



Social Acceptance of Live-In Relationships in Rural and Urban India: A Comparative Sociological Study

Dr. Avkash Kumar

avkash1110@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Live-in relationships - cohabitation between unmarried partners without the formal sanction of marriage - have emerged as a visible, if still contested, feature of intimate life in contemporary India. While legal recognition has expanded gradually through judicial pronouncements and statutory provisions, social acceptance remains sharply uneven across the rural-urban divide and across class, caste, gender, and generational lines. This paper undertakes a comparative sociological analysis of how live-in relationships are perceived, negotiated, and sanctioned in rural and urban Indian settings. Drawing on theories of modernization, individualization, family sociology, and gender studies, the paper argues that urban India's acceptance of live-in relationships is best understood as a partial, stratified liberalization embedded within persistent patriarchal structures, while rural India's resistance reflects the continued centrality of kinship, caste endogamy, and community honour in regulating intimacy. The study also examines the role of law, media, economic independence, and migration in reshaping attitudes, and considers the gendered costs borne disproportionately by women who choose to cohabit outside marriage. The paper concludes that social acceptance of live-in relationships in India is not simply a matter of urban modernity versus rural tradition, but a complex, layered process shaped by intersecting structures of power.

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1. Introduction

Marriage has historically occupied a near-sacrosanct position in Indian society, functioning simultaneously as a religious sacrament, an economic contract, a mechanism of caste and community reproduction, and the primary legitimate site for sexual and domestic life. Against this backdrop, the emergence and gradual normalization of live-in relationships - where couples cohabit in a marriage-like arrangement without undergoing formal marital rites or registration - represents a significant, if uneven, sociological shift.

Live-in relationships are not entirely new to the Indian subcontinent; informal cohabitation has existed historically among certain communities and in specific circumstances, often unrecorded or socially invisibilized. What is new is the increasingly public, self-conscious, and rights-based framing of cohabitation, particularly among urban, educated, economically independent young adults, alongside its partial recognition by the Indian judiciary. At the same time, live-in relationships continue to be viewed with suspicion, moral anxiety, or outright hostility in large parts of the country, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where caste councils (khap panchayats), extended family authority, and community surveillance remain powerful regulators of intimate conduct.

This paper asks: how does social acceptance of live-in relationships differ between rural and urban India, and what sociological factors explain this divergence? It further asks whether the urban-rural distinction itself is sufficient to explain the pattern of acceptance and resistance, or whether other variables — gender, caste, class, religion, education, and economic autonomy — cut across and complicate this binary.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews existing literature on cohabitation and family change, both globally and in the Indian context. Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework. Section 4 details the methodology. Section 5 traces the legal context. Sections 6 and 7 present the comparative analysis of urban and rural India respectively. Section 8 examines cross-cutting factors of change. Section 9 discusses the gendered dimensions of acceptance and stigma. Section 10 offers a synthesis and discussion, and Section 11 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Perspectives on Cohabitation

Sociological interest in non-marital cohabitation grew substantially in Western contexts from the 1960s onward, associated with the "Second Demographic Transition" - a shift toward delayed marriage, rising individualism, and diversification of family forms. Anthony Giddens's work on the "transformation of



intimacy" argued that late modernity has produced a shift from institutionally regulated relationships toward negotiated, reflexive partnerships based on mutual disclosure and emotional satisfaction rather than external social or religious sanction. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim similarly theorized the "individualization" of intimate life, wherein traditional scripts of family and marriage lose their taken-for-granted authority and are replaced by biographies that individuals must actively construct.

These frameworks, while useful, were developed primarily with reference to Euro-American societies characterized by weaker kinship control, greater state welfare provision, and more individuated legal-economic subjects. Their applicability to India requires substantial modification, given the continued strength of joint family systems, caste-based social organization, and community-mediated (rather than purely individual) marriage arrangements.

2.2 Family and Marriage in Indian Sociology

Classical Indian sociology, from figures such as I.P. Desai and Patricia Uberoi, has long emphasized that the Indian family cannot be understood through a simple traditional-to-modern linear framework. Uberoi's work on family, kinship, and marriage in India highlights how the family remains a key site for the reproduction of caste hierarchy through the practice of endogamy, even as individual family forms diversify. Sociologists such as Leela Dube have shown how women's sexuality has historically been treated as family and community property, tightly regulated through marriage, to preserve lineage purity and caste boundaries.

This literature helps explain why live-in relationships are read, in much of India, not merely as private lifestyle choices but as potential threats to family honour (izzat) and caste order -a reading that is far less salient in individualized Western contexts.

2.3 Emerging Indian Scholarship on Live-in Relationships

More recent Indian scholarship has begun to address cohabitation directly, often through legal-sociological analysis prompted by landmark court judgments. Scholars have noted a distinct urban, middle-class, and often upper-caste character to the public visibility of live-in relationships, with media representations skewing toward metropolitan professionals. Studies on rural India, by contrast, tend to approach the subject indirectly, through research on honour killings, khap panchayat interventions, and inter-caste or inter-religious relationships, which frequently attract far more violent community responses than urban cohabitation does.



There remains a relative paucity of large-scale, comparative empirical survey data directly measuring rural-urban attitudinal differences toward live-in relationships specifically, as opposed to premarital sex or love marriage more broadly. This paper's analysis is therefore necessarily synthetic, drawing on adjacent bodies of survey research (such as those on marriage attitudes, gender norms, and family values), legal case material, and qualitative/ethnographic accounts, rather than a single dedicated national dataset.

2.4 Gender and Sexuality Studies

Feminist scholars in India, including Nivedita Menon and Flavia Agnes, have examined how the Indian legal and social system regulates female sexuality and autonomy far more stringently than male sexuality, a pattern that reproduces itself in the differential social costs borne by women who enter live-in relationships. This literature is essential for understanding why "acceptance" of live-in relationships cannot be treated as a single undifferentiated social attitude, but must be disaggregated by gender.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theoretical lenses. Modernization theory provides a starting point, suggesting that urbanization, industrialization, education, and exposure to media erode traditional normative structures and expand the range of legitimate lifestyle choices. This helps explain the greater visibility and tolerance of live-in relationships in Indian cities.

However, modernization theory alone is insufficient, because it tends to assume a linear, convergent trajectory toward Western-style individualism. India instead demonstrates what sociologists have called "conjunctural" or "selective" modernity- a pattern in which economic modernization proceeds alongside the persistence, and sometimes intensification, of caste and patriarchal control over marriage and sexuality. This framework helps explain why even highly educated, urban, economically successful Indians often face intense family pressure regarding marital choices, and why khap panchayats have, if anything, become more assertive in some regions even as urban India liberalizes.

Finally, the study draws on feminist standpoint theory and the concept of the patriarchal bargain, which holds that women's negotiation of autonomy occurs within, rather than outside, structures of gendered constraint. This lens is critical for understanding why women's acceptance of and access to live-in relationships is qualitatively different from men's, and why "acceptance" at the level of law or urban middle-class discourse does not straightforwardly translate into safety, respectability, or lived social acceptance for women who cohabit.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, comparative-synthetic methodology, appropriate for a topic where large-scale, directly comparable rural-urban survey data specific to live-in relationships is limited. The analysis draws on four types of secondary material:

1. Legal-judicial sources: Landmark Supreme Court and High Court judgments addressing live-in relationships, domestic violence protections, and related matters, which both reflect and shape social norms.
2. Existing survey and attitudinal research on marriage, premarital relationships, and gender norms in India, used as proxy indicators where direct live-in relationship data is unavailable.
3. Ethnographic and journalistic case material documenting rural community responses (including khap panchayat interventions) and urban lived experiences of cohabiting couples.
4. Sociological and feminist scholarship on Indian family systems, caste endogamy, and gendered sexuality.

The comparative method treats "rural" and "urban" not as fixed, homogeneous categories but as ideal-typical poles on a continuum, recognizing significant internal variation (e.g., metropolitan versus small-town urban India; economically diverse and caste-diverse rural India) and the growing presence of hybrid, peri-urban spaces. Limitations of this approach include the absence of primary quantitative data collected specifically for this study and the reliance on existing literature, which itself is unevenly distributed — skewed toward urban, English-language, and legal-case-based sources. These limitations are addressed by triangulating multiple types of evidence and by explicitly flagging where claims rest on indicative rather than exhaustive data.

5. Legal and Policy Context

Indian law does not provide a comprehensive, dedicated statute governing live-in relationships, but a body of judicial interpretation has gradually extended limited recognition and protection to cohabiting couples.

The Supreme Court's judgment in *S. Khushboo v. Kanniammal* (2010) held that living together as partners without marriage is not a criminal offence, affirming that consenting adults have a right to cohabit under the constitutional right to life and personal liberty. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 extended protection to women in "relationships in the nature of marriage," a category subsequently interpreted by courts, notably in *D. Velusamy v. D. Patchaiammal* (2010) and *Indra Sarma v. V.K.V. Sarman* (2013), to require that such relationships meet certain conditions -cohabitation for a significant duration,



shared household, and a marriage-like public presentation - before legal protections apply. Courts have also addressed the legitimacy and inheritance rights of children born of live-in relationships, generally extending protections comparable to those of children born in marriage, and have on occasion directed police protection for consenting adult couples facing threats from family members, particularly in inter-caste and inter-religious relationships.

This legal trajectory is significant sociologically because it signals a shift, at the level of the state, from treating marriage as the sole legitimate framework for intimate and domestic life toward a more functional, rights-based approach. However, legal recognition and social acceptance operate on different registers. Judicial protection has often been invoked precisely because informal community and family sanctions - including violence - persist; the law's expansion is in part a response to, rather than a reflection of, existing social consensus. Some state and local-level moves, such as certain police verification advisories for cohabiting tenants, and periodic political or religious commentary against live-in relationships, indicate that state attitudes themselves remain contested rather than uniformly liberal.

6. Live-in Relationships in Urban India

6.1 Visibility and Normalization Among the Urban Middle Class

In large metropolitan cities - Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune, Hyderabad - live-in relationships have become a recognizable, if still minority, lifestyle choice, particularly among educated, professionally employed young adults in their twenties and thirties. Several structural features of urban life facilitate this: the physical and social distance from natal family and community surveillance; the availability of independent rental housing; economic self-sufficiency, particularly for women in salaried employment; anonymity within large, heterogeneous neighbourhoods; and dense exposure to media, popular culture, and peer networks that normalize alternative relationship forms.

Urban professional culture - including workplaces, universities, and increasingly diverse social circles - provides both the practical conditions (housing markets that do not require family involvement, dual incomes) and the discursive resources (a vocabulary of choice, compatibility-testing, and individual autonomy) that make cohabitation thinkable and, for a growing minority, livable.

6.2 The Limits of Urban Acceptance

Nonetheless, urban acceptance should not be overstated or treated as uniform. Several qualifications are necessary.



First, acceptance is strongly stratified by class and education. It is concentrated among the upper and upper-middle class, English-educated professional segment; working-class and lower-middle-class urban populations, who may share physical urban space but retain stronger ties to extended kin, caste community, and neighbourhood-level social monitoring, often display attitudes closer to rural norms.

Second, acceptance is frequently generational and relational rather than absolute. Many urban parents who would not choose cohabitation for themselves, and who might initially react with concern, nonetheless tolerate or quietly accommodate their adult children's arrangements — a pattern of pragmatic, private accommodation rather than public normative endorsement. Visibility in cosmopolitan social circles coexists with continued discretion in front of extended family, neighbours, and landlords, many of whom still informally discourage renting to unmarried couples.

Third, urban acceptance is gendered. Male cohabitation attracts comparatively little social penalty; female cohabitation continues to raise concerns about reputation, marriageability, and family honour even within urban middle-class families, illustrating that urban modernity has not dismantled the underlying sexual double standard, even where it has changed its outward form.

6.3 Live-in Relationships and Urban Life-Course Change

Urban live-in arrangements are often understood by participants themselves not as a rejection of marriage but as a preparatory or testing phase — a means of assessing compatibility before a formal marital commitment, particularly given rising ages at marriage, career-building years, and anxieties about divorce. This "trial marriage" framing is itself sociologically significant: it suggests that Indian urban cohabitation frequently operates within, rather than against, the broader normative horizon of eventual marriage, rather than replacing it as a permanent alternative family form, as is more common in some Western contexts.

7. Live-in Relationships in Rural India

7.1 The Continued Centrality of Kinship and Caste

In rural India, marriage remains deeply embedded in kinship networks, caste endogamy, and land- or lineage-based property considerations. Marriages are frequently arranged, negotiated between families rather than individuals, and understood as alliances between kin groups rather than purely personal unions. Within this structure, an unmarried couple cohabiting outside marriage - and particularly outside caste or community-sanctioned unions - represents a direct challenge to the mechanisms through which family status, caste purity, and property inheritance are maintained.



Consequently, rural social response to live-in arrangements, where they become known, tends to range from strong disapproval and social ostracism to, in extreme cases, violent community sanction. Institutions such as khap panchayats (informal caste councils, particularly prominent in parts of North India) have in some documented cases intervened forcibly against couples - including formally married inter-caste couples — indicating that even legally sanctioned unions that violate caste or gotra norms can attract severe sanction; unmarried cohabitation is generally at even greater risk of hostile community response.

7.2 Surveillance, Visibility, and the Absence of Anonymity

Rural social structure differs from urban structure in a sociologically crucial respect: the near-total absence of anonymity. In villages and small rural communities, household composition, comings and goings, and relationships are generally known to the wider community. There is little of the urban infrastructure-independent rental housing markets, anonymous neighbourhoods, distance from extended kin - that enables urban cohabitation to remain socially invisible or discreet. This structural absence of privacy is arguably as important as normative conservatism itself in explaining the rarity of openly acknowledged rural live-in relationships; even individuals who might personally desire such an arrangement typically lack the practical means to pursue it without immediate detection and consequence.

7.3 Economic Dependency and Limited Exit Options

Rural women, in particular, often have more limited independent economic means, land ownership, or employment outside the agricultural or household economy, which constrains their ability to establish an independent household outside marriage or family structures. Where women in rural India have entered informal cohabiting unions — often documented in the context of second marriages, widow remarriage, or unions across caste lines — they frequently face significantly greater economic precarity and social vulnerability than urban women in comparable arrangements, given weaker access to independent income, legal literacy, and institutional support systems.

7.4 Signs of Gradual Change

It would be inaccurate to characterize rural India as entirely static. Migration for work, exposure to television and, increasingly, smartphone-based social media and streaming content, expanding female education, and government schemes promoting girls' schooling and delayed marriage have begun to erode some traditional certainties, particularly among younger rural cohorts. Studies of rural youth attitudes toward "love marriage" versus arranged marriage show generational softening in some regions, even where actual behaviour continues to be constrained by family and community authority. However, this attitudinal



change appears to be occurring more around choice within marriage (self-selected spouses, inter-caste love marriages) than around cohabitation outside marriage as such, which remains a considerably more marginal and higher-risk practice in most rural contexts.

8. Cross-Cutting Factors Shaping Acceptance

While the rural-urban distinction captures an important structural difference, several factors cut across this binary and shape variation within both settings.

Education, particularly women's education, is consistently associated with more liberal attitudes toward premarital relationships and delayed or non-traditional marriage patterns, in both rural and urban contexts, though its effects are mediated by family control over daughters' choices even after schooling.

Economic independence- the ability to earn, rent housing, and sustain oneself without family financial support - is a critical enabling condition for cohabitation, explaining why urban salaried employment (especially for women) correlates strongly with the practical feasibility of live-in arrangements, independent of attitudinal change alone.

Media and digital exposure, including television serials, films, and social media, have increasingly diffused urban cohabitation narratives into rural and small-town consciousness, contributing to greater awareness even where actual acceptance lags. This exposure operates as an "attitude leading behaviour" mechanism: rural audiences may become familiar with and less shocked by the concept of live-in relationships as portrayed in media, without this translating into local tolerance for the practice among neighbours and kin.

Caste and religion intersect with the rural-urban divide in complex ways. Inter-caste and inter-religious relationships -whether formalized as marriage or informal as cohabitation - attract disproportionate hostility regardless of geography, though the urban setting offers more practical protection through anonymity, police access, and legal recourse (including specific "protection of couples" orders that courts have issued), which are far less accessible to rural couples.

Migration - both rural-to-urban labour migration and international migration - has produced a growing population of individuals living outside direct family and community supervision, some of whom enter cohabiting relationships while working away from their native villages or towns, an underexplored dimension of change that does not fit neatly into either the "urban" or "rural" category, since the individuals' attitudes were shaped rurally even as their practices are enabled urbanly.



9. Gendered Dimensions of Stigma and Acceptance

No comparative analysis of live-in relationships in India is complete without close attention to gender, since the social costs and benefits of cohabitation are not evenly distributed between men and women.

Across both rural and urban settings, women who enter live-in relationships face disproportionately greater risks to reputation, future marriageability, personal safety, and family relations compared to their male partners. This asymmetry reflects the broader pattern, documented extensively in Indian feminist sociology, whereby female sexuality is treated as a matter of family and community concern in a way that male sexuality generally is not. A man's participation in a live-in relationship is frequently minimized, overlooked, or even quietly regarded as unremarkable within his own family network, while a woman's participation in the same relationship may be treated as a serious breach of familial honour.

This asymmetry has practical legal and safety implications. Domestic violence protections extended to women in live-in relationships, discussed in Section 5, exist precisely because women in such relationships are recognized as being at heightened risk of abandonment, economic exploitation, and violence, with fewer social and institutional supports than married women possess. Cases of women being abandoned by partners after a live-in relationship, with limited legal recourse regarding property or maintenance compared to divorced wives, have been a recurring theme in Indian family law jurisprudence, prompting incremental judicial efforts to extend protections without a comprehensive dedicated cohabitation statute.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to portray women in live-in relationships purely as vulnerable subjects. Urban, economically independent women increasingly describe cohabitation as an assertion of autonomy, a rejection of the perceived constraints of arranged marriage, and a deliberate choice enabling relational and sexual self-determination. The tension between vulnerability and agency is itself a central and productive theme within feminist analyses of live-in relationships in India, cautioning against both moral panic narratives that treat cohabiting women solely as victims and celebratory narratives that treat cohabitation as unambiguous liberation without acknowledging its structural risks.

10. Discussion: Beyond a Simple Urban-Rural Binary

The evidence surveyed in this paper suggests that while the urban-rural distinction remains sociologically meaningful - urban India does display substantially greater visibility, practical feasibility, and discursive tolerance of live-in relationships than rural India - this binary risks oversimplification if treated as the sole or primary explanatory variable.



Several qualifications emerge from the analysis. First, "urban acceptance" is itself stratified by class, caste, and gender, such that a working-class urban neighbourhood may in practice resemble rural social dynamics more closely than it resembles an upper-middle-class metropolitan enclave. Second, "rural resistance" is not monolithic; younger, more educated rural cohorts, especially those exposed to migration and media, show incremental attitudinal shifts even where behavioural change lags. Third, the structural conditions enabling cohabitation - independent housing, anonymity, economic self-sufficiency - may matter as much as, or more than, attitudinal liberalism per se; a rural individual who attitudinally accepts cohabitation may still be practically unable to pursue it, while an urban individual with residual conservative attitudes may cohabit simply because the infrastructure and anonymity make it feasible and low-cost to do so.

This suggests that "social acceptance" of live-in relationships in India should be understood not as a single attitudinal variable, but as the product of at least three partially independent dimensions: (a) normative attitudes (is cohabitation viewed as morally or socially acceptable), (b) practical feasibility (can individuals realistically access housing, income, and anonymity to cohabit), and (c) enforcement capacity (does the surrounding family/community/caste structure have the practical power to detect and sanction cohabitation). Urban India scores moderately-to-highly on feasibility and enforcement-avoidance even where normative attitudes remain mixed; rural India scores low on feasibility and high on enforcement capacity even where normative attitudes are beginning to shift among younger cohorts. This three-dimensional framework offers a more precise account of the observed rural-urban divergence than a simple "traditional versus modern" narrative, and helps explain why legal liberalization at the national level has not produced uniform social change across the country.

The gendered analysis further complicates any simple modernization narrative: the persistence of a sexual double standard even within ostensibly liberal urban milieus indicates that increased tolerance of live-in relationships as a general social phenomenon has not been accompanied by an equivalent transformation of the underlying gender order that assigns differential reputational risk to men and women.

11. Conclusion

Live-in relationships occupy an increasingly visible but still deeply contested place in Indian social life. This comparative analysis has shown that urban India, particularly its educated, economically independent, professional segments, has moved toward a qualified normalization of cohabitation, enabled by anonymity, independent housing markets, media exposure, and legal recognition, even as full normative consensus and gender parity remain elusive. Rural India, by contrast, continues to regulate intimate and marital life primarily through kinship, caste endogamy, and community surveillance, with live-in relationships



remaining rare, high-risk, and in some documented instances subject to severe social and even violent sanction, notwithstanding gradual generational and media-driven attitudinal shifts.

The paper has argued that the rural-urban divide, while real and significant, should not be treated as a simple traditional-modern dichotomy. Acceptance of live-in relationships is better understood as the outcome of intersecting structural conditions - class, caste, education, economic independence, gender, and the practical availability of anonymity and independent housing -that operate differently, and sometimes cross-cuttingly, across both rural and urban India. Gender remains a particularly persistent axis of differentiation, with women across both settings bearing disproportionate reputational, economic, and safety risks associated with cohabitation, a pattern that legal reform has begun, but not completed, the work of addressing.

Future research would benefit from dedicated, large-scale comparative survey data specifically measuring attitudes and practices around live-in relationships (as distinct from premarital sex or love marriage more broadly) across rural and urban India, disaggregated by caste, class, religion, and gender, in order to test and refine the three-dimensional framework - normative attitude, practical feasibility, and enforcement capacity - proposed in this paper. As India continues to urbanize, and as migration, education, and digital connectivity further reshape the conditions of intimate life, the sociological study of live-in relationships offers a valuable window into the broader, uneven, and contested transformation of family, gender, and kinship in contemporary Indian society.

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