



Erotic sculpture at a temple at Khajuraho archaeological site, Madhya Pradesh State, India

Between tradition and modernity: Controversy in India about the sex education programme in state-run schools

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India is a society in transition. On the one hand, we have a thriving economy and modernization and on the other, an uneasy debate raging on sex education for young people – “Should a 15 year old Indian student be permitted to look at anatomical drawings that illustrate how an adolescent’s body develops into an adult form?” In 2007, a number of state governments passed orders banning an adolescent education programme designed for 15-17 years in all state-run schools. It was devised by the National Education Ministry and the government body responsible for combating the spread of HIV/AIDS – the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO). The immediate provocation was a manual for teachers that allegedly featured offensive illustrations and classroom exercises. Information in the curriculum on contraception and sexually transmitted diseases also provoked anger. One by one, the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Kerala, Chhattisgarh and Goa – some of the largest Indian states – declared that the course content was unacceptable and banned the programme. Unfortunately, the subject became a political flashpoint.

The debate has been between educators who say sex education will reduce HIV rates and help young people protect themselves and critics who fear it will corrupt young minds and ruin Indian culture.¹ The critics feel that “*Sex education may be necessary in western countries, but not in India, which has a rich culture. It will have adverse effects on young minds.*” According to them, sex education is only for married people. On the other hand, the proponents of sex education say that conservative ideas have little place in a modernizing country where attitudes towards sex are changing rapidly. They point to surveys showing that for a generation of Indians exposed to television and the internet, casual sex or sex outside marriage is no longer taboo.

What are the facts? – According to the Population Council in India, there are 315 million young people aged 10-24 years in India, representing 30% of the country’s population. This cohort is healthier, more urbanized and better educated than earlier

“Sex education may be necessary in western countries, but not in India”

generations. At the same time, these young people face significant risks related to sexual and reproductive health, and many lack the knowledge and power they need to make informed sexual and reproductive health choices. They are growing up in a fast-changing world with rapid changes in attitudes and expectations. A popular

magazine (*India Today*) poll revealed that one in four Indian women between 18 and 30 in eleven cities had sex before marriage. A youth survey in Maharashtra conducted by the International Institute of Population Sciences (IIPS) and Population Council in 2006-2007 among unmarried women and men (15-24 years) and married women and men (15-29 years) found that there is a huge lack of awareness about sexuality among women and that information on sex is still considered taboo.² The findings show that 18% of men and 3% of women have had pre-marital sex. Men have comparatively more access to information, though not always the right source, while women still do not feel free to discuss issues openly. Only 33% of unmarried women knew that they could get pregnant from their first sexual encounter as compared to 46% of men. According to NACO’s research, one-third of reported HIV infections across India are in the 15-29 age group and 50% of all new infections are in this category. As Sujata Rao, Director of NACO has said, “*We are worried about our young people*”.¹

NGO responses

Except for the banned sex education programme developed for use in state-run schools, there have been several NGO-led interventions in India to address the neglected needs of young people. Highlights of three different kinds of innovative programmes are described below. TARSHI,



Sex education class in an Indian school

Talking about Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues is an NGO based in Delhi working on sexuality issues. It has been running a telephone helpline on sexuality since 1996, and has responded to more than 59,000 calls. Most callers say they want to know about basic facts like sexual anatomy and physiology, underlining the need for the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in the school curriculum. TARSHI also runs a resource centre on sexuality and a training programme entitled 'Sexuality Rights Institute'.

Other organizations have been implementing more comprehensive programmes for young people that go beyond just sexuality. The Centre for Development and Population Activities (CEDPA) has been implementing a programme for adolescent girls and boys for many years. The programme, using the Better Life Options and Opportunities Model (BLOOM), focuses on holistic development of the young person that includes all facets of life – friends, work, relationships, family, gender relations, physiology, marriage, parenthood, nutrition, health, hygiene, etc. Implemented with in-school and out-of-school youth in India, the initiative has helped empower thousands of young people and prepared them to make better life choices.

The Association for Promoting Social Action (APSA), a child and youth-centred organization based in the southern city of

Bangalore, Karnataka, ran a mobile phone sex education campaign in mid-2007. The campaign used four statements which were sent out by SMS to 5000 people, creating a cascading effect. The statements were:

- *Sex education is a must!* Silence and taboo help to spread AIDS!
- Do you want (your) children to be free from sexual abuse? *Sex education is a must!*

More than 60% of men say that both boys and girls should be taught about sex and sexual behaviour in school, but less than half of women agree

- A child giving birth to a child (teenage pregnancy): Better not? – *Sex education is a must!*
- You want (your) children to be Happy, Healthy and Responsible? *Sex education is a must!*

The response was positive and helped raise awareness and engage people in a debate and discussion.³

What do adults think?

Several national surveys are shedding light on what adults think about sex education for young people. According to the findings of the 2005-2006 National Family Health Survey, most adults agree that children should be taught moral values in school,

and think that children should learn about changes in their bodies during puberty.⁴ Men and women differ somewhat on whether children and youth should be taught in school about contraception. About half of women and two-thirds of men think girls should learn about contraception in school. Both women and men are slightly less likely to say that contraception should be part of boys' school education. Most men and women believe that information on HIV and AIDS should also be part of the school curriculum: about 80% of men think boys and girls should learn about HIV and AIDS, compared with 63% of women. More than 60% of men say that both boys and girls should be taught about sex and sexual behaviour in school, but slightly less than half of women felt that this was an appropriate topic to be taught to girls and boys in school.

To combat the mounting criticism, the Government of India set up a review committee that reviewed the programme and assessed the situation. Committee members travelled to states to visit schools and talk to teachers, young people, parents and NGOs. Another committee reviewed the training materials – the manuals – assessing their content and cultural sensitivity. As of now, a new toolkit is being developed. The findings from these committees will determine the future of this programme in India.

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1. "Get real" and save Indian youth from AIDS: official. Reuters, May 17, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/healthNews/idUSDEL6968520070517>

2. *Project Youth in India: Situation and Needs Study*, http://www.popcouncil.org/projects/TA_IndiaYouth/SituationNeeds.html

3. More information about these organizations: <http://www.tarshi.net>, <http://www.cedpa.org> and <http://www.apsaindia.org>

4. National Family Health Survey, <http://www.nfhsindia.org>