

## **HIV/AIDS AWARENESS: A SCHEDULED CASTE-BASED STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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### **Abstract**

The epidemic disease AIDS is stepping into its fourth decade has become a pandemic/ deadly disease that threatens not only India but the world population. The last two decades witnessed a global initiative to extend the outreach venture of spreading awareness of AIDS to each and every human being who was yet outside the fold of education. The paper tries to enhance HIV/ AIDS awareness among the university students and an attempt has been made to know their information and attitude towards HIV/AIDS, which has threatened humanity globally. Though the study is based on a small sample size, results have great scope for policy implications. As the various roles performed by mass media and educational institutions can create a great awareness and prevention of the disease.

*Open your eyes before AIDS closes them..*

### **Introduction**

No other word engenders as much fear, horror, despair and utter helplessness as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). 'This epidemic stepping into its fourth decade has become a pandemic/ deadly disease that threatens not only India but the world population. Statistics tell their own distasteful tale - over 40 million deaths are forecasted in this millennium. The first case of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) infection in India was detected in 1986 in Chennai. The last two decades witnessed a global initiative to extend the outreach venture of spreading awareness of AIDS to each and every human being who was yet outside the fold of education. This study is meant to enhance HIV/ AIDS awareness in the country - especially youth - and the various roles performed by mass media and educational institutions to create awareness and prevention of the disease.

### **Background of HIV & AIDS**

HIV is a tiny virus, thousand times smaller than the thickness of human hair and resembles a rolled up porcupine or a sunflower in full bloom. It infects human cells and uses the energy and nutrients provided by those cells to grow and multiply. It is different from other viruses because the immune system can never fully get rid of it. The virus hides in the immune system (white blood cells) and other cells causing significant damage to the system itself, leaving it open to various opportunistic infections and dangerous illnesses. The HIV infection thus leads to AIDS. Its hallmark is the progressive loss of a specific type of immune cell called 'T-helper' or 'CD4' cells. When the CD4 count falls below 200, the person is said to develop AIDS which usually occurs 6-8 years after the HIV infection.

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### **Research Methodology**

A study was carried out among Scheduled Caste students of Rani Channamma University, Belgaum, Karnataka State, India to assess their information related to HIV/AIDS. A total of 60 (26 Boys and 34 girls) were interviewed. Data used in the study were derived from two principal sources, primary and secondary. The primary source comprised questionnaire and interview schedule while the secondary source was the university records/data. The study aimed at finding out the awareness among the scheduled caste students, who belong to weaker/ marginalised section (socially, economically and educationally background), an attempt has been made to know their information and attitude towards HIV/AIDS, which has threatened humanity globally.

### **Hypothesis**

Since, scheduled castes belong to the marginalised group in India; it is naturally assumed they are unaware of the deadly HIV/AIDS disease.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- ❖ To analyse the socio-economic variables influencing HIV/AIDS awareness.
- ❖ To examine HIV/AIDS awareness, sources of knowledge and ways to avoid the disease.
- ❖ To verify stigmatizing attitudes towards HIV/AIDS patients.

### **Social Assessment**

Youths are the backbone of the nation. The progress and development of any country very much depends on youths. They are especially vulnerable to infection as they are often not well informed on methods of prevention. Hence, it is very important for younger persons to have access to correct information. Thus, an effort is been made to know the awareness on HIV/ AIDS, ways to avoid the disease and their attitude towards the diseased patients. The facts of the study are as follows:

**Table: 1**                      **Socio- economic Background of the Respondents**

		Male		Female		Total	%
		Total	%	Total	%		
<b>Age Composition</b>	<b>22</b>	06	23.07	18	52.94	24	<b>40.00</b>
	<b>23</b>	09	34.61	07	20.58	16	<b>26.66</b>
	<b>24</b>	07	26.94	06	17.64	13	<b>21.66</b>
	<b>25</b>	04	15.38	03	08.84	07	<b>11.68</b>
<b>Sub- castes</b>	<b>Chalawadi</b>	11	42.30	16	47.05	27	<b>45.00</b>
	<b>Madar</b>	07	26.94	10	29.41	17	<b>28.33</b>
	<b>Samgaar</b>	04	15.38	05	14.70	09	<b>15.00</b>
	<b>Bajantri</b>	02	07.69	02	05.88	04	<b>06.67</b>
	<b>Dasar</b>	02	07.69	01	02.96	03	<b>05.00</b>
	<b>Others</b>	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	<b>00.00</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Unmarried</b>	23	88.47	30	88.23	53	<b>88.33</b>
	<b>Married</b>	03	11.53	04	11.77	07	<b>11.67</b>
<b>Family Unit</b>	<b>Joint Family</b>	14	53.85	12	35.29	26	<b>43.33</b>
	<b>Nuclear Family</b>	12	46.15	22	64.71	34	<b>56.67</b>
<b>Place of Stay</b>	<b>Rural</b>	02	07.69	04	11.77	06	<b>10.00</b>
	<b>Urban</b>	24	92.31	30	88.23	54	<b>90.00</b>
<b>Father's Occupation</b>	<b>Farming</b>	11	42.30	13	38.23	24	<b>40.00</b>
	<b>Business</b>	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	<b>00.00</b>
	<b>Clerical</b>	02	07.69	06	17.64	08	<b>13.33</b>
	<b>Teaching</b>	09	34.63	11	32.35	20	<b>33.34</b>
	<b>Social Sector</b>	04	15.38	04	11.78	08	<b>13.33</b>
<b>Monthly Income of the Father</b>	<b>Less than Rs. 5,000</b>	01	03.84	02	05.88	03	<b>05.00</b>
	<b>Rs. 5,001 - Rs. 10,000</b>	12	46.15	16	47.05	28	<b>46.67</b>
	<b>Rs. 10,001 - Rs. 15,000</b>	10	38.46	11	32.35	21	<b>35.00</b>
	<b>Rs. 15,001 - Rs. 20,000</b>	02	07.71	03	08.84	05	<b>08.33</b>
	<b>Rs. 20,001 - Rs. 25,000</b>	01	03.84	02	05.88	03	<b>05.00</b>
	<b>More than Rs. 25,001</b>	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	<b>00.00</b>

Majority of the respondents (76.01 percent and 55.19) are in the age group of both 22 and 23 respectively. And they are pursuing their education at the right age. There expounds more representation of Chalawadi sub- caste i.e. 45.00 percent of the total respondents. Sub- caste Madar constitutes with 28.33 percent, Samgaar with 15.00 percent. Bajantri and Dasar represent with 06.67 and 05.00 percent respectively. Thus, respondents from Chalawadi sub caste are more in number. The fact reveals that a very high percentage of 88.33 of the respondents are unmarried. This proves that majority have given a high importance to education than social compulsions like early marriage. The nature of family of the respondents, which states that majority of the respondents are constituted with nuclear family (56.67 percent). Thus it can be assumed that majority of the respondents are from urban background living in the nuclear family as compared to joint family. The occupational background of the respondent's father elucidates the fact that most of the respondent's fathers are farmers (40.00 percent) and teachers (33.34 percent). 13.33 percent is constituted with both Clerical and Social Sector. The conclusion can be drawn that more number of the respondent's father are engaged in farming or teaching. The economic background of the respondents family is exhibited in the table 1, which explains the fact that more number of the respondents come from poor background having monthly income between Rs.5,001 – Rs.10,000 (46.67 percent).

**Table: 2 Respondents Knowledge of HIV/AIDS**

	Responses	Male		Female		Total	%
		Total	%	Total	%		
<b>Is HIV/AIDS Contagious?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	10	38.46	14	41.17	24	<b>40.00</b>
	<b>No</b>	11	42.30	17	50.00	28	<b>46.67</b>
	<b>Don't Know</b>	05	19.24	03	08.00	08	<b>13.33</b>
<b>Is HIV/AIDS Curable?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	02	07.69	00	00.00	02	<b>03.33</b>
	<b>No</b>	23	88.46	33	97.05	56	<b>93.34</b>
	<b>Don't Know</b>	01	03.85	01	02.95	02	<b>03.33</b>
<b>Is HIV/AIDS Preventable?</b>	<b>Yes</b>	02	07.69	03	08.82	05	<b>08.33</b>
	<b>No</b>	22	84.62	30	88.23	52	<b>86.67</b>
	<b>Don't Know</b>	02	07.69	01	02.95	03	<b>05.00</b>
<b>Source of Information of HIV/ AIDS</b>	<b>Television</b>	23	88.46	22	64.70	45	<b>75.00</b>
	<b>Radio</b>	06	23.07	07	20.58	13	<b>21.66</b>
	<b>School/ College</b>	16	61.53	14	41.17	30	<b>50.00</b>
	<b>Books</b>	19	73.07	20	58.82	39	<b>65.00</b>
	<b>News Paper/ Magazines</b>	23	88.46	26	76.47	49	<b>81.66</b>
	<b>Peer Group</b>	23	88.46	24	70.58	47	<b>78.33</b>
	<b>Others</b>	04	15.38	11	32.35	15	<b>25.00</b>

HIV/AIDS is considered to be contagious between people. Generally, the infectious agent may be transmitted by saliva, air, cough, fecal-oral route, surfaces, blood, needles, blood transfusions, sexual contact, mother to fetus, etc. Though infectious, it is not a genetic disease and not caused by a defective or abnormal gene. This contagious disease can be transmitted: by sexual conduct between people, from person to person by blood, from the mother to her fetus. Table 2 confirms majority of the respondents had response of 'No' and 'Don't Know' about the Contagious/ infectious nature of the disease, and 40 percent of them opined that, it is transmittable. Thus, this fact reveals that majority of the respondents are not aware about the nature of the disease.

Though HIV/AIDS is treated through numerous medicines, however it is not curable. We cannot currently eradicate or cure HIV. Once you are HIV antibody positive (HIV+) many thousands of immune cells are infected with the virus. Treatments for HIV provide a potential 'clinical cure', meaning that they allow people to live a (near) normal life expectancy with limited consequences from the virus. Table 2 reveals the fact that 93.34 percent of the respondents opined that, HIV/ AIDS is not curable. This fact denotes that the respondents are health-conscious.

Though HIV/AIDS is not curable, there are preventive measures People need factual information; need empowerment to negotiate safe and responsible sexual relationships; gender inequalities must be confronted; and those who choose to have sex need access to condoms. The most reliable ways to avoid becoming infected with or transmitting HIV are: abstain from sexual intercourse (i.e., oral, vaginal, or anal sex), remain in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with an uninfected partner, and abstain from sharing needles and/or syringes for injectable drugs. The severity of HIV/AIDS was well acknowledged, as majority of 86.67 percent of the respondents revealed the truth that the disease cannot be prevented as it is a life-threatening one (Table 2).

The Government of India has been extensively using numerous ways to create awareness to the general public about HIV/ AIDS and its prevention. In table 2, the Sources of information received about HIV/ AIDS reveals the fact that majority of students got their information from News paper (81.66 percent), Peer group (78.33 percent), Television (75.00 percent), Books (65.00 percent), further School/ Teachers (50.00 percent) and very little communication of source from Radio (21.66 percent) and 25.00 percent from other sources. This hints the importance of news paper, friends group, television, books and involvement of teachers in HIV/ AIDS education programmes. The fact proposes that the mass media have succeeded in raising HIV/ AIDS awareness among students in this study.

**Table: 3 Respondents Knowledge on the Modes of Transmission of HIV/AIDS**

Modes	Responses	Male		Female		Total	%
		Total	%	Total	%		
Unprotected Sexual Intercourse	Yes	22	84.62	24	70.60	46	<b>76.68</b>
	No	02	07.69	02	05.88	04	<b>06.66</b>
	Don't Know	02	07.69	08	23.52	10	<b>16.66</b>
Transfusion of Infected Blood	Yes	17	65.38	27	79.41	44	<b>73.33</b>
	No	06	23.07	03	08.83	09	<b>15.00</b>
	Don't Know	03	11.55	04	11.76	07	<b>11.67</b>
HIV Invasive Needles, Syringes, Blades	Yes	12	46.15	18	52.95	30	<b>50.00</b>
	No	06	23.07	16	47.05	22	<b>36.67</b>
	Don't Know	08	30.78	00	00.00	08	<b>13.33</b>
HIV Infected Mother to her Unborn Child	Yes	18	69.24	28	82.36	46	<b>76.66</b>
	No	04	15.38	03	08.82	07	<b>11.67</b>
	Don't Know	04	15.38	03	08.82	07	<b>11.67</b>
All the above	Yes	18	69.24	29	85.29	47	<b>78.34</b>
	No	06	23.07	02	05.88	08	<b>13.33</b>
	Don't Know	02	07.69	03	08.83	05	<b>08.33</b>

With regards to the knowledge about the mode of transmission of the virus, the table 3 reflects that majority (76.68 percent) of the respondents knew that unprotected sexual intercourse is one of the modes of transmission. Transfusion of infected blood constituted 73.33 percent and use of unsterilized or infected needles with 50.00 percent. Further 76.66 percent of them reported that it could be transmitted from infected mother to her unborn child. Morley majority (78.34 percent) of them revealed all the above said transmissions. It may be specified that the awareness level of the respondents is further important to note that as against the baseline, relatively fewer respondents i.e. 08.33 percent of them did not know any modes of transmission of the dreaded diseases.

Knowledge of ways to avoid the infection is very high among the students. When they were asked about their knowledge regarding prevention of the disease, all reported that sex with only single partner and use of condom as the major preventive measures. Avoiding sex with commercial sex workers (95.00 percent), use of sterilized needles/syringes (88.33 percent), checking/ avoiding blood prior to transfusion (65.00 percent) and only 10.00 percent of the respondents exhibited abstaining/ absence from sex as a means to avoid HIV/AIDS. The fact revealed that all the respondents had one or the other means of knowledge on preventive measure of the diseases.

**Table: 4 Respondents Knowledge and Attitude towards HIV/AIDS**

	Sources	Male		Female		Total	%
		Total	%	Total	%		
<b>Respondents Knowledge on Preventing HIV/ AIDS</b>	<b>Abstaining from Sexual Intercourse</b>	03	11.53	03	08.82	06	<b>10.00</b>
	<b>Using of Condoms</b>	26	100.00	34	100.00	60	<b>100.00</b>
	<b>Monogamous Relationship</b>	26	100.00	34	100.00	60	<b>100.00</b>
	<b>Avoiding Blood Transfusion</b>	15	57.69	24	70.58	39	<b>65.00</b>
	<b>Using Disposable needles</b>	22	84.61	31	91.17	53	<b>88.33</b>
	<b>Avoiding Commercial Sex</b>	25	96.15	32	94.11	57	<b>95.00</b>
	<b>Nil Awareness</b>	00	00.00	00	00.00	00	<b>00.00</b>
<b>Knowledge on World AIDS Day Celebrated</b>	<b>May 1<sup>st</sup></b>	02	07.69	04	11.77	06	<b>10.00</b>
	<b>Dec 1<sup>st</sup></b>	16	61.54	27	79.41	43	<b>71.67</b>
	<b>None of the above</b>	01	03.85	01	02.94	02	<b>03.33</b>
	<b>Don't know</b>	07	26.92	02	05.88	09	<b>15.00</b>
<b>Attitude Towards HIV/AIDS Infected Person</b>	<b>Keeping away from the Society</b>	10	38.46	17	50.00	27	<b>45.00</b>
	<b>Giving Psychological Support and Confidence</b>	14	53.85	14	41.17	28	<b>46.67</b>
	<b>Don't Know</b>	02	07.69	03	08.83	05	<b>08.33</b>

Table 4 illustrates that majority of 71.67 percent of the total respondents opined the correct date of World AIDS Day. The day helps to educate people about HIV, reduce the stigma associated with the disease, and promote HIV testing. Organized by WHO in 1988 and observed every December 1, World AIDS Day spotlights the disease, which has killed an estimated over 25 million people since the early 1980's. To successfully combat the spread of HIV/AIDS, it is necessary to stimulate involvement at all levels -- from individuals to governments. Therefore, World Bank, Bill Gates Foundation and Government of India's NACP Phase III programmes are a rallying point for HIV/AIDS activities and programs. Dr. Luc Montagniet, discoverer of HIV has rightly said that "Psychological factors are critical in supporting immune function. If you suppress this psychological support by telling someone he is condemned to die, your words alone will have condemned him". Finally, students were asked to express their feeling/ attitude towards an HIV/+ AIDS person. Table 4 is explicit that, 46.67 percent of students reported that there is no harm in meeting a HIV +/AIDS infected person and opined that; we have to give moral support psychologically and help to build self confidence to lead a good social life. Negative attitudes toward HIV +/ AIDS infected individuals were common. As it was heartening to know that 45 percent of the total respondents who are pursuing higher education (PG) were of the opinion that diseased patients should be kept away from the society. They had an apathetic feeling towards the HIV+/ AIDS people. Results also indicated that students are still in a dilemma about making social contacts with HIV/AIDS infected persons as 08.33 percent of them said that, they don't know what to do with the diseased persons. Although attitudes concerning AIDS probably cannot be improved at once, it could be effective to initiate a campaign through the mass media, aimed at attitude modification. However, it appears that the mass media has succeeded in raising HIV/ AIDS awareness, but have produced little effect in changing student's attitudes towards it.

### Summary & Conclusion

The study has revealed that awareness of the existence, spread and prevention of HIV/AIDS is relatively high among the Scheduled Caste students, in the Rani Channamma University, Belgaum, Karnataka State. Students of 22- 23 age bracket constitute the majority pursuing their higher education at the proper age. Majority of the respondents opined that, HIV/AIDS is not curable. The severity of the disease was well acknowledged, as majority of them revealed that the disease cannot be prevented as it is life-threatening. Acquired nature of the disease and causative factors were not known to most of them. However knowledge regarding correct mode of transmission of infection was well known to all. The study exhibited that mass media has succeeded in raising HIV/ AIDS awareness among students. All the respondents had one or the other means of knowledge on preventive measures. Lastly, it was heartening to know that 45 percent of the total respondents had an apathetic feeling towards the HIV+/ AIDS people. They opined that the diseased patients should be kept away from the society. Results also indicated that few students were still in a dilemma about making social contacts with the infected persons. Such inadequate knowledge may place them at risk for HIV infection.

### Towards AIDS-Free India - Policy Implications

The data from this survey could be a useful guide for HIV+/AIDS campaign strategies and programs designed to convey accurate information about HIV transmission and prevention and to dispel wrong beliefs. A media campaign to increase knowledge and change attitudes of the students is imperative, with specific emphasis on the most disadvantaged segments of the population. Though the study is based on a small sample size, results have great scope for policy implications. Youth need accurate, timely and age-appropriate information. There is need to sensitize them regarding how to talk with their parents or other trusted adults, how to identify and eliminate risk, how to talk with potential partners about risk, where to get tested for HIV, and how to use a condom correctly. To spread education about HIV/AIDS prevention, the education institutions could introduce it in the syllabus at the entry level. Teachers should take an active role in such programs.

India has mounted a broad intervention program, including government and international, non-governmental, and community-based organisations. The main barriers to effective control are insufficient resources, illiteracy, and stigma. These measures will have a positive impact on a programme towards an AIDS- Free India. No one can lead our lives for us. So people especially the younger generation need to be very careful especially where safe sex is concerned.

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