

Male Sexual Debut in Orissa, India: Context, Partners and Differentials

*Young men still need to be reached with information
on unsafe sex and condom promotion*

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First sexual intercourse is a significant event in a man's life, whether or not it happens within the context of marriage. In the wake of the HIV pandemic, sexual initiation before marriage has become a focus of attention. From an intervention point of view, the proportion of young people who are sexually active, especially before they form stable partnerships, is an important area of concern. Early age at sexual debut and the number of pre-marital partners have been shown to be correlated with risk behaviour later in life

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(White and others, 2000). Contextual data on sexual partners and circumstances are needed to understand and assess the risk associated with early sexual experiences, and thereby design appropriate policies and programmes.

Systematic information on sexuality and sexual behaviour in India is scarce. Despite a rapid increase in intervention research on sexual behaviour and health in the second half of the 1990s, most studies covered groups with high risk behaviour, and little is known about what happens in the general population (Nag 1995; Peltó, 1999). An exception is a study of married men in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in which 14.5 per cent of the men were reported to have had sexual intercourse before marriage (Singh and others, 1998). Only a few studies of Indian young people report on their sexual behaviour (Jejeebhoy, 1998).

Drawing on in-depth sexual case histories, this article provides information on the context of young men's first sexual encounters, describing the range of sexual partners. These qualitative findings are supplemented by data from a general population sample giving numerical estimates of premarital sex and age at sexual debut, which allow for comparison.

Methods and data

Of all Indian states, Orissa has the second highest concentration of tribal people: its 62 different scheduled tribes make up 22 per cent of its population. The study area for the research on sexual health and behaviour was limited to the four coastal districts of Orissa with low concentrations of tribal people: Puri, Cuttack, Balasore and Ganjam districts. The distinctly different cultures of the scheduled tribes in Orissa suggest the need for a separate in-depth study in tribal areas.

The strategy adopted for the qualitative data collection broadly followed the guidelines for conducting focused ethnographic studies (Peltó, 1994; Peltó and Peltó, 1997). Data-gathering focused on the need to answer programmatic questions on sexual health and condom promotion interventions. The field-workers were trained in in-depth interviewing, social mapping and various structured interviewing techniques.

In total, 17 *sahi* (localities: colonies, neighbourhoods or hamlets) were studied in depth by a team of four male and two or three female researchers. The average number of days spent in one location varied from seven to ten days, depending on the availability of the informants, and time taken initially to build rapport. Each *sahi* was treated as a separate case and a

detailed study of the various role players in each location was carried out. Data-gathering and analysis took about four months to complete from May to September 1997.

In-depth individual interviews were done with both key informants and case study informants. Key informants were selected for their extensive knowledge of local cultural beliefs and practices, and the conversation focused on local perceptions and behaviours. They were selected during participatory social mapping exercises and other informal group discussions, and guided the interviewers towards men who had experienced sexual ill-health and others who engaged in risky sexual behaviour. This article draws heavily on interviews with these case study informants (42 cases), who were visited several times in order to build up rapport and permit probing into sensitive issues. The conversation focused on their personal lives, to elicit illness episodes and sexual histories.

Fieldworkers took notes during the group and in-depth interviews, which were expanded and written out immediately afterwards. Transcripts of all interviews were coded and analysed with the software package Ethnograph. All names in the quotations presented in this article have been replaced by the fictional name Kanhu.

Following the qualitative fieldwork, a structured survey was undertaken to estimate the extent of sexual risk behaviour and the need for condoms in the general male population. The findings from the qualitative study were used in the design and refinement of the survey instrument, mainly to employ the correct local vocabulary and define coding categories. This survey covered a large population-based random sample of 2,087 single and married men in urban and rural areas of the four coastal districts in Orissa. The ages of the respondents were limited to 18-35 years since international studies of sexual behaviour show that risk behaviour tends to peak before age 30 (Cleland and Ferry, 1995), a finding confirmed in the study area by the qualitative research preceding the survey. Respondents were selected using multi-stage random sampling. In each selected cluster, all houses were mapped and numbered, and 33 selected at random. All men aged 15 or older in the selected households were listed and de facto resident men aged 18-35 were ranked by age. Male field-workers selected the youngest, second youngest, third youngest, and so on, of the eligible males in strict rotation in consecutive households. The selected respondent was asked to consent and invited to a central location outside his home for a private interview. The questionnaire pre-test indicated that a half-hour rapport-building chat was needed before discussing sensitive issues of sexual behaviour. The refusal and non-contact rate was lower than 1 per cent.

Men not living in households may have a different pattern of sexual risk behaviour and had no chance of being sampled by these methods. During completion of the household schedule, interviewers therefore asked about family members currently staying away from home. Of men aged 18 to 35, 6.9 per cent were away from home as students or migrant labourers. As there was no sampling frame, an opportunistic sample of eight college hostels and four migrant-worker camps was selected: 159 single students and 150 migrant labourers (85 married and 65 single) were subsequently interviewed. The article presents some comparative statistics on sexual debut from these separate samples.

The statistical analysis of survey data was done using SPSS software. The data file was weighted according to urban/rural residence and the size of the district, to make it truly representative of the four coastal districts. Since marriage is virtually universal in India, sexual activity among single men is referred to as “premarital sex”.

Results

The socio-demographic characteristics of the single and married men in the sample are presented in [table 1](#). It gives the actual distribution of respondents, and was calculated from the unweighted data. In the weighted sample, 1,033 men (49 per cent) were married and 86 per cent lived in rural areas. Equal-sized samples were selected in urban and rural areas of the four coastal districts and only one man regardless of marital status, was selected randomly in each household. The different distribution of single and married men according to residence and district is thus a result of differences in age at marriage. Urban men and men living in Cuttack marry later, resulting in a higher proportion of single men in these strata. Less educated men marry at younger ages and nearly 20 per cent of married men had received no education compared with 4 per cent of single men. More than half of the single respondents had studied beyond the secondary level. The caste distribution for single and married men was also slightly influenced by age at marriage, which is later among the higher caste. By sampling coastal districts only, very few men from the tribal populations were included, and all men in the “no caste” category are Muslim.

Sexual experience before marriage

In the survey sample, only 8 per cent of men under the age of 25 were married, and among the 30-35-year-olds 7 per cent were single. The median

Table 1. Percentage distribution by marital status, according to selected background characteristics, among men in Orissa

Background characteristics	Married men	Single men	Total
Residence			
Urban	40.7	57.9	50.0
Rural	59.3	42.1	50.0
District			
Puri	25.6	24.2	24.8
Ganjam	29.3	21.1	24.9
Balasore	25.7	24.6	25.1
Cuttack	19.4	30.1	25.2
Education			
None	19.9	3.8	11.2
Primary/non-formal	26.9	9.2	17.3
Secondary	36.1	33.5	34.7
Higher	17.0	53.5	36.8
Caste			
Upper caste	21.8	28.9	25.6
Other backward caste	48.5	50.4	49.5
Scheduled caste	26.2	18.3	21.9
Scheduled tribe	1.9	1.1	1.4
None (Muslim)	1.6	1.3	1.4
Age (years)			
18-19	0.1	22.9	12.4
20-24	7.2	49.5	30.1
25-29	31.3	22.5	26.5
30- 35	61.4	5.1	31.0
Number	958	1,129	2,087

age at marriage was 26, but was higher in urban areas (27.8) than in rural areas (25.1). Despite this late age at marriage, the survey data showed that only about a quarter of the men in Orissa had had premarital heterosexual intercourse. Twenty-two per cent of the single men reported at least one sexual partner and 27 per cent of the married man had had sex before marriage. The difference in these levels for married and single men can be attributed to censoring; more of these single men will have sex before they marry. Life table analysis of loss of virginity enables the comparison of age patterns of sexual initiation as shown in [table 2](#). The probabilities of surviving in the virgin state by each age are very similar for both single men and married men who reported premarital sex, thus supporting the assertion that the difference in the proportion reporting premarital sex was because of censoring and not under-reporting of sexual activity by single men.

Table 2. Indications of age at sexual debut among single and married men in Orissa who reported premarital sex

Indications	Median age at sexual debut	Proportion of men still virgins at exact age (years)				Number
		18	20	25	30	
Sexually active single men	18.6	60	35	6	1	240
Married men reporting premarital sex	18.7	62	38	7	1	291

Since urban men marry later, 36.1 per cent had had sex before marriage compared with 26.3 per cent of the rural men; 17 per cent of the student sample reported premarital sexual intercourse.

First partner and circumstances of first intercourse

The young men's first sexual experiences took place with three main categories of partner: married women, single women and sex workers. Among married men who reported premarital sex, 6 per cent reported that their first sexual intercourse was with the girlfriend who later became their wife (8.3 per cent in urban areas and 5.6 per cent in rural areas). Nearly three quarters of the men who had sex before marriage reported girlfriends or acquaintances as their first partner, and 16 per cent reported relatives. A small proportion of men (4 per cent) reported sexual initiation with a so-called *bhauja*; this is the Oriya term for sister-in-law. Indian culture sanctions close interaction between young men and their *bhaujas*. This may sometimes include sexually explicit conversation and sexual relations are often mentioned. The qualitative study had shown that probing about sexual relations with the wife of "own" brothers was too sensitive for the survey setting and the coding category was broadened to "*bhaujas* in the neighbourhood". This broader term thus included the wives of older men in the community. Initiation with these *bhaujas* was more frequent for urban men (8 per cent) than rural men (3 per cent).

Among the 42 case study interviews, several instances of sex with married women in the neighbourhood were reported. For example, a man from a slum in Cuttack had had sex with five married women. He described how he became familiar with the women and other family members by shopping for them and doing various little jobs in their houses, enabling him to gain access to their homes without suspicion. The following extract relates how another man from Cuttack was taken along by his friend to the house of a married woman:

“... One day Kanhu was sitting in front of his house when one of his friends came to him and told him that there is a woman with whom he had sex and if he is willing they can go to her since her husband is not at home. Around 4 p.m., both of them went to that woman’s house where she was alone.... Then his friend told her about the purpose of their visit. Initially she was not willing because there were two. But his friend convinced her and she agreed. After that they went to her bedroom and they had sex. It was his first sexual experience.... after that he had sex with the same woman three times....”

First sexual intercourse in the company of another man was not unusual. First sex with sex workers often happened on the invitation or encouragement of a friend or a group of friends. Though the qualitative data include several instances of first sex with a sex worker, the survey shows that relatively few men in the general population (7 per cent of those who had sex before marriage, and thus less than 2 per cent of all men) shared that experience. It was higher for urban men, and married men reported more sex workers as first partners than single men (9 per cent compared with 5 per cent). It is possible that perceptions of who gets labelled as a sex worker may change, though the difference may also be explained by the fact that men who start their sex life late are more likely to have sex workers as first partners. Five per cent of the men who had sex before the age of 20 reported a sex worker as their first partner, compared with 10 and 12 per cent among those who had their first sexual encounter at ages 20-24 years and over 25 years respectively.

In all, 4 per cent of the married men reported that they were with a friend when they first had sex and 3 per cent of them reported the company of a group of friends. However, among those whose first partner was a sex worker (n = 25), nearly half were accompanied by one or more friends when it happened. Less than 10 per cent of the men were under the influence of alcohol during their first sexual experience, although this indicator was as high as 40 per cent for first encounters with sex workers.

First sex most frequently took place with girlfriends or other single young women, and young people do seem to get chances to meet. The interviews reflected different degrees of courting and emotional involvement with the woman. A man in Puri town recounted the gradual development of his affection for a girlfriend, which culminated in the young people having sex in her house:

“... Four to five years back I had sex for the first time. There was a girl who is the sister of my friend (she is married now). I used to go to my friend’s house frequently. We started liking each other and gradually a relationship developed between us. I went approximately 20 to 30 times to her house. Then we started going out together to the beach. In the evenings we would sit on the beach and kiss each other. One day when nobody was there in the house, her sister had gone for tuition, her father had gone to work and her grandmother was also not present, she called me to her house. I asked her for sex and she agreed. I went to her at least 22 to 23 times to have sex after that day....”

This man further explained that he had used a condom on this occasion as “... I was prepared, since I had expected to have sex with her, I had taken a condom in my trousers....”. In this case, both partners seemed to have had the same intention. Not all instances depict this mutuality (nor the advance planning), and some young men resorted to emotional blackmail to get to the sexual act.

The sexual case histories suggest that women and girls play a surprisingly active role in initiating sexual contact. Some girls were known to have several sexual partners, and are referred to as bad girls or *kharap jhea*. But it is not only these “bad” girls who appear to be pursuing the men; ordinary girls are not all averse to losing their virginity with their boyfriends, as was depicted by one of the cases described above. The active role women play was confirmed by the survey data. Excluding first encounters with sex workers, 29 per cent of married men who reported sex before marriage said that they had been approached by the woman. In 38 per cent of the encounters, it had been a mutual initiative and in 33 per cent of the cases it was the man himself who had clearly taken the initiative. For those with the so-called *bhaujas* as first partners, more than half of the encounters (8 out of 14 respondents) were reported to have been initiated by the women.

From the case histories it is clear that these first sexual encounters were usually unplanned and happened on the spur of the moment. Although young people do find chances to meet, the windows of opportunity are often short which makes first intercourse very mechanical and quick. The lack of privacy and the fear of being found out are pressing considerations. Only 5 per cent of first encounters took place in hotels, lodges or brothels; about 44 per cent happened in a public place or open area, and half took place in the home of either partner. Usually this was in the absence of the other family members, although several instances were reported of other family members being present, mostly at night when everyone was asleep.

Table 3. Differentials in timing of sexual debut: life-table median ages and proportions still virgin at specified ages, among men in Orissa

Characteristics	Median age at sexual debut	Proportion of men still virgins by exact age (years)				Number
		18	20	25	30	
Sample						
Main sample	24.5	89	80	47	17	2,087
Student sample	—	88	83	71	—	159
Migrant sample	20.3	75	52	26	6	150
Residence						
Urban	25.7	90	81	56	23	296
Rural	23.6	89	78	39	12	1,791
Education						
Less than secondary	21.6	84	69	23	3	679
Secondary	24.4	88	78	45	15	723
Higher	28.3	95	91	74	37	685
Current age						
18-24	—	89	81	60	—	887
25-29	24.6	91	82	47	18	554
30-35	23.8	88	76	42	14	646

Differentials in age at sexual debut

Table 3 shows differences in the timing of sexual debut, presenting data on life table median ages at sexual initiation, and on the probability of remaining in the virgin state by different ages. Overall, half of the men in coastal Orissa have sex before the age of 24.5 years, but only 11 per cent have sex before the age of 18. Migrant labourers showed earlier sexual debut, but the students sampled at college hostels did not. The median age for the student sample could not be calculated since only 17 per cent reported premarital sex. Life-table estimates show that less than 30 per cent of students have had sex before the age of 25, which is consistent with the 26 per cent of men in the main sample who had higher education and had lost their virginity by the age of 25.

Sexual debut among urban men takes place about two years later than among rural men. There is a strong association between age at first intercourse and educational level, with men studying beyond secondary level starting nearly seven years later than those with no schooling beyond primary level. The differential across cohorts can be interpreted as a change in timing of

sexual debut, which is towards a later rather than an earlier start. This is explained mainly by the trend towards a later age at marriage: in the youngest cohort, life-table probabilities of getting married before the age of 25 are one in three, while the median age at marriage for the 25-29 cohort is 24.6 and 23.8 for the oldest cohort.

A comparison of the median ages in [table 3](#) with those among the subgroups of men who had had premarital sex, as presented in [table 2](#), illustrates how estimates of sexual debut can be biased when they are based only on the sexually active. About three quarters of single men were still virgins, and so are excluded from the estimates in [table 2](#), as are married men who did not report premarital sex. For those married men who reported premarital sex, the average interval between the first sexual experience and marriage was 4.5 years, varying little across different strata. However, for urban men and for those with an education above secondary level, the gap was 5.1 years. Despite this long period between first sex and regular sex within marriage, 56 per cent of the married men who had engaged in premarital sex said they had done so with only one partner, 13 per cent of them reported more than five partners (which is less than 4 per cent of all men).

Discussion

In the coastal districts of Orissa, men start sex late and nearly three quarters of them have their first sexual experience within marriage. A comparison of the data from the qualitative and survey components reveals both agreement and contrast between the two data sources.

Under-reporting of sexual activity before marriage in surveys cannot be ruled out owing to the strong social norms which inhibit the free discussion of sexuality and sexual behaviour in India. However, it is important to note that interviewers were very well trained: all had been involved in the qualitative field work preceding the survey, were de-sensitized and felt relaxed talking about sexual practices, and had put a great deal of effort into building rapport with the respondents before starting the interviews. Even so, some men may have chosen not to reveal that they had partners before marriage. However, in the only other comparable Indian study, among married men in Uttar Pradesh (Singh and others, 1998), only 14.5 per cent reported sexual intercourse before marriage, about half the level found in this study in Orissa. The consistency of age patterns of sexual debut from reports by both married and unmarried respondents (as shown in [table 2](#)) reinforces the validity of the findings.

The household sampling did exclude men who do not live in households and those who were away from home for travel. Away from the family context, men have more opportunity to engage in activities outside social norms, including risky sexual behaviour. Indeed the migrant labourers showed an earlier age at sexual debut. College students start sex later than the general population, though slightly earlier than men with higher education in the main sample. In a study of men in different occupational groups in Maharashtra (Savara and Sridhar, 1994), 19 per cent of the students had experienced sexual intercourse, compared with levels of 26-35 per cent among white and blue collar workers, and migrant workers. The data gathered in this study on the general population are in sharp contrast to observations among groups with high-risk behaviour such as truck drivers (AIMS-Chennai, 1997; Rao and others, 1994).

The relatively low level of sexual activity reported in the survey is not inconsistent with the findings of the qualitative study. The case study informants were purposely selected because they engaged in high-risk behaviour and even though they report multi-partner sex, the encounters they describe were of an unplanned and occasional nature.

The men's first sexual partners can be classified mostly as low risk, consisting mainly of young unmarried women and also married women. Sex workers play a much lesser role in sexual initiation than is commonly believed. It is often assumed that men resort to sex workers for their first sexual encounter, but less than 2 per cent of the men in the study had done so, and less than 4 per cent had had any sexual encounter with sex workers before marriage. However, the higher the educational level and the later the age at debut (and marriage), the more likely it was that first sex was with a commercial sex worker. This finding is consistent with the study in Maharashtra where white collar workers were two to three times more likely to have had first sex with sex workers than were the lower occupational groups (Savara and Sridhar, 1994). Men in all communities were able to identify places where commercial sex could be obtained (not necessarily within their own neighbourhood), although there are only a few towns in Orissa where prostitution is organized (in contrast to the big Indian cities). Apart from the few "red light" areas, pimps and female agents contact sex workers who live in the slums, and these women are usually taken to the client's home, or some public place. Some hostels and lodges also have the reputation for being able to contact and supply sex workers. Key informants often told of women who solicit for sex near bus stands, cinema halls and railway stations.

Seventeen per cent of the students had been initiated into heterosexual sex, but that does not necessarily mean they had been recently sexually "active". In fact, less than 6 per cent reported having had sex in the previous year, compared with 9 per cent of the single men in the main sample. Collumbien and others (2000) give more detail on the most recent encounter, showing that sex among single men is infrequent (on average once a month among the 9 per cent who reported having had sex in the previous year), with 19 per cent of the most recent encounters being protected by condom use. Men whose last partner was a sex worker, reported 40 per cent condom use. Even though the low frequency of sex is encouraging in the context of the prevention of HIV transmission, the fact that most encounters were unplanned events poses challenges for the promotion of consistent condom use. In the main sample, 2 per cent of single men reported anal intercourse with other men, with both the survey and qualitative study pointing to large variations in the prevalence of male-to-male sex, which was higher in Puri district.

The relatively high levels of proactive sexual participation by women contrasts with varying degrees of coercion and force used by men in order to obtain sex (Collumbien and others, 2000). The late start of sexual intercourse for most Oriya men, with 47 per cent not having had sex before the age of 25, suggests a widespread tension caused by suppressed sexuality, which may be expressed in sexual coercion. The late sexual debut may equally explain the high levels of anxiety expressed in concerns about nocturnal emissions and involuntary semen loss in this population (Collumbien and others, forthcoming; Collumbien and Hawkes, 2000).

These data from the coastal districts in Orissa cannot be indiscriminately generalized to other states in India (or even to other districts within Orissa). Substantial variations in sexual behaviour patterns are clearly suggested by recent statistics on HIV infection. Whereas some states detected their first HIV infection only in the last few years, 2 per cent of pregnant women tested HIV-positive at antenatal clinics in urban populations of West and South India (UNAIDS/WHO, 1998). The findings of this study in Orissa should therefore not be used to distract attention from campaigns encouraging safer sex. They can be used to inform the design of programmes for the prevention of sexually transmitted infections so that they run with maximum effectiveness. In low HIV settings such as Orissa, this means that control efforts should be directed to the core group of high transmitters (Shelton, 1999). Efforts in Orissa should be concentrated on sex workers and their clients, and areas where male-to-male sex is more prevalent. Young men still need to be reached with information on

unsafe sex and condom promotion, but this should be done in the broader context of addressing all their perceived sexual health concerns rather than being focused on the threat of HIV transmission.

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