

# **“Characterless?” — Why Indian Society Shames Love Before Marriage**

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“Love isn't shameful. Judging it is.”

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# Preface

This document is not just a reflection, its a revolution. Written for every teen who was ever silenced for simply feeling love, it stands as a beacon of hope in a society that often misjudges the hearts truest expressions. We at DearTeenIndia extend a warm welcome to you readers, dreamers, and lovers alike inviting you to journey with us through the pages that follow. These words are born from the whispers of countless young voices stifled by the harsh label of “characterless,” a term that has unjustly shadowed the innocence of teenage romance and the courage of youthful bonds.

Our mission is clear: to challenge the stigma that binds love to outdated norms and to ignite a movement for change. This is not merely an academic exercise but a passionate plea to rethink how we perceive relationships whether they bloom in the tender years of teenagehood or evolve later in life. We draw inspiration from the silenced stories of students in rural villages and urban campuses alike, from the quiet struggles of those judged for holding hands to the resilient spirits who dare to love against all odds. Every page is a step toward breaking the chains of prejudice, offering a space where love is seen as a strength, not a failing.

As you turn these pages, know that this work is a promise a promise to amplify the voices of the youth, to foster understanding between generations, and to build a future where love knows no shame. Together, let us redefine what it means to feel, to connect, and to grow. This revolution begins with you, and we are honored to walk this path alongside you, turning silence into strength and judgment into empathy.

# Abstract

In Indian society, young people who express romantic feelings or engage in relationships, particularly during their school or college years, are frequently labeled “characterless.” This stigma arises from a complex interplay of historical legacies, cultural norms, patriarchal structures, religious influences, and institutional practices that misjudge love as a moral failing. This thesis examines the multifaceted reasons behind this label, its psychological and societal impacts, and the evolving attitudes among younger generations. Through historical analysis, cultural critique, case studies, and intersectional perspectives, it explores why love before marriage is stigmatized and proposes actionable pathways for societal change. The document argues that the “characterless” label reflects outdated biases rather than the worth of individuals, advocating for empathy, education, and reform to foster a more inclusive future.

# 1 Introduction

In India, romantic relationships among young people, especially students in schools and colleges, are often met with disapproval and harsh labels such as “characterless,” “immoral,” or “distracted.” This judgment reflects not the individual’s moral worth but deeply entrenched societal norms that prioritize tradition, family honor, and conformity over personal emotions. Why does Indian society stigmatize young love so intensely? What historical, cultural, psychological, and institutional factors perpetuate this label, and how do they impact the youth? This thesis delves into these questions, combining historical context, cultural analysis, relatable case studies, and intersectional perspectives to unpack the stigma and propose a path toward empathy and acceptance.

## 2 Historical Roots of the Stigma

India's relationship with love has evolved dramatically over time. Ancient traditions, such as the *Kama Sutra* (circa 3rd century CE) and Tamil Sangam poetry, celebrated love as a multifaceted emotion encompassing passion, companionship, and spirituality. Texts like *Tirukkural* emphasized love's role in personal and social harmony. A notable example is the divine love between Lord Krishna and Radha, which began in their youth in Vrindavan. Their relationship, as depicted in the *\*Bhagavata Purana\** and devotional poetry like Jayadeva's *\*Gita Govinda\**, is revered as a sacred bond, symbolizing spiritual union and emotional depth, despite their young age. This acceptance of youthful love contrasts sharply with later shifts.

However, Mughal and British colonial influences introduced restrictive norms. The British, guided by Victorian morality, imposed strict codes of conduct that equated public affection with indecency, reshaping social attitudes. For example, colonial-era laws like the Indian Penal Code (1860) indirectly reinforced familial control over relationships to maintain social order. By the 19th century, arranged marriages became the dominant model, particularly among upper castes and urban elites, to preserve caste purity, property, and family honor. Love outside this framework was seen as a threat, often associated with elopement or scandal. Post-independence, while India embraced modernity in education and economy, conservative attitudes toward love

persisted, reinforced by community surveillance and the “log kya kahenge” (what will people say) mindset. This historical legacy continues to frame romantic relationships before marriage as rebellious or immoral, particularly for young people.

## 2.1 Divine Love vs. Modern Stigma

The Krishna-Radha narrative offers a counterpoint to the modern stigma. Their youthful love, celebrated during festivals like Holi and Janmashtami, was not judged but exalted as divine. This historical acceptance suggests that the current “characterless” label is a cultural construct, shaped by colonial and patriarchal influences rather than an inherent moral failing.

## 3 Cultural and Social Conditioning

Indian society's disapproval of young love is rooted in cultural norms that prioritize collective identity over individual desires. The “log kya kahenge” mindset reflects a pervasive fear of societal judgment, where personal choices are scrutinized through the lens of family honor and community reputation. Key cultural factors include:

- **Expectation of Modesty and Duty:** Young people, especially in conservative communities, are expected to focus on education and familial responsibilities. Dating is perceived as a distraction that jeopardizes academic or career success. For instance, parents may view a teenager's relationship as a risk to competitive exam performance.
- **Fear of Social Transgressions:** Relationships are stigmatized due to fears of premarital intimacy, elopement, or unintended pregnancies, which are seen as bringing shame. This fear is heightened in rural areas, where community reputation is paramount.
- **Community Surveillance and Gossip:** In close-knit settings like schools, colleges, or small towns, gossip amplifies scrutiny. A simple interaction, such as a boy and girl studying together, can be misconstrued as a relationship, leading to public shaming.
- **Cultural Festivals and Norms:** Events like Karva Chauth or Raksha Bandhan reinforce traditional roles, indirectly framing romantic love outside marriage as deviant. In con-

trast, festivals like Holi, which historically celebrated playful romance, are now sanitized in many communities.

These norms create a culture of fear, where young people suppress their emotions to avoid being labeled “characterless,” a term that falsely equates love with moral deficiency.

## 4 Gender Bias and Patriarchal Norms

The “characterless” label is disproportionately applied to women, reflecting patriarchal norms that tie a woman's worth to her perceived purity. Key aspects include:

- **Double Standards:** A boy who dates may be teased as a “flirt,” while a girl risks being labeled “characterless” or “shameless.” For example, a male student seen with a female friend may face light-hearted ribbing, but a female student risks slut-shaming or reputational damage.
- **Patriarchal Control:** Women are expected to uphold family honor through modesty and compliance, while men enjoy greater freedom. This stems from a view that women's behavior defines familial prestige, a norm rooted in patriarchal traditions like dowry or arranged marriages.
- **Intersectional Gender Dynamics:** Women from marginalized communities face even harsher judgment, as their actions are seen as reflecting on their community's social standing.

These disparities erode women's confidence, foster fear of ostracism, and limit their autonomy, perpetuating inequality in personal freedom.

## 5 Religious Influences on Stigma

Religious beliefs significantly shape attitudes toward love in India. Many traditions emphasize duty, chastity, and familial harmony, often framing premarital love as a violation of moral codes, yet historical examples like Krishna and Radha challenge this narrative:

- **Hinduism:** Texts like the *Manusmriti*, though not universally followed, historically prescribed strict roles for women, emphasizing chastity before marriage. Modern conservative interpretations reinforce these views, labeling love as contrary to dharma. However, the Krishna-Radha love story, celebrated as divine despite their youth, suggests a historical acceptance of youthful love when framed as spiritual.
- **Islam:** In some Indian Muslim communities, cultural practices (distinct from religious doctrine) emphasize early marriage and gender segregation, viewing premarital relationships as dishonorable.
- **Other Faiths:** Sikh and Christian communities also face similar pressures, with community leaders often discouraging relationships to maintain social cohesion.

While religious texts often celebrate love, their cultural interpretations prioritize control, amplifying the “characterless” stigma and overshadowing divine precedents like Krishna-Radha.

## 6 Psychological and Societal Impacts

Labeling young love as “characterless” has profound impacts, grounded in psychological theories like social identity theory, which suggests individuals derive self-esteem from group approval. Key effects include:

- **Psychological Trauma:** Constant judgment leads to internalized shame, anxiety, and lowered self-esteem. Young people may question their worth, fearing they've failed societal expectations.
- **Social Isolation:** Fear of being labeled discourages social engagement, leading to loneliness. Students may avoid mixed-gender events to escape scrutiny.
- **Stifled Emotional Growth:** In repressive environments, relationships provide a vital space for emotional expression. Stigmatizing them deprives youth of healthy outlets, hindering emotional maturity.
- **Societal Reinforcement of Control:** The “characterless” label reinforces patriarchal and

hierarchical structures, discouraging individuality and perpetuating conformity.

These impacts highlight the need to reframe love as a natural aspect of human development rather than a moral failing.

## 7 Campus Culture and Societal Disconnect

Modern Indian campuses, particularly at institutions like IITs, IIMs, and Delhi University, are becoming progressive spaces. Events like IIT Bombay's Mood Indigo or Delhi University's Crossroads fest promote gender interaction through cultural activities, fostering healthy relationships. However, external forces—parents, relatives, or community elders—often view these activities with suspicion, labeling students as “shameless” or “characterless.” This creates:

- **Emotional Conflict:** Students navigate a divide between liberal campus environments and conservative family expectations, leading to stress and identity conflicts.
- **Misjudgment of Intent:** Respectful relationships or friendships are misconstrued as immoral, ignoring their role in personal growth.

### Case Studies:

- **Urban Context:** At a Delhi college, a female student faced rumors after being seen with a male classmate at a fest. Despite their platonic friendship, her community labeled her “characterless,” causing social withdrawal and academic stress.
- **Rural Context:** In a small-town college in Uttar Pradesh, a couple was publicly shamed after being spotted holding hands. The girl's family restricted her education, fearing further “dishonor,” highlighting rural conservatism.
- **Inter-Caste Scenario:** At an IIT, an inter-caste couple faced backlash from peers and family, with the girl labeled “characterless” for defying caste norms, illustrating intersectional stigma.



## 8 Role of Educational Institutions

Educational institutions play a dual role in perpetuating and challenging stigma:

- **Perpetuating Stigma:** Some schools and colleges enforce strict rules, such as gender segregation or dress codes, implicitly endorsing the idea that interactions lead to immorality. For example, a private school in Rajasthan banned mixed-gender seating, reinforcing stereotypes.
- **Challenging Stigma:** Progressive institutions promote inclusive environments. BITS Pilani offers counseling services and events that normalize healthy relationships, while IIT Bombay's Salsa Night and Prom Night during Mood Indigo foster social bonding and gender interaction. Workshops on emotional literacy can counter stigma, but such initiatives remain rare across most institutions.

Institutions must balance discipline with fostering open, respectful environments to reduce judgment.

## 9 Peer Dynamics and Social Media

Peer dynamics in schools and colleges significantly contribute to the “characterless” label:

- **Bullying and Gossip:** Peers often engage in moral policing, spreading rumors about relationships. For instance, a whispered rumor about a couple in a college canteen can escalate into public shaming.
- **Social Media Trolling:** Platforms like Instagram and X amplify gossip, with viral posts or memes mocking couples. A 2024 X post mocking a college couple for public affection garnered thousands of likes, reinforcing stigma.
- **Positive Peer Influence:** Conversely, peer groups in progressive campuses support relationships, creating safe spaces for expression.

Peer dynamics, amplified by social media, shape how young people navigate love and judgment.

## 10 Intersectionality: Class, Caste, and Region

The “characterless” label is amplified by intersectional factors:

- **Class:** In lower-income communities, economic pressures make families protective, fearing relationships could lead to financial burdens. Urban elites face less stigma due to access to progressive spaces.
- **Caste:** Inter-caste relationships challenge social hierarchies, attracting harsh judgment. Couples crossing caste lines risk being labeled threats to community identity.
- **Region:** Rural areas, with stronger traditional norms, impose harsher judgments than metropolitan cities like Mumbai, where globalized values reduce stigma.

These factors create a complex web of judgment, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups.

## 11 Media Influence: Bollywood and Social Media

Media plays a dual role:

- **Bollywood:** Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) romanticize love but emphasize family approval, framing unapproved love as rebellious. Recent films like *Gehraiyaan* (2022) challenge norms by exploring complex relationships.
- **Social Media:** Platforms amplify progressive voices, with influencers advocating for love and mental health. However, they also enable cyberbullying, where couples face public shaming. For example, a 2023 Instagram reel mocking a college couple went viral, reinforcing the “characterless” stereotype.

Media's mixed messaging complicates the narrative, offering both liberation and judgment.

## 12 Generational Clash and Evolving Mindsets

Generation Z, shaped by globalization and digital connectivity, is redefining love. They prioritize emotional awareness, mental health, and personal freedom, viewing dating as natural.

Influences include:

- **Globalization:** Exposure to Western media normalizes dating.
- **Social Media Advocacy:** Influencers promote open discussions about relationships.
- **Career Independence:** Womens increasing autonomy reduces reliance on familial approval.

Older generations, raised on arranged marriage norms, resist this shift, creating tension.

## 13 Pathways for Change

To dismantle the stigma, society must embrace reform:

- **Education and Awareness:** Schools should integrate sex education and emotional literacy. A Karnataka colleges workshop on healthy relationships reduced peer judgment.
- **Family Dialogue:** Parents should discuss emotions openly, with community programs facilitating understanding.
- **Policy Reforms:** Institutions should adopt inclusive policies, like anti-bullying measures and gender-neutral events.
- **Youth-Led Initiatives:** Student campaigns, like Delhi Universitys anti-shaming drives, can challenge stigma.
- **Media Responsibility:** Bollywood and influencers should promote diverse love stories, countering stereotypes.

## 14 Conclusion

The label “characterless” is a misnomer, rooted in historical legacies, patriarchal norms, and cultural biases that have diverged from the divine acceptance of love exemplified by Lord Krishna and Radha in their youth. Love, in its essence, is never shameful or characterless; it is a natural and profound human emotion that can flourish at any age, whether in the tender years of teenagehood or in the 40s after marriage. Yet, Indian society often casts an unjust and unwarranted judgment on relationships during the formative teenage years or before marriage, branding them with derogatory terms like “characterless,” “shameless,” or “immoral.” Such labels are not only baseless but also misaligned with the historical reverence for youthful love, as seen in the sacred bond of Krishna and Radha, celebrated as a spiritual ideal that transcends societal constraints.

The psychological toll of this stigma manifesting as shame, anxiety, and isolation underscores the urgent need for societal transformation. Relationships among teenagers or individuals before marriage should not be viewed through a lens of suspicion or moral condemnation; rather, they should be recognized as opportunities for emotional growth, companionship, and self-discovery, no less valid than love that blossoms in the 40s after marriage. The divine love of Krishna and Radha serves as a timeless reminder that love at a young age, when nurtured with purity and respect, holds intrinsic value and should not be diminished by societal prejudice.

To forge a compassionate future, India must embrace education, open family dialogue, and inclusive policies to reframe love as a source of strength rather than a moral failing. By challenging outdated norms and fostering empathy, society can empower its youth to express love freely, unburdened by the weight of unjust labels. This shift will not only heal the emotional wounds inflicted by stigma but also cultivate a culture where love, at any age and in any context, is celebrated as a fundamental human right and a pathway to personal fulfillment.