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Bullying and victimization among adolescents in India: a socio-cultural perspective

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Abstract

This chapter explores layers of socio-cultural systems influencing bullying behaviors among adolescents in India using Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. This model integrates individual-level attributes with the contextual-development perspective to address possible sources of bullying behavior in India. At the macrosystem of Bronfenbrenner's model, the study explores the role of Indian culture on youth behaviors, using the constructs of caste, religion, and gender role expectations. Moving to the exosystem, the study examines the role played by attitudes and beliefs of schoolteachers and the school climate on bullying behaviors. For the microsystem, the study focuses on parents, family affluence, and peers, and their association with bullying and victimization. Finally, converging to the innermost layer, Indian youths, the chapter explores psychopathic traits, weight status, and skin color to understand adolescent behaviors in India, particularly bullying and victimization.

Keywords: Bullying; India; Adolescents; Bioecological model; Socio-cultural context; Caste

In contrast to the relative abundance of studies on bullying in Western countries, there is a paucity of research on bullying from India. Bullying and its consequences have been recognized in past studies in India, and an increasing demand to examine factors associated with bullying has been suggested (Thakkar et al., 2020a). Reports indicate that not only is bullying sizably prevalent in India (Nguyen et al., 2017; Ramya & Kulkarni, 2011), but also socio-cultural inequalities in caste, religion, SES, or skin color have been acknowledged as the determinants of bullying behaviors (Srisiva et al., 2013). This chapter is about bullying behaviors among school-going adolescents in India, with a deconstruction of associations between socio-cultural background, classroom contexts, peer group processes, individual characteristics, and bullying and victimization.

Bullying is an act of intentional and repetitive physical or psychological aggression by an individual, or a group, over another. A key feature of bullying is that the aggressor is generally more powerful than the victim (Olweus, 1997). This imbalance of power can be studied by examining within-person (individual) traits, in relation to social contexts that create dissimilarities between persons (group dynamics) (Rigby, 2004), or by focusing on the interaction between personal characteristics and contextual characteristics. Traditional theories for understanding bullying and victimization in the classroom have focused on the individual-level attributes that lead to bullying behavior. For instance, a bully has been characterized as one who is aggressive and destructive, and asserts dominance over others, whereas a victim is perceived to be passive, submissive, or weak (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009; Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Beyond individual-level attributes, past research has also indicated a growing need to study bullying in relation to a broader socio-cultural context, where bullying behavior occurs as a result of different levels of power that exist within social groups (Jansen et al., 2016; Rigby, 2004).

The need for understanding bullying behaviors through a contextual perspective is in line with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Figure 26.1). This model suggests that symbiotic layers of systems exist, like that of an individual's personality, that are embedded within a family and peer groups (microsystem), which is further nested into school climate and interaction with teachers (exosystem), that is, in turn, nested within cultural and societal norms (macrosystem). These

layers reciprocally influence and co-construct each other through a mutual exchange between the interlinked layers (mesosystem).

Furthermore, Prakash (2003) highlights that India, being a collectivistic society, recognizes an individual *not* based on their personal characteristics or achievements, but based on the processes and persons that are the context in which an individual grows up or lives and are akin to family, caste, place, or institution. The contextual-development perspective presented by Chen and French (2008) suggests that in collectivistic countries like India, context is more likely to influence evaluations of socially acceptable behavior and experiences, rather than individual attributes. Little attention, however, has been given to the understanding of these dynamics with respect to bullying behaviors, particularly so in India (Smith et al., 2018). Using this perspective and the bioecological model, we present a conceptual and theoretical framework to explore and understand bullying behaviors in India by moving from the outward to the inner concentric layers of Bronfenbrenner's system, subsequently converging to an understanding of the activities of adolescents, particularly bullying and victimization.

Indian culture: The macrosystem

India is a vast country, one of the most populous countries in the world, with an adolescent population of nearly 253 million, approximately 36% of the world's youth population. One in every five individuals in India is an adolescent between the age of 10–19 years (Census of India, 2011; UNICEF, 2019). While Hindi is the national language, there are 22 other officially recognized languages, with distinct scripts and literature, and multiple dialects that add to the diversity and heterogeneity. Of these languages, English, Hindi, and other regional languages (in that sequence) present a hierarchical power of linguistic capital (Pandharipande, 2002), where English is perceived as a language of economic and social progress, a language of the “elite”. A student proficient in English might assert social dominance and popularity over others, who are not proficient in English, regardless of personal characteristics (Annamalai, 2004). Furthermore, India embodies an oftentimes disharmonious, multi-religious diversity (Ganguly, 2003), and a deep-rooted caste system (Deshpande, 2001; Nambissan, 2009). To add to this, there is a gender divide with respect to access to secondary education, where over 40% of girls drop out before completing secondary education because of socio-cultural factors like responsibilities within the household, child marriage, and labor expectations, that correspond to parental and familial attitudes representing low esteem for schools and employability for girls, as well as to schools that lack appropriate sanitation facilities for girls (UNICEF, 2019). These cultural contextual circumstances impact bullying behaviors in a manner that is characteristic of the Indian context. To illustrate, we expand on some aspects of caste, religion, and gender role expectations and attitudes in India below.

Caste

The caste-based system in India is believed to have originated approximately 1,500 years ago, from the Laws of Manu where individuals were classified into separate *Varnas* or “castes”, based on their *dharma*, which is their obligatory family occupation. The four core *Varnas* were: *Brahman*, priests; *Kshatriya*, warriors; *Vaishya*, traders; and *Shudras*, menial job laborers (for example, sweepers; Deshpande, 2001). Although the system may have been formed initially as discrete, mutually exclusive “occupation-specific categories”, the caste system created hierarchies and evolved into a rank-order system during the British colonial rule (Sharma, 2012) with a power distance between the “upper” caste, being the *Brahmans*, and “lower” caste, being the *Shudras*. A connotation of “pure” and “polluted” came to be assigned to these castes over time, where higher caste individuals were considered purer (both physically as well as spiritually) and the lower castes were considered more polluted. For example, the custom of *untouchability* existed, where lower caste individuals who were scavengers, sweepers, drain cleaners, or performed other menial or “dirty” labor, were considered unhygienic and impure. Touching a lower caste person would “pollute” the *dharma* (*dharma-brashth*) of a higher caste individual. Higher caste individuals would then have to take a bath and pray, to “cleanse” themselves of the impurity (Gupta, 2000). Practices like having separate water facilities or wells for the *untouchables* or not allowing them in

temples to avoid pollution of the sacred places prevailed in Indian society (Deshpande, 2001). Around the time of India's Independence in 1947, mass-scale movements to end the caste system led to an affirmative action program characterized by a quota system of *reservation*, where 22.5% of all government jobs, electoral constituencies, or educational seats were reserved for lower caste persons. With this, the caste system was collapsed into four new categories: "general caste", "scheduled caste" and "scheduled tribe", or "other backward class" (OBC), instead of the previous hierarchical classification. The constitution of India written at the time of Independence included this program, such that caste-based segregation was (broadly) banished and deemed a punishable offense, and it also allowed for the "scheduled" (or "other backward") castes and tribes in India to have reserved benefits to compensate for the ages of discrimination that socially predisposed them to future positions of disadvantage, as compared to higher caste families (Deshpande, 2001). Nevertheless, generations of division and inequality left a residual structural distance and angst between individuals from lower and upper castes (Nambissan, 2009). Nowadays, upper caste individuals (now broadly referred to as, "general" caste) argue that the reservation system retains unfair benefits and maintains several privileges the higher caste individuals do not have, which has stirred up *anti-reservation* activism (Deshpande, 2001; Subramanian, 2019). Although casteism in India has been banned by the Indian constitution, it continues to be important for people's social identity (Sharma, 2012). Even today, parents from the upper caste are uncomfortable when their children come in close contact with lower caste peers, let alone play with them. Furthermore, teachers at school are prejudiced against lower caste students while showing favoritism towards higher caste students (Neelakandan & Patil, 2012). Given this structural distance between people of different castes, bullying and aggression between persons from different castes is a historically and normatively acknowledged part of society in India (Jaishankar, 2009). The Indian hierarchical system drives social behavior over and above individual characteristics and plays a role in creating power imbalances among adolescents, a factor that is characteristic of bullying behaviors (Olweus, 1997).

Religion

While caste presents a unique challenge through hierarchical structures in India, the diversity of India concerning religion also adds to groupism and imbalance of power. Of the Indian population, roughly 80% is Hindu, 14% Muslim, 2% is Christian, 2% Sikh, and the rest is either Buddhist, Jain, or followers of another religion (Census of India, 2011; Salazar, 2021). Religious bullying is a normatively accepted and habituated practice in India (Campbell et al., 2018; Erum, 2018). For example, Sikh children (*Sardaars*), who wear turbans, are disproportionately bullied in schools on account of their appearance with jokes implicating that they are slow-witted (Froystad, 2013). Countless *Sardaar* jokes are repeatedly perpetuated in pop culture as well, through movies and social media, with references to "Santa and Banta" who are stock characters typically projected as two naïve, unintelligent, or simple *Sardaars*. Additionally, there exists an ideological and cultural distance between Hindus and Muslims in India, where each has a distinct social identity (Froystad, 2013). Consequently, Hindu children commonly bully Muslim children, and vice versa, reflecting how broad socio-cultural, religious inclusion, and exclusion norms in India shape interaction between peers. Erum (2018) indicates that in cases of religious bullying, children "learn to cope with it on their own", while parents and teachers dismiss it as "harmless banter" and thus most incidents go unreported. This is manifested in an apathetic acceptance of cultural divides, which involves failing to recognize and acknowledge bullying behavior and being reluctant to act upon it, thereby influencing interpersonal dynamics and bullying behaviors in class (Campbell et al., 2018). Such attitudes and practices in India may play a role in normalizing bullying behavior in classrooms, making it part of a youth's identity and daily life experiences.

Gender Role Expectations and Beliefs

India is a patriarchal society and substantial importance is placed on the gender and gender role of children in India. Traditionally, males were considered *above* females in the social hierarchy of Hindu culture. Behaviors appropriate for women are described in the Laws of Manu—for example, it was stated

that a woman's duty (*dharma*) is to be obedient to their husbands, fathers, and brothers, or their sons in the absence of the husband, and non-compliance was considered deviant (Flood, 1996). There is also a gender bias rooted in many aspects of family and school life between girls and boys (Subramaniam, 1996). Investments made towards and leeway permitted to boys in society are unequally higher as compared to those for girls. Khatri and Kupersmidt (2003) report that overt aggressive behavior is accepted to be consistent with the traditional gender-role expectation of masculinity (but not femininity) in India. Aggressive behavior by boys is seen as permissible, sometimes even credited as a show of masculine strength and power. Contrastingly, a girl is expected to be polite, and quiet, not to ask too many questions, and respect elders, thus shaping interactions between adolescents in the classroom based on their gender. Findings from India on the differences in gender in bullying behavior overwhelmingly show that boys have higher odds of being bullies and/or victims as compared to girls (Thakkar et al., 2020a).

The diversity and population density, combined with disparities and inequalities co-existing in India between cultures and also within the subgroups of particular cultures, have been recognized as unique to the Indian setting (Panda & Gupta, 2004). Estimating cultural homogeneity in India is presumptuous; even research findings from stratified regions within India are not generalizable to other parts of the country, let alone generalizable to high-income Western countries where most research on bullying comes from. Given these historically established and long-standing cultural divides, and the general lack of indigenous bullying research in India, it is crucial that bullying be studied in India through the *Indian* lens.

The exosystem

Moving a layer inward in Bronfenbrenner's model, we examine the role played by the attitudes and beliefs of teachers and the school climate concerning bullying behaviors.

Teachers

It has been noted that teachers' competence, classroom management policies, discipline styles, and in particular, their interaction with the students, is fundamental in promoting positive developmental outcomes in students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teachers and educators are potential influencers in children's peer relations and their interpersonal growth, being the only educators in a position to view the whole child in relation to their social ecology. Moreover, teachers are seen as the *de facto* leaders of a classroom social system, and are responsible for shaping interaction patterns and activities within a class for the productive engagement of all students (Farmer et al., 2011). Past research has shown that there is a wide spectrum of teachers' responses to bullying ranging from not intervening at all to intervening in a manner that may appear threatening to the bullies (Goldstein et al., 2001; Yoon, 2004). A longitudinal study found that teacher's use of active strategies (e.g., punishing aggressor or contacting parents) dissuades bullying behavior in class (Troop-Gordon & Ladd, 2015). However, harsh disciplining techniques, or bullying responses from teachers, adversely affect peer victimization in the classroom, where students model teachers' aggressive responses as acceptable ways to interact with others (Banzon-Librojo et al., 2017). Conversely, passive intervention strategies by teachers, e.g., advocating independent coping or advocating avoidance, are associated with higher levels of classroom aggression (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Craig and colleagues (2000) report that teachers intervene in less than 20% of bullying incidents and thus inadvertently contribute to the problem of bullying by their sparse or passive intervention techniques. However, past research on teacher-student relations and their influence on bullying behaviors has been conducted predominantly in high-income Western countries and there are very few studies from India. One study from India reported that while only a handful of teachers agreed to participate in the study ($N = 20$), most of them were defensive and ignorant about the prevalence of bullying in their class and 59% of teachers resorted to *punishing the aggressor* as an intervention technique (Ramya & Kulkarni, 2011). Sanctions used by teachers in India in response to serious bullying incidents included "slapping them on the face" or "making a child stand in the sun, or in

awkward positions for a long time” (Thompson et al., 2018). Furthermore, one study among pre-service teachers in India (Spears et al., 2018) reported that while 50% of teachers indicated that they were aware of bullying behaviors in classrooms or had witnessed them, nearly 25% of teachers indicated that they were “unsure” of the problem. Additionally, 50% of teachers reported that “they did not feel very informed, did not feel very capable/competent, and did not feel very confident about dealing with school bullying incidents” (Spears et al., 2018, p. 223).

School Climate

Given Bronfenbrenner’s model of exchange between systemic layers, it could also be that teachers’ responses to bullying behavior in the classroom may be contingent upon the student’s behavioral patterns. Thus looking at a broader school climate and the influence thereof, teachers’ awareness of bullying in school has been noted to be triggered only when the prevalence of bullying behavior is critically high within the school (Stone et al., 2009). However, given the aforementioned normative acceptance of bullying behaviors as a result of the cultural context, the recognition of bullying behaviors may go largely unnoticed. Research shows that there are inconsistencies among students in even defining the term “bullying” in Indian native languages, and the consensus among teachers was that there is no specific term used resolutely in schools for behaviors considered bullying (Smith et al., 2018). School climate, which is an indicator of the quality of the school environment, is considered positive when there is support and structure in terms of the interpersonal student-teacher trust, safety, cohesion, respect for academic competition, teaching and learning practices, and provision of favorable educational infrastructure. However, the expectation of promoting these values also relies on the teachers in India, who already consider themselves over-burdened with teaching responsibilities and other administrative duties (Shinde et al., 2017). Furthermore, while it has been found that a multi-component, school-based health promotion intervention in a low-resource setting in India is effective when delivered by school counselors as opposed to teachers (Shinde et al., 2018), the mental health professional workforce is largely nonexistent in the Indian school system. The Indian education system faces several challenges such as over-centralization, bureaucratic structures, and lack of accountability, transparency, or professionalism in addition to insufficient resources and facilities (Sheikh, 2017), leading to an inadequate focus on research at schools overall. To add to this, school quality concerning infrastructure is poor. For instance, there is limited and unequal access to drinking water, toilets, furniture, teaching aids, books, fans, etc. in government or lower SES schools (Kingdon, 2007), while classroom sizes (number of students per class) are large with pupil to teacher ratios averaging 45:1 in secondary schools (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, despite several recent improvement programs developed to improve the school system by advocating for school enrollment and promoting literacy and better sanitation requirements in India (Cornell & Shukla, 2018), the quality and quantity of effects remain unclear. Furthermore, though corporal punishment in school has formally been banned in India through the Right to Education Act, and school principals and policies are supposed to dissuade such acts, punishment is so institutionalized in Indian schools that children hardly recognize and are unlikely to report physical punishments from teachers. They mostly perceive of punishment as common to “school life” (Smith et al., 2018). Additionally, teachers and other educators utilize different approaches when dealing with bullying, depending on classroom size, students’ age range, and their maturity level (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001), suggesting that teachers adapt their responses to bullying based on student characteristics. Given the large classroom sizes in India, the diversity and imbalance in power dynamics, and an inherently changing classroom composition as a result of higher dropout rates in India, schools would need to equip themselves with the knowledge and skills required to work with a culturally and behaviorally diverse set of students. Sadly, there are almost no accounts from India that examine the broader school climate in terms of students’ perceptions of the disciplinary practices as being fair or consistent; students’ engagement with school culture; school safety; perceptions and impact of adolescents’ academic pressure in India; reception of support from teachers or overall school structure; and the interaction of these elements with bullying behaviors. To quote bullying experts Cornell and Shukla (2018, p. 347): “Almost

19% of the world's children are in India. If Indian schools could provide a safe and supportive climate to all children, it will be a major achievement for the entire world."

The Microsystem

Moving closer to the child within Bronfenbrenner's circles of systems, we now focus on the more direct and immediate influencers: parents and peers.

Parents

Parents' perceptions of bullying, their awareness and attitudes, and subsequent communication with their children are known to contribute to a child's experience of bullying and victimization in the classroom (Waasdorp et al., 2011). Georgiou and Fanti (2010) report that children and parents are intertwined in a cycle of reciprocal relations such that conflicts in the parent-child relationship are associated with bullying and victimization, and in turn, the development of bullying and victimization further affects parent-child conflict. However, parental involvement is often overlooked and neglected in the study of bullying, with a particular lack of research from India. The Indian family, traditionally considered "tight" with "joint-family" systems of uncles/aunties, nieces/nephews, and grandparents, all living under the same roof in a household, has "westernized" to nuclear family households, which seems to have impacted also children's victimization experiences. Evidence shows that children belonging to nuclear families experience more victimization than joint-family children (Campbell et al., 2018): a relatively new-found concept in India. Additionally, it has been noted that witnessing domestic violence or interpersonal-parental conflict could lead to modeling of the same behavior by children through the perpetration of bullying on their peers. India, although not the *only* country with high numbers, reports a stark prevalence of domestic violence between parents (Deb & Walsh, 2012) and also harsh and violent parental disciplining techniques. Indian mothers' punishment routines traditionally included acts of hitting children with objects, kicking, or choking them (Sadowski et al., 2004). In Western countries, such parental punishment techniques have been found to have an impact on physical bullying among adolescents (Sahithya et al., 2019). Furthermore, the Indian parenting style is colloquially known for its practice of making comparative remarks and an attitude of "keeping up with the Joneses" (roughly translated in Hindi to "*Sharmaji ke bacche ko dekho*"). Social comparisons with other children are used as a shaming tactic to coax children into performing their duties, especially in terms of academic achievements and career prospects. This may further facilitate unfavorable peer dynamics, emphasizing the need to study the implications of this practice on child bullying behaviors in India.

Family Affluence and Socio-economic Status

Another significantly relevant factor within a child's microsystem is that of their family's affluence and socio-economic status (SES). India is a country of stark contrasts and inequalities (Sinha et al., 2010), and this is particularly evident in the distance between the high and low socio-economic status of the country. This inequality in economic status influences customs and practices of child-care and development that consequently affect interactions between children in the school environment (Bapat, 2016). For example, children from lower SES are expected to assist in chores at home like cooking, cleaning, or fetching water for its use at home from the closest water pump/well/facility, because a continuous running supply of water is usually not accessible to low-income households (Nambissan, 2009). Likewise, basic necessities, oftentimes considered "materialistic" indulgences in India, like electric supply at home, hygiene and sanitation, cars, and internet or technology access are also unequally available to children, based on the family's SES in India. These circumstantial differences in daily lives place many lower-class children in positions of responsibility, for instance necessitating them to bring money into the household by taking up paid labor jobs (UNICEF, 2019), while the economically content youth focus on academic excellence, thereby affecting their school attendance, academic competency, and interpersonal relationships among youth within the class environment. It follows that material wealth and resources are indicators of youth's demeanor affecting structural group dynamics that may be precursors to bullying and victimization. An

illustration of this is noted by Nambissan (2009) who reports that children from a particular SES tend to socialize among the same SES class. For instance, girls who come from the *basti* (slums) are friends with the other *basti* girls alone, while girls who reside in a *colony* (indicating higher income households) tend to connect with other colony girls. Furthermore, colony people would sit in the front rows of a classroom and be labeled as more “*hoshiyaar*” (intelligent) by the teachers, whereas *basti* youth would sit at the back. One may assume that these inequalities and dissimilarities, which create a power imbalance between groups, influence peer interactions in the classroom environment in India, emphasizing the need to examine bullying behaviors by a deconstruction of this distinctive context in India. To illustrate, it has been found in past studies that lower SES children are predisposed to higher victimization experiences in general around the world (Tippett & Wolke, 2014), as is also the case in India (Sethi et al., 2019). However, Thakkar (2021) found that not only is the objective measurement of SES significant in predicting bullying behaviors, but classroom SES composition, or relative proportions of different SES levels between students within a classroom, also significantly contributes to bullying behaviors among adolescents, implicating the role played by this microsystemic subjective factor in India.

Peer Group

Another important construct that impacts the microsystem of an adolescent is their peer group.

In normative Western contexts, *friendship* is a dyadic interpersonal relationship that is voluntarily chosen or dissolved by individuals. In India though, there exists a concept of “ritualistic friendship” (Desai, 2010) that is a form of association where geographic proximity, sameness among individuals in terms of gender, work projects, religion, or caste defines a child’s friend beyond their personal affinities. Friendships, like marriages, are oftentimes “arranged” or assigned to children by their parents and socio-cultural norms. Just like notions and experiences of dissimilarities between people are passed down from parents to children through generations, this is also the case for the notion of *sameness*. Both dissimilarity and sameness are key notions in shaping peer dynamics. Ritualistic friendships actively discourage notions of real intimacy but are purposeful in promoting affection between individuals and enabling enduring family ties in India. Thus, in ritualistic friendships, friendship *roles* are rather “fulfilled” than chosen beyond personalized dyadic relations, thereby institutionalizing performative conformity among peer groups and resultantly shaping bullying roles. An illustration of this is seen in the study of young “leaf collectors” in Northern India (Dyson, 2010). While belonging to the same workgroup promoted reciprocity in alliance formation and matching adult expectations of leaf collections, problems between the young girls’ families were sometimes noted to be the reason for ending friendships. Friendships in India are pragmatically forged in favor of socio-cultural factors like class or religion, or based on socio-culturally defined individual roles, such as gender roles (Kumar, 2017). This is a concept that needs compelling examination in the study of bullying and its associations in India.

The Indian individual

It has been found that individual factors known to be associated with bullying perpetration and victimization in Western contexts do not show the same influence in studies from India. For instance, past research shows that an individual’s need to assert dominance among peers and to enjoy social standing and popularity within the classroom, driven by status goals and a quest for power and aggression, and converging as psychopathic personality traits, are recognized intentions of bullying perpetration (Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). However, Thakkar et al. (2020b) found that while a *combination* of psychopathic traits indeed predicted bullying behaviors, individual traits did not predict bullying perpetration—a finding inconsistent with literature from outside India. In addition, the same study found that covariates like gender, caste, and religion showed unique strength in predicting the likelihood of children being bullies or victims in India. Similarly, appearance concerning body weight and body image have also been found to predict bullying victimization in global research. However, recent research from India (Thakkar et al., 2021) showed that not only does victimization play no role in predicting weight status over time, but neither does weight status predict the odds of being victimized over time in India. It

may be true that beauty and appearance standards among Indian adolescents are perhaps not the same as in Western countries, and thus deviation from those standards may not directly lead to peer victimization in the Indian context as seen in reports from Western countries. An individual-level factor found to contribute to bullying victimization in India is skin color. A reflection of residual colonial roots, skin color leads to social stratification, and white color/fair complexion is preferred over darker skin (Malik, 2007). Karnani (2007) reports that fairness creams or whitening products are widely used by school girls in the 12 to 14 years age group. A study on bullying in India found that 43% of the victims reported being bullied based on their appearance, while 36% of victims reported that they were bullied because of their skin color or complexion (Srisiva et al., 2013). Moreover, these figures outnumbered other significant factors, like poor academic performance or caste differences, as the reason for victimization.

Thus, beyond individual-level attributes, several circumstantial, societal, and cultural adversities may be possible sources of problem behavior in India. In line with the social-push hypothesis (Ray et al., 2016), we assert that the impact of individual characteristics surfaces in predicting problem behaviors when the context of the individual is *less harmful*, but in socially adverse conditions, the context overshadows the predictive influence of the Indian individual. Thus, bullying needs to be examined from a socio-cultural lens, beyond individual traits, in India.

The present picture

In India, bullying perpetration is prevalent among 7% to 31% of students, while bullying victimization is estimated as ranging between 9% to 80% as per a recent systematic review of bullying behaviors in school-going adolescents (Thakkar et al., 2020a). Victimized youth have been found to face adverse cognitive and physical consequences like anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, school phobia, vomiting, catastrophizing, self-blaming, or sleep disturbances (Kshirsagar et al., 2007; Maji et al., 2016), while bully-victims, i.e., individuals who perpetrate bullying but are also bullied themselves, are more likely to struggle with behavioral problems and academic difficulties (Malhi et al., 2014; Sarkhel et al., 2006). Despite the high prevalence and negative consequences of bullying in India, the systematic review highlights the scarcity, but also the contentious quality of existing research in terms of methodological rigor, validity of instruments, data collection processes, use of sophisticated statistical approaches, and presentation of the findings. The present chapter advocates meaningful investment in research and access to resources in India, where there is a promising opportunity in research to yield a welcome transformation in the scope and understanding of youth behaviors—more particularly, bullying and victimization—through a socio-cultural perspective.

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