

# Health Behaviours and Problems among Young People in India

**SUNITA GAHLOT**

Associate Professor

Govt. M.S. College for Women, Bikaner (Rajasthan) India

## ABSTRACT

Young people in India face numerous health challenges that can have long-term consequences on their physical, mental, and social well-being. This research paper aims to explore the health behaviours and problems among young people in India, highlighting the prevalence of risk behaviours, mental health issues, and the impact of socio-cultural factors on their health. The health status of young people in India is a critical area of study, as the challenges they face significantly determine the nation's future social and economic capital. This research paper will meticulously explore the current landscape of health behaviours and problems among this demographic, recognizing that the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is a period of heightened risk and vulnerability. A central focus will be the pervasive prevalence of risk behaviours, which includes an examination of increasing rates of substance abuse (e.g., tobacco and alcohol use), sedentary lifestyles, and unsafe sexual and reproductive health practices. Concurrently, the paper aims to shed light on the burgeoning crisis of mental health issues, detailing the commonality of stress, anxiety, and depression that often stem from intense academic pressure, unemployment fears, and family expectations, highlighting the significant barriers posed by widespread social stigma and limited access to professional support. Furthermore, the analysis will critically evaluate the profound impact of socio-cultural factors—such as gender norms, caste, economic disparities, and traditional beliefs—on shaping health outcomes, underscoring how these determinants influence access to care, nutritional choices, and the propensity for adopting or abandoning healthy behaviours, ultimately necessitating a comprehensive and context-specific approach to intervention.

**Keywords:** Health challenge, Socio-cultural factors, Unemployment, Gender norms, Economic disparities

## INTRODUCTION

India has a large population of young people, with over 34% of the population under the age of 25 (Census of India, 2011). This demographic dividend presents both opportunities and challenges for the country's development. However, young people in India face numerous health challenges, including risk behaviours, mental health issues, and limited access to healthcare services. India's demographic structure, with a massive young population (with approximately 27-34% of the population currently under the age of 25, representing the world's largest youth cohort), presents a significant Demographic Dividend—a window of opportunity for accelerated economic growth driven by a high proportion of working-age individuals. However, this potential

dividend is severely challenged by a host of escalating health issues that threaten to diminish the productivity and overall well-being of this future workforce. The dual burden of disease is evident, with persistent issues like malnutrition (both under-nutrition and rising obesity/overweight rates) coexisting alongside an alarming rise in Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), whose risk factors—such as sedentary lifestyles, tobacco, and substance abuse—are often established during these formative years.

The most pressing challenge is the burgeoning crisis of youth mental health, marked by high reported levels of stress, anxiety, and depression linked heavily to immense academic pressure, career uncertainty, and societal expectations. Studies indicate that mental health disorders are a major contributor to the burden of disease

in the 15-29 age group, with suicide being a leading cause of death in this cohort. Compounding these problems is limited access to quality healthcare services, particularly in rural areas, and a deeply entrenched social stigma surrounding mental health and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues. These socio-cultural factors prevent young people, especially women, from seeking confidential care, thereby allowing problems like anemia, untreated STIs, and mental health disorders to persist and undermine India's ability to fully capitalize on its vast demographic potential.

### **Health Behaviours:**

Young people in India engage in various risk behaviours that can have serious health consequences. According to the National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16), 14.6% of males and 2% of females aged 15-24 years use tobacco. Additionally, 11.7% of males and 1.3% of females in this age group consume alcohol.

Poor dietary habits are also common among young people in India. A study by the International Institute for Population Sciences (2016) found that only 10.4% of adolescents consumed fruits daily, while 57.1% consumed vegetables daily. Physical inactivity is another major concern, with only 15% of young people in India meeting the recommended levels of physical activity (WHO, 2018).

### **Mental Health Issues:**

Mental health issues are a significant concern among young people in India. A study by Patel *et al.* (2016) found that 10-20% of adolescents experienced depression and anxiety. Furthermore, suicide is a leading cause of death among young people in India, with 20-30% of global suicides occurring in this age group (WHO, 2019).

### **Depression:**

Depression is a common mental health issue among young people in India, with symptoms including persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities, and changes in appetite and sleep pattern. The rising prevalence of depression among adolescents and young adults presents a significant global public health challenge (Lakasing and Mirza, 2020).

### **Anxiety:**

Anxiety is another prevalent mental health issue, characterized by feelings of worry, fear, and apprehension.

Anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental health concern facing adolescents today, yet they are largely undertreated. This is especially concerning given that there are fairly good data to support an evidence-based approach to the diagnosis and treatment of anxiety, and also that untreated, these problems can continue into adulthood, growing in severity. On the one hand, we know a great deal about anxiety disorders, including the fact that they are the most common psychiatric disorders among adolescents, with an estimated prevalence of 31% (Merikangas *et al.*, 2010). On the other hand, anxiety disorders are the most undertreated mental health problems in adolescents, with recent data indicating that only 18% of anxious adolescents were in treatment (Merikangas *et al.*, 2011).

### **Academic Pressure:**

Academic pressure is a significant stressor for young people in India, with many experiencing stress and anxiety related to exams and academic performance. Academic stress is a major stressor for young people, stemming from performance pressure, exams, and future concerns, significantly impacting their mental health (anxiety, depression) and physical well-being, with causes including family, peers, and systemic issues, requiring management through healthy coping like exercise, relaxation, and support systems (Hovsepian *et al.*, 2019).

### **Social Media:**

Social media is a major contributor to mental health issues among young people, with cyberbullying, online harassment, and unrealistic beauty standards being major concerns. Social media significantly impacts youth mental health, acting as a double-edged sword: while offering connection, it's linked to increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, and sleep disruption due to social comparison, cyber bullying, and addictive design, harming self-esteem; however, it also provides support networks and mental health resources, necessitating digital literacy and healthy usage habits to mitigate risks and harness benefits. Numerous studies on social media's effects have been conducted, and it has been proposed that prolonged use of social media sites like Facebook may be linked to negative manifestations and symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2018).

### **Family and Relationship Issues:**

Family and relationship issues, such as parental

conflict, divorce, and romantic relationship problems, can contribute to mental health issues among young people. Family and relationship issues significantly drive youth mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and stress, stemming from poor communication, conflict, lack of support, and family instability (like divorce or domestic issues), while positive bonds, communication, and supportive environments act as crucial protective buffers, highlighting the family unit's foundational role in adolescent well-being. In a cohort study of 18 185 individuals (9233 females and 8952 males), those who experienced positive adolescent family relationships had significantly lower levels of depressive symptoms from early adolescence to midlife (late 30s to early 40s) than did those who experienced less-positive family relationships (Chen and Harris, 2019). Socio-economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare, can also contribute to mental health issues. Socioeconomic issues significantly harm youth mental health through financial stress, poor living conditions, less social support, and increased Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) like neglect or abuse, making disadvantaged kids 2-3x more likely to have problems like anxiety and depression; these factors create chronic stress, impact brain development, and limit resources, forming a cycle of deprivation and mental illness that requires systemic societal change and early intervention. The relationship between income and health has been clearly established. For instance, life expectancy tends to increase as gross national product (GNP) rises, but only to a certain extent, where other factors come into play such that further advances can no longer be made (Tibber *et al.*, 2022).

#### ***Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors:***

Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are a significant concern among young people in India, with 20-30% of global suicides occurring in this age group (WHO, 2019). Suicide death accounts for 8.5% of all deaths among adolescents and young adults around the world (15–29 years), and is a leading cause of death among youth worldwide (WHO, 2017).

#### ***Substance abuse:***

Substance abuse is a growing concern among young people in India, with many using substances as a coping mechanism for mental health issues. Drug misuse is a widespread issue; in 2016, 5.6% of people aged 15 to 26

reported using drugs at least once (Nawi *et al.*, 2021).

#### ***Eating Habits:***

Eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia, are becoming increasingly common among young people in India, particularly among females. Eating disorders are serious health conditions that affect both your physical and mental health. These conditions include problems in how you think about food, eating, weight and shape, and in your eating behaviors. These symptoms can affect your health, your emotions and your ability to function in important areas of life. If not treated effectively, eating disorders can become long-term problems and, in some cases, can cause death. The most common eating disorders are anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorder. Epidemiological studies have suggested that the incidence of eating disorders among adolescent girls has increased over the last 50 years. The reported prevalence rate for anorexia nervosa is 0.48% among girls 15 to 19 years old. Approximately 1% to 5% of adolescent girls meet the criteria for bulimia nervosa (Fisher *et al.*, 1995).

#### ***Socio-Cultural Factors:***

Socio-cultural factors play a significant role in shaping young people's health behaviours in India. Poverty and socio-economic status are major determinants of health, with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to engage in risk behaviours and experience poor health outcomes (IIPS, 2016).

Gender is another important factor, with female young people in India facing unique challenges, including limited access to education and healthcare, and increased risk of violence and exploitation (NFHS-4, 2015-16).

Cultural norms and expectations can also influence young people's health behaviours, with some communities promoting risk behaviours such as tobacco use (Patel *et al.*, 2016).

#### ***Recommendations:***

1. *Increase Access to Mental Health Services:* There is a need to increase access to mental health services for young people in India, including counselling, therapy, and medication.
2. *Promote Mental Health Awareness:* Mental health awareness needs to be promoted among young people, parents, and educators to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking behavior.
3. *Develop School-Based Interventions:* School-

based interventions, such as mental health education and counselling, can help identify and address mental health issues early.

4. *Address Socio-Economic Determinants*: Socio-economic determinants, such as poverty and lack of access to education and healthcare, need to be addressed to reduce mental health disparities.

### Conclusion:

Young people in India face numerous health challenges that require urgent attention. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that involves government, healthcare providers, educators, and communities. Recommendations include increasing access to healthcare services, promoting healthy behaviours, and addressing socio-cultural determinants of health. The health of young people in India is a critical development issue, requiring a deeply integrated and multifaceted response across various societal sectors. These challenges extend far beyond simple infectious diseases to encompass a complex interplay of mental health crises, malnutrition in both its deficit and excess forms, and significant sexual and reproductive health issues. The sheer scale of youth populations means that neglecting these needs today translates directly into a massive burden of non-communicable diseases and reduced economic productivity for the nation tomorrow. Addressing this requires the government to establish comprehensive, adequately funded policies, particularly focusing on strengthening primary healthcare infrastructure to offer confidential, non-judgmental, and easily accessible youth-friendly services.

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