21]. Respondents' awareness of live-in relationships as a social phenomena was generally moderate to high, but their knowledge of related rights and legal protections was still quite low. Additionally, differences in awareness were noted between communities, with tribal populations showing relatively more familiarity and acceptance of non-marital cohabitation than mainstream Indian society, where marriage remains the predominant and socially favored institution of relationships (Rath & Sarangi, 2023)^[22].

Overall, the examined literature shows that technology, education, urbanization, and media exposure are all contributing to India's gradually rising awareness of live-in relationships. Nonetheless, there are still large gaps in legal knowledge and comprehension of the rights and safeguards related to cohabitation, underscoring the necessity of increased legal literacy and public awareness campaigns.

Discussion

According to the reviewed studies, educated young, urban dwellers, and working professionals in India have more positive opinions about cohabitation (Malatesh & Dhanasree, 2018; Rani, 2024)^[3, 9]. Growing urbanization, educational progress, economic independence, and exposure to global cultural influences via media and digital platforms could all be contributing factors to this trend (Chakravorty *et al.*, 2022; Akarshita, 2022)^[16, 1]. These results lend credence to the idea that modern Indian young are progressively embracing more individualistic ideals that prioritize personal preference and compatibility in relationships. However, research continually shows that attitudes regarding cohabitation are still influenced by conventional cultural norms and familial expectations, leading to only a limited social acceptability of live-in relationships (Mandava & Banu, 2018; Sharma & Singh, 2024; Raj & Tiwary, 2025)^[7, 11, 12].

Conclusion

The current review focuses on how live-in relationships are perceived differently and how awareness of them is rising in modern Indian society. According to the reviewed literature, cohabitation is becoming more and more acceptable, especially among working professionals, urban dwellers, and educated young. Higher education, urbanization, globalization, economic independence, and exposure to digital media are some of the factors that have led to increasingly positive perceptions of cohabitation. Before getting married, many young adults view cohabitation as a chance to determine compatibility, gain emotional understanding, and exercise personal choice.

The review shows that live-in partnerships still encounter strong societal and cultural opposition despite these shifting attitudes. Public opinions are still influenced by traditional family values, religious convictions, moral concerns, and cultural expectations, particularly among older generations and conservative areas. Hence, marriage remains the most socially accepted and preferred form of intimate partnership in India.

The review also shows that although there has been a significant increase in awareness of live-in relationships as a social phenomena, there is still a lack of information about the legal rights and protections available to cohabiting partners. The need for increased legal literacy and public education is highlighted by the lack of knowledge on maintenance rights, women's legal protections, and the rights of children born in cohabitation.

Overall, the results point to a slow shift in relationship patterns in India, marked by the coexistence of increasing individualistic attitudes and traditional family values. More study is required to examine regional variations, gender-specific experiences, long-term cohabitation outcomes, and the efficacy of legal and educational remedies as live-in relationships become more prevalent in Indian society. A more balanced view of this developing relationship type within India's shifting social landscape may result from increased awareness and educated public discourse.

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