

Research Article

From Tradition to Troubles: Evaluating the Consumption of Opium as Social Practice in Western Rajasthan

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Abstract

Drug consumption is not always associated solely with pleasure or intoxication; it can originate as a customary practice and evolve into a societal tradition over successive generations. In Rajasthan, particularly in its western region, drug consumption initially emerged as a commemorative practice during social gatherings, occasions, and celebrations. However, this practice has gradually transformed into a compulsory addictive issue, posing concerns for individuals and society as a whole. In this context, a case study of the prevalence of consumption of opium as part of social customs in Rajasthan is dealt with. The aim is to understand the increasing addiction to opium and its association with social customs and stigma. The paper also addresses the concerns and challenges that arise from this phenomenon. To ascertain the usage and impact of opium abuse on society, both primary and secondary sources are utilized. The study also evaluates socio-political and legal initiatives undertaken by governments and civil society to address the issue. In conclusion, this paper puts forth recommendations to mitigate the problem of drug abuse.

Keywords: Drug addiction; Opium; Rajasthan; Social custom; Social stigma

Introduction

The drugs consumption in India had various connotations and manifestations over the period of time. It has multiple dimensions of uses and implications. The drugs were primarily used for medication purposes, healing purposes, and pleasure. Drug consumption has also become an important derivative of culture and social purposes in some parts of the country. Gradually, these drugs have turned into addictive practices and increased the drug menace among the common people. It has further led to drug abuse and drug addiction. There are various reports regarding drug abuse from various regions across the nation. The geographical location of India between the golden crescent on one side and the golden triangle on the other makes it more vulnerable to drug trafficking. These increasing challenges of drug menace and trafficking will lead to several bitter issues in the near future for the health and morality of society, par-

ticularly youth, and the nation's security.

The intensity of the drug use and its prevalence is defined under distinct terminologies like drug abuse, dependence, or addiction. The term 'drug abuse' means inappropriate or conscious use of drugs beyond certain sectioned norms, whether in situation or quality. On the other side, 'drug dependence' is a physical process of the body or mind that adapts to the drugs and considers it as an essential part of it. 'Drug addiction' while is a psychological process that involves a compulsive craving for drugs irrespective of adverse consequences [1].

The commonly used drugs are opioids, alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, tobacco, amphetamine, etc. Further opioids refer to opium, which includes doda, phukki, and poppy husk; heroin, including brown sugar and smack; and pharmaceutical opioids. Cannabis refers to bhang (cannabis leaf) as well as ganja (marijuana) and charas (hashish) [2].

Opium is one of the most consumed drugs in India. According to a recent report of the Comprehensive National Survey on Extent and Pattern of Substance Use in India conducted in 2018, the prevalence of drug use has significantly increased in India, and opium is one among them. It further states the consumption of opioid products has risen from 0.7% in 2004 to 2.1% in 2018 [3]. Opium is mainly extracted from the poppy plant. Initially, among other drugs, it was also used for relieving physical and mental capabilities, and for medicinal purpose, but with time, the uses moved more towards addiction and abuse.

In the state of Rajasthan, particularly in the western region, the consumption of opium is primarily a part of the social customary practices. Opium is perceived as a comparatively lesser harmful substance, which has contributed to

its relatively widespread usage. According to an estimate, 60% to 70% of drug addicts consume opium [4]. There are multiple incidences in which it is offered, along with poppy husk as a part of celebrations, festivals, or community gatherings. The practice is gradually turning into a mandatory practice and is severely impacting the communities in multiple ways.

The rising trend of these kinds of ill practices and issues of social stigmas are leading to alarming challenges for both the state and civil society. On one side, it leads to health issues; on the other, it dwells on financial challenges. It affects both the family of the drug abuser and those who are forced to offer the same. The prevalence among the elderly population on one side and increasing addiction, particularly of opium, poppy husk, and its associated drugs like heroin among the youth on the other side are alarming.

Research Objective

This study aims to understand the nuance of drug addiction from historical and cultural perspectives. It is to understand the various reasons behind opium consumption in Rajasthan. It seeks to identify the role of social customs and stigmas in leading drug consumption and how it has become a matter of concern. It would also attempt to understand the initiatives taken by various stakeholders to mitigate the drug menace. The study also further suggests some initiatives and steps to curb drug consumption.

Research Methodology

The present study focuses on the state of Rajasthan, located in the northwest of India. A qualitative research approach is employed to evaluate the stated objectives, utilizing an analytical framework to gain insights into social practices and their enduring societal impacts. The required information is collected through field-based interviews conducted over 2 months, from February 2023 to March 2023. Our analysis encompasses a range of primary sources, such as government reports, newspapers, and other government and non-governmental data. Besides, secondary sources such as books, research articles, journals, and reports are also used in the study.

Results

Opium consumption is prevalent due to social structure, customs, and stigma, leading to societal issues, concerns, and challenges. It also includes drug abuse (mostly among youth), health issues, financial challenges, drug trafficking, and further security issues for the state.

Role of Social Structure, Customs and Stigma

The serving of drinks made of opium (locally known as afeem or amal) and sometimes along with poppy husk (locally known as doda-post) has been a long-standing custom as a part of ceremonies in western Rajasthan, comprising of Jodhpur, Barmer, Jalore, Jaisalmer and the neighboring districts. This is an age-old custom being followed by the generations. When the Rajput ruled the princely states of Rajasthan, opium was passed around in cabinet meetings. The warriors in the army used to take a dose before going to

battle to overcome their fear [5]. Conversely, people from lower economic backgrounds used to take it to feel rich.

Opium consumption has also become a daily practice among these communities. In the social function and on the arrival of guests, the host offers them opium to drink in the cupped palm as a token of respect. It is a significant part of the community's celebration, whether it be marriage, the birth of a male child, festivals, or any other program. It is also prevalent during the post-death rituals; even if some person dies in any family, opium must be offered for the whole mourning ceremony.

The local population commonly congregates for a ceremonial gathering called 'reyan.' Various village and community elders assemble at a designated location during this event. One of the eldest individuals typically assumes a central position and grinds dried black opium into a fine powder. The powder is then mixed with water and strained through a cloth or poured into the cupped palm of the elder. Each person at the gathering is offered the mixture and is expected to bow down to sip it. The refusal of this offer is often regarded as an insult. For the time, the ceremony serves as customary social practice and carries an air of grandeur. Additionally, doda (poppy husk) is distributed among the attendees on many occasions.

For thousands of villagers in parts of western Rajasthan, opium consumption has become a daily ritual, thereby threatening to cripple their lives [5] permanently. A household survey-based study conducted on 45 rural villages regarding opium consumption in rural areas of western Rajasthan observed that the addiction rate increases with age. It also stated that literacy and low socio-economic status are the major causes of addiction [6].

The opium consumption practice is majorly associated with social stigmas and social status. Over a while, from being a custom on some occasions, it has become a habit and evolved as a part of daily lifestyle, resulting in a significant increase in overall consumption. The stigmas are so hardened that anyone discussing the de-addiction of these kinds of drugs and removing it from social customs is sometimes seen as an enemy of the society and system.

In the political domains also, the shortage of opium and also poppy husk becomes a significant issue during the elections. Political leaders also have to offer the same and promise adequate supply at government shops despite these promises being against the law [5]. There have been several incidents wherein high-profile people and custodians of democracy could not dare to ignore this age-old tradition of consuming and serving opium at ceremonies. A few of them are also facing legal proceedings due to political rivalry.

Concerns and Challenges

The social customary practices of the consumption of opium have now gradually turned into a matter of concern and challenge for society. Ranging from elders to younger generations, it is almost grappling every individual and particularly the male population. Addiction among the aged

population impacts their physical and financial health, contributing to the continuity of these drug-associated traditions in society. Ideally, they should be the first to stand like a steel frame against the drug menace; however, they are passing the evil practices to the coming generations. It can be attributed to rigidity and lack of education in society.

The problem of drug abuse and addiction is worsening in Western Rajasthan. Starting as a tradition, it is gradually becoming a cause of severe addiction and putting thousands of lives at risk, particularly the youth. Opium consumption is prevalent in the age group of 20 years to 50 years [7]. As the customs and practices move from generation to generation as part of culture and daily practices, children or teenagers also have an eagerness to join the adult population. In pursuance to continue the customs and follow their elders, they develop their interest in the consumption of drugs. It is working as a double-edged sword, while on the one side, it has threatened the lives of the youth and their families; on the other side, it is endangering the future of India by pushing its demographic dividend towards demographic disaster in the form of the unhealthy and unproductive youth.

The customs gradually become addictions, leading to poverty and hunger. A recent study states that for almost a terrifying 80 percent of the male villagers of Jodhpur, Jalore, Pali, Barmer, and Jaisalmer districts, opium addiction has become a reality far more significant than poverty, a need more important than food and shelter [8]. Due to social stigmas, it has become a compulsion for individuals to serve opium in family functions, thereby becoming a burden for the poor or underprivileged. It generally ends in a financial crisis, entrapping them further in the debt cycles to sustain their livelihood.

It is not only obstructing the social structures but also the families and individuals as the males of the families are either in nausha (addiction) all the time or would be searching for ways to consume the drug. It is deteriorating family conditions and relations, giving rise to incidences of domestic violence and social tensions. In some cases, it is even creating a double burden on the females; on the one side, it becomes absentia from the earning of the male members, and on the other, they are being forced to earn for the family and household. With illiteracy or a low level of education, they are either forced to do extreme physical labour or jobs in the lower hierarchy, leading to various forms of workplace harassment and deteriorating their health status.

Widespread drug abuse has taken its toll in several bordering districts of Rajasthan. Addicts primarily belong to the age group of 14 years to 60 years [8]. There have been several cases of addicts exhibiting mental or physical disorders, showing withdrawal symptoms, and becoming socially segregated. Sometimes even those who wish to give up are in bouts of extreme craving and becoming sufferers of chronic disorders. An opium user has to spend up to Rs. 300 to Rs. 400 a day, and in the absence of a regular source of income, many of them commit petty crimes or end up in severe poverty [8].

Drug abuse has also led to several health issues. A study on health issues concludes that the chronic use of opium over 2 years increases the risk of hepatic and pulmonary damage [9]. A study conducted in Barmer and Bikaner district 1998 also reported that opium and doda consumption among men has indirectly affected and changed the fertility of their spouses [10].

The high rate of drug consumption is leading to issues like illegal trade, drug trafficking, and smuggling. The problem of drug addiction has a significant bearing on drug trafficking throughout the South Asian region. It has also become a significant challenge for governments, philanthropists, and social reformers [11]. The NCB report states that the main internal factor for drug trafficking in India is the illicit cultivation of opium, poppy, and cannabis. Also, the diversion from licit opium sources to illegal opium production is a major concern [12]. In the trends of 2020, Rajasthan is among the 3 major states, along with Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, from where the opium is trafficked to other parts of the country (Figure 1) [13].



Figure 1: The map showing Rajasthan as one among the states on opium trafficking areas. (Source: NCB Annual report, 2020)

News from Hindustan Times also reports that with increasing drug demand, drug addicts heavily rely on supplies from Pakistan via Punjab or smuggled directly into Rajasthan through the international border [14]. The trafficking further leads to illicit financial flows, which could severely threaten the economic, political, and social development of the region.

Recent reports state that the prevalence of opium consumption and drug abuse is rapidly increasing in Rajasthan. The cases registered under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985 in Rajasthan has grown by 45.42% from 1,878 cases lodged in 2018, it increased to 2,589 in 2019 and further to 2,731 in 2020, and 2,989 in 2021 [14]. Despite the lockdown and COVID situation, the increase in the use of drugs in Rajasthan is a matter of

concern.

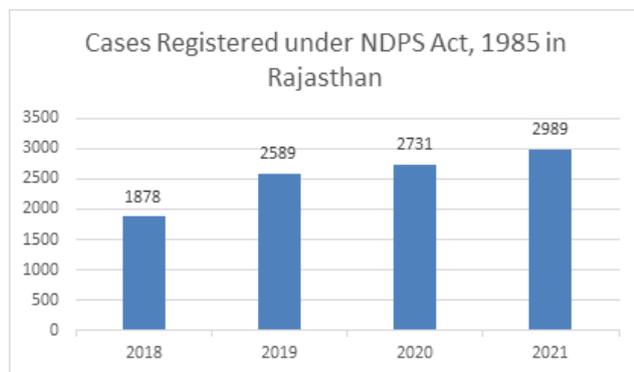


Figure 2: The cases registered under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 (NDPS Act) in Rajasthan (Source: Hindustan Times, February 14, 2021)

According to a recent study conducted in 2016, an estimated 15% to 20% of the population in Rajasthan, primarily in rural areas, has been involved in substance abuse. However, there has been a shift in the type of drugs being consumed in certain parts. An estimated 60% to 70% of drug addicts in Rajasthan consume opium [4].

The reports of the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) in its quarterly journal 'Narcontrol' and Annual reports also reflect the severity of the situation regarding increasing numbers of cases registered for drug trafficking in Rajasthan. The annual report of the year 2019 states that more than 240 kg of opium were seized from its Jodhpur Zonal Unit [12]. According to the 2020 annual report, the total amount of opium seized was 491.306 kg, in which 233.976 kg was seized on July 19, 2020, from Chittorgarh [13]. The increasing drug abuse has also led to an increase in the consumption of other drugs. The reports of NCB also provide details about various cases of seizure of poppy straw, ganja, heroin, and even drug money at several places in the Jodhpur Zonal Unit. A recent report states that the total opium-based drugs seized under the NDPS Act during the year 2021 from Rajasthan is 124018 kg, and it is among the highest drugs seized under the category across the states [23].

The study on the Drug Abuse Monitoring System (DAMS) by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, and United Nations Office on Drug and Crime, Regional Office for South Asia, states that opium is the most common (39.8% of the studies' total sample size) used drug in Rajasthan, followed by heroin and alcohol (15%). On opium abuse, the study finds that Rajasthan is the second most affected state after Punjab. It also adds that the abusers are most often illiterate and predominantly (75.6%) belong to rural areas [15].

Discussion

The opium poppy is a species of flowering plant in the family Papaveraceae. From the seeds of the plant, opium, and poppy are derived. Opium is the coagulated juice of the opium poppy [12]. The word 'opium' is derived from the Greek word 'opion.' In Arabia, it was known as 'afyun'; in

Chinese, it is 'yapien'; in Persian, it is known as 'afium'; in Sanskrit, it is known as 'aahi phen,' meaning snake venom; in the local terminology in India, it is called as 'afeem' [16].

According to some sources, opium was brought to India in the 9th century by Arab traders through the west coast [5]. In the early days, it was primarily used for medicinal purposes. In the next few centuries, opium spread across the region and also got space in social functions. The opium was also gradually started to be cultivated in the Indian subcontinent. In the early sixteenth century, the production and consumption of drugs saw a gradual rise. There are references to the role of the Mughal emperor Babar in encouraging poppy cultivation and the sale of opium. As the British East India Company took over the political and revenue powers, it monopolized opium [5]. They amplified the opium trade with China and other countries. Further, they also attempted to popularise its use among the local masses to enhance revenue generation. After independence in 1959, selling opium was banned, and oral consumption was prohibited except for registered addicts on medical grounds [17].

Rajasthan, one of the closest regions to Central and Western Asia, initiated the consumption of drugs. The rulers used opium in critical social functions such as marriage when sealing essential business deals or a war victory [5]. A study carried out in 1995 in Rajasthan also stated that the region is known for its traditional use of raw opium in the form of amal (opium) or doda (poppy straw) due to its climate and difficult living conditions [18]. The people of Rajasthan do much eco-stress management by using opium and its natural derivatives. The ethnographic information suggests that opium use has, in many ways, integrated into the socio-cultural fabric of the local community. Self-medication with opium mitigates various health problems, and the drug is also used to relieve mental distress. Besides, the drug is used recreationally and within settings that facilitate social bonding [5].

The drug use pattern at the local level could be understood in 2 broader categories: ceremonial or ritualistic use and convivial use. Opium is primarily used in 2 forms, either as a nugget or as a liquid. It is prevalent in the rural society of Rajasthan. It has become a ritual to consume opium in different parts of the country on different occasions like harvest, marriage, the birth of a child, or during local festival celebrations [19]. It started with the customary practice of social gathering. Gradually, it became compulsory to offer opium in all social functions, and people were also evaluated based on their involvement in it. A study conducted in 1993 states that the prevalence rate of opium consumption in rural areas of Western Rajasthan was 13.4% of total adult males in the region [7]. It further stated that the primary reason was the social and cultural customs of the area.

Since the medieval times, opium has been among the most traded and smuggled drugs. In his book *Smuggling as Subversion*, Amar Farooqui argued that Western Rajasthan-Sindh provided essential routes for the opium trade [20]. The smuggling also continued through this route even

after the partition. A District Gazetteer of Barmer mentions about 16 cases of Opium smuggling in 1960 [21].

Initiatives to curb the addiction

Several initiatives are being taken by various stakeholders of society, particularly in the context of Rajasthan, to curb drug addiction in general and opium consumption in particular. For better understanding, these initiatives can be categorized into Legal and Political Initiatives; and Civil Society Initiatives.

Legal and political initiatives

The government of India has taken various steps to control the increasing prevalence of drug abuse. In the Indian constitution, Article 47, under directive principles of state policies, directs the state to endeavor to prohibit the consumption of intoxicating drugs harmful to health, except for medicinal purposes. In this context, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is the nodal ministry for monitoring, controlling, and curbing drug abuse. The annual surveys and timely studies are being conducted to overview the situation along with initiatives like the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (NAPDDR), *Nasha Mukta Bharat Abhiyan* (NMBA) to reduce the drug demand. The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) also works extensively on restricting drug trafficking incidences. It also provides "Assistance to States and U.T.s" for curbing drug abuse by establishing the institutional mechanism [12]. The government has also taken several legal measures to curb the illicit uses of the drugs. The Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act 1985 is a significant move in this context. Further, the Prevention of Illicit Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act 1988 has strengthened the state's resolve of drug issues under the legal ambit. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment also runs a National Toll-Free Helpline 14446 to provide tele-counseling to drug users and refer them to the nearest de-addiction centre [24].

The state government of Rajasthan has also brought some specific laws, such as Rajasthan Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Rules 1985, to curb drug abuse. The state government controls the sale of opium and poppy straw at the licensed shops or thekkas at a licensed amount with a legal permit and only after permits by the state excise department. The state government has also launched some awareness programs such as *Naya Savera Karyakram*, *Navjeevan Yojana*, *Nasha Mukti Abhiyan*, and others to curb drug addiction, reduce the prevalence of drug addiction cases, and for the rehabilitation of victims and families. The state government has taken initiatives to reduce the cultivation of opium in the state and the number of opium and poppy husk shops.

Recently, the Rajasthan state government, with the motive of creating a drug-free Rajasthan, has set up the Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF) and Anti-Narcotics Unit (ANU) for prevention of drug abuse, rehabilitation of drug victims, and creating public awareness. Rajasthan Police has proposed to the state government to form a task force

headed by a specialized officer to work across the state, solely focusing and working against narcotics and its rampant smuggling. The mandate of the task force will be to coordinate, suggest action in drug demand reduction, raise community awareness, increase community participation and public cooperation, and focus intervention in schools, colleges, and among the youth. Various local administrative structures are working with several initiatives for the same [22]. The government also provides training through capacity-building programs to various law enforcement officials, health care workers, and other stakeholders to implement better steps towards restricting drug addiction.

Civil society initiatives

There are several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as *Nayi Zindagi Foundation*, *Asha Bhawan*, *Nayi Umeed Nasha Mukti Kendras*, etc., in Rajasthan which are working on curbing drug consumption through the awareness campaign amongst the society and for rehabilitation and resettling them back in everyday life. People at their level are also developing new initiatives to curb drug addiction.

Various caste-based groups are taking pledges and initiatives at their level. The social groups are also making efforts to aware ordinary people about the uses of drugs in social functions. Various people at the village level to the larger platforms are taking a pledge to not use opium in reyan. For example, recently, people of some villages of *Bilara block* in *Jodhpur district* of Rajasthan state have taken a united initiative to stop the increasing drug addiction among the youth [25]. Many people take *Nasha Mukta Samaj Shapath* (pledge for Drug-Free Society) at various sacred places and in community programs. An organization named *Baba Ramdev Sewa Sansthan* in Western Rajasthan is spreading awareness against the use of drugs through *Bhajans*. Many people take a pledge against drug abuse at *Aajji Temple Pratapgarh* every year [26].

There are also some incidences in which people at the village or community level are taking self-initiatives by excluding persons who consume opium, alcohol, or intoxicants and imposing fines on sellers and buyers of these substances. Several village *Sarpanch* has taken initiatives with village panchayat to stop drug addiction. Some recent news reports also state that people are becoming aware of the threats arising from drug abuse and avoiding the consumption of opium in social functions, particularly in *murtyu bhoj* (mourning ceremonies). They are convincing people to eradicate the use of opium and other drugs.

Suggestions

Education and awareness among people and their will to curb these ill practices and associated social stigmas is the primary tool to eliminate them. Strict laws and their proper implementation, along with work for the collective whole of society, are required. As the social traditions and stigmas are based on the roots of the community, the pragmatic reforms are also need of the hour. The state is adopting the two-pronged strategy by taking initiatives to curb drug

abuse by reducing supply and demand levels. The society also needs to cooperate to mitigate it from the demand side.

Further, the role of local administration, the Panchayati Raj Institutions, and Urban Local Bodies need to be enhanced to work at the ground level. Rajasthan is a land of cultural epitome and versatility, so awareness through cultural programs, competitions, events, advertisements, and messages from locally influential people needs to be promoted. Celebration of 'International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking' on June 26 at a mass level and effective use of social media platforms also have the potential to yield good results.

Community intervention becomes more significant in the context of drug use in social customs. The responsible persons of society need to bring in change by making themselves an example and leading change makers. Responsiveness amongst the people and about their future is required in order to curb drug addictions. Moral policing and moral education of people is an essential tool in this context. Local-level programs and public pledges by the communities are also required. There is also a need for a social movement with the participation of ordinary people. The community needs to be the epicentre of the change, and a community-driven approach that encourages a significant level of involvement of the common people is not only significantly required for curbing drug abuse but also for a better future.

Drug addicts should be provided with proper medical treatment. They should not be victimized by questioning their character; instead, they should be seen as patients. The need is also to organize de-addiction camps at the panchayats and local levels. More numbers of *Nasha Mukti Kendra* (rehabilitation centers) with specialist facilities and proper functioning need to be established. These institutes also must work on quality building to gain public trust, so that the issue of drug addiction can be reversed. Recently, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has suggested that drug users caught with small quantities should be treated as victims, not culprits. They should be sent to compulsory rehabilitation and treatment rather than jail [3,27]. Society also needs to change its stigmas associated with drugs. It needs to understand that drug addicts are victims, not criminals, and need to bring them into mainstream society. A quote from Mahatma Gandhi is apt in this context "Hate the sin, not the sinner."

Yoga and related therapies are potent tools for preventing and curing drug addiction and mental illnesses. Encouraging the establishment of Yoga centres in every panchayat and promoting mantra chanting, particularly with the sound 'Om,' can provide stress relief and promote well-being. Additionally, meditation, including transcendental meditation, offers a peaceful and transformative effect on the mind, discouraging drug use and fostering positive attitudes toward preventing substance abuse [1].

Conclusion

The threat of drug abuse has always been a matter of con-

cern for the state and society. However, it becomes more appalling when it becomes a part of social customs. It is high time for the state and civil society to address the issue before it worsens. The reports of the increasing prevalence of drugs among youth in a state like Rajasthan, with a history of pride, valor, and socio-cultural richness, are alarming and a serious matter of concern. It needs to be curbed and controlled as early as possible before pushing society towards more threatening challenges or even beyond. It is also the responsibility of every single individual to be aware of the issues arising from drug abuse and the social practices promoting it.

The social, cultural, and customary practices are part of society and must be carried forward from generation to generation. Still, it is also essential to check, relook and revise them according to the needs of the time. It is among the prime responsibility of society's educated and leading class to take the lead. As stated, various initiatives are being taken by the government along with civil society; there is a need for effective policy implementation.

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Conflict of Interest

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