

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION & EMPOWERMENT OF GIRL CHILD

Vincy Jindal

Research Scholar & Presiding Principal, G.S.S.S. School (Girls), Barnala

Abstract

This paper is an analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the Indian Education System, its major impact on girl child education and the need for corrective measures. Women's issues have received attention from many national and international communities, and they have made various efforts to empower them in order to improve their social and health conditions and involve them in developmental activities. Studying women empowerment in India is made possible by the Indian DHS survey (National Family Health Survey) several times. Several attempts were made to measure the various aspects of empowerment: the household autonomy index, the mobility index, the attitude index towards gender, and the attitude index towards domestic abuse. These indexes are used to analyse the geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural differences that exist within India. COVID-19 left some more complex issues in society which derogates the women's status and hinders the girl child education. The review of several national and international journals shows the indices that fewer women have the freedom and autonomy to leave their homes and the ratio of domestic violence against women still persists at a high rate in our society. In this paper, the author wrote a serious note in regards to these social stigmas and gave emphasis on the improvement of the girl child education system as the author believes that only educating the girls can be helpful for women's empowerment and raising their living standard in the society. The author describes that “no society can flourish with a rich culture where the women's dignity is subject to gender discriminatory practices.”

Keywords: COVID-19, Education, Girl-Child, Women, Empowerment, Indian Education System, Sex-Disparity, Role of Women in Society

Introduction

“There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish.”¹

-Michelle Obama

India is a vast and diverse country with a rich tapestry of cultural, social, and religious practices, which influence the roles and status of women in different ways. While progress has been made, there is still work to be done to ensure that women have equal opportunities, rights, and recognition in all spheres of Indian society. The role of women has evolved over time and varies greatly across different regions and communities within the country, but COVID-19 badly affected the cycle of progress of women. Historically, Indian society has been patriarchal, with prescribed gender roles that limited women's opportunities. Women in India were primarily seen

¹ Sol's Arc: Empowering Diversity and Inclusion Through Innovative Solutions, available at, <https://www.livemint.com/brand-stories/sols-arc-empowering-diversity-and-inclusion-through-innovative-solutions-11679924744546.html>, (visited on June 5, 2023).

as homemakers and caregivers. Their roles were centred around managing the household, raising children, and supporting the family. In many cases, their contribution to the family and society was undervalued. In the past, access to education for girl children was limited, and female literacy rates were lower as compared to men. Women had limited opportunities for formal employment outside the household. However, there has been a gradual improvement in this area, with increased efforts to ensure girl education and enhance their access to schools and higher education. More women have joined the workforce across various sectors, contributing significantly to India's economic growth. Movements relating to girl education and empowerment have gained momentum in India; advocating for equal rights, protection against gender-based violence, and challenging traditional gender norms. Over the years, there have been legal reforms aimed at safeguarding women's rights, including legislation against dowry, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and female infanticide. Despite progress, Indian society still faces challenges in achieving complete gender equality. COVID-19 had a profound impact on education in India which pulls back the progress of women's empowerment. The pandemic led to the closure of schools, colleges, and educational institutions. After COVID-19, issues such as gender-based violence, unequal pay, and limited representation in leadership positions are increasing and it can be cured only by empowering girl children, providing a better education system, enabling a comfortable and secure work environment for women and increasing their participation in social activities.

Objectives of the Study

This paper is an attempt to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the Indian Education System with specific reference to girl child education and empowerment.

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the impact of COVID-19 on the Indian Education System.
2. To examine the available resources for girl child education.
3. To strengthen the present education system which can help in girl child empowerment.

Methodology

The data for the study has been collected from secondary sources, published books of eminent authors, official reports, records, articles and any published and unpublished materials, whichever is relevant. In this paper, a non-participant observation method has been employed and only a doctrinal study has been conducted. The area of study has been covered all over India.

Meaning of Girl Child Empowerment

The Conceptual meaning of girl child empowerment is - to provide them with better educational facilities, health facilities, the safest and most comfortable environment for study on outdoor campuses, teach them their legal rights, enable them to fight for their rights, remove gender discrimination, equal job opportunities, equal pay comparing to men and strengthening the girls and women to fight against domestic violence issues. "Article 14 and Article 15 of the Indian

Constitution provide for the right to equality and prohibits gender discrimination.”² The world economy has changed into a global economy, still in the world of developed and developing countries women have been suppressed in all walks of life for generations and the status of women needs to be improved in various fields. This goal can be achieved through social, political and economic empowerment of women and girl child education is the only path in this direction.

The Education System in India

"To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves."³

-Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru

The perception that the Indian education system is "backward" compared to developed countries is a complex issue with multiple factors at play. It is essential to recognize that every education system has its strengths and weaknesses, and comparing them directly can be challenging due to diverse socio-economic, cultural, and historical contexts. However, the lack of infrastructure and resources contributes to the perception of the Indian education system being less advanced.

Lack of Infrastructure and Resources

Indian education faces challenges related to inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, and a shortage of resources like libraries, laboratories, and technology. There is a shortage of qualified and well-trained teachers, especially in rural areas. Teacher training programs might not always be comprehensive or up-to-date. The lack of a friendly environment and traditional methods of teaching add problems to a higher level. Teachers are still adamant about adopting change because they do not want to learn new innovative methods and modern approaches to teaching. The Indian education system has historically been criticized for its rote-learning approach and emphasis on memorization rather than critical thinking and practical application of knowledge. This adds to the underlying problem as students themselves find it difficult to apply knowledge in daily use. Parents had the thinking that only experience teaches their girls what they face in daily life. Education can not help them in earning their livelihood and when it's of no use why waste time on it? It's better to teach household matters to them at home. Indian education relies heavily on high-stakes, standardized examinations, which can put immense pressure on students and promote a narrow focus on exam-oriented learning. Sometimes under stress or due to emotional trauma, they went into depression and after that, it becomes difficult for the parents to marry them off. Even the education policies made by the government had flaws because those were made as per the general standards but no two areas are the same due to the diverse nature of our country and without understanding and having deep knowledge at the root level whatever policies they make it's of no use. One can understand that policy can not be made after studying each place problem but many problems are the same having different angles. The problem is that we don't want to. The common problem that everyone is facing more or less is the access of girl children to education. Even if some parents try to overcome but others relating to them always try to push them on the wrong path. Some parents convey that if they did not stop giving

² M.P. Jain, Indian Constitutional Law (LexisNexis, Delhi, 8th edn., 2018).

³ Women Empowerment Through Education, available at, <https://morungexpress.com/womens-empowerment-through-education> (visited on June 5, 2023).

opportunities to their girl child then it won't be possible for them to find proper matrimonial matches for their girl. Moreover, our education is not life-related. It can't be applied in solving daily problems then why waste time and spoil their girl child who is but an asset to some other? So, it's better to teach them how to be tolerant and listen to others.

India faces challenges related to access to quality education, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. Sometimes policy implementation and governance issues can also hinder the effective functioning of the education system in India. Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty, inequality, and cultural norms, can impact educational outcomes in India. The research output and innovation in Indian universities and institutes are comparatively lower. It is important to note that while the Indian education system may face certain challenges, it also has many strengths, including a vast talent pool, a strong emphasis on STEM fields, and a rich cultural heritage. Efforts are continually being made to improve the system, and progress is being achieved in various areas. Education is a complex and evolving field, and it requires sustained efforts from multiple stakeholders to bring about positive changes. The focus must be on experiential learning, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary approaches to education. We should include more comprehensive systems and a broader range of assessment methods that emphasize skills and creativity. Government Policies should be stable and consistent. These provide better access to education and there is a strong emphasis on research and development. Stress should be on higher per capita incomes and stronger social safety nets.

The central government has rolled out National Education Policy 2020⁴ to tackle all these issues and re-framed the whole education system and pedagogy. The motive of the new education policy is to provide education to all students irrespective of their residence. They have suggested flexible courses for the students and they also gave emphasis on taking benefits of the latest technology for providing online and distance education via several media. The government has taken a good initiative in this direction, but it is premature to evaluate all the things at so an early stage because complex issues of lack of knowledge, low literacy rate, the rigidity of society and many other factors will resist applying this policy in the whole country and it may take several years to accomplish the objectives enshrined in this policy.

Sex Disparity and Girl Child Education

“When women are educated, their countries become stronger and more prosperous.”⁵

-Michelle Obama

Sex disparity, particularly in the context of gender discrimination, has significant effects on girl child education in India. Despite progress in recent years, gender-based inequalities persist, leading to various challenges for girls in accessing and completing their education. There are

⁴ National Education Policy 2020, available at, https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/national-education-policy-2020/?gclid=Cj0KCQjw5f2lBhCkARIsAHeTvlhFaZTHIKzwIMTNFwAhRVX90x3h5rZ-XLMb6fv9bWs65UgscTmwjLlaAtyVEALw_wcB (visited on June 5, 2023)

⁵ How does education empower a better world, available at, <https://indiaeducation.net/resources/articles/how-does-education-empower-a-better-world/#:~:text=Education%20and%20Gender,nations%2C%20and%20the%20entire%20world>, (visited on June 5, 2023).

many key factors of sex disparity in girl child education in India that are barriers to their development. Likewise, in many parts of India, cultural norms and traditional beliefs prioritize boys' education over girls. As a result, girls may face barriers to accessing schools, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Gender norms and socioeconomic factors can contribute to early marriages for girls, which often leads to early dropouts from school. When girls get married at a young age, they are more likely to discontinue their education to take on household responsibilities. Parents took girls as a burden and they want to shed it off as early as possible. Most of the time due to family problems both parents have to go outside for work and there is nobody at home to take care of the girl child. When parents don't feel safe for their girls even in their own homes it has become a great challenge for teachers to make them understand about school safety. Safety concerns, especially during the commute to school or within school premises, can discourage parents from sending their daughters to school. The lack of safe and gender-sensitive infrastructure can be a deterrent to girl education. This results in the marriage of their girl child at an early stage thus feeding them with the responsibilities of being mothers at such early age when they themselves are the same. Their innocence and childhood got killed at the hands of society. The shyness or fear of discussing menstrual days is another big hindrance for girls from taking education. Girls may miss school during menstruation or drop out altogether. Girls don't want to discuss or we can say they were taught to be kept and tolerate any pain regarding it to themselves because parents thought it would be shameful if anybody comes to know and still, they are using the infected cloth during these days that results in many women related health problems after marriage.

Gender-based stereotypes can limit girls' aspirations and opportunities, leading them to pursue traditionally female-dominated fields rather than exploring diverse educational and career paths. Even if girls manage to complete their primary education, they may face additional challenges when seeking higher education due to financial constraints, lack of family support, or societal expectations. In the long term, gender disparities in education contribute to the gender pay gap, as women with limited access to education may face reduced employment opportunities and lower earning potential. The lack of equal educational opportunities for girls means that India is not fully utilizing the potential of half of its population. This hampers the overall development and progress of the country. Efforts are being made by the Indian government, non-governmental organizations, and various stakeholders to address these disparities and promote girl education. Initiatives like the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) program and scholarships specifically for girls have been introduced to encourage their education. While progress has been made, sustained efforts are required to achieve gender equality in education and create an inclusive and empowering environment for all children in India.

Education is the only utility that can empower girls. Although the National Survey of India shows that there is an improvement in the literacy rate in India in 2022 as compared to the 2011 census, still there is much more improvement needed. "The results of the 2011 census reveal that there has been an increase in literacy in the country. The literacy rate in the country is 74.04 per cent,

82.14 for males and 65.46 for females.”⁶ “As per National Survey of India, Literacy Rate in India has increased from 73% in 2011 to 77.7% in 2022, however, it still stands behind the global literacy rate which stands at 86.5% (as per UNESCO). Of the 77.7% Indian literacy rate in 2022, male literacy rate stands at 84.7% and female literacy rate stands at 70.3% as compared to the global average female literacy rate of 79% (as per UNESCO).”⁷

Literacy rate in India in (year)	Male (in per cent)	Female (in per cent)	Combined Literacy rate
2011	82.14%	65.46%	74.04%
2022	84.70%	70.00%	77.70%

Table – 1 Data showing the literacy rate in India

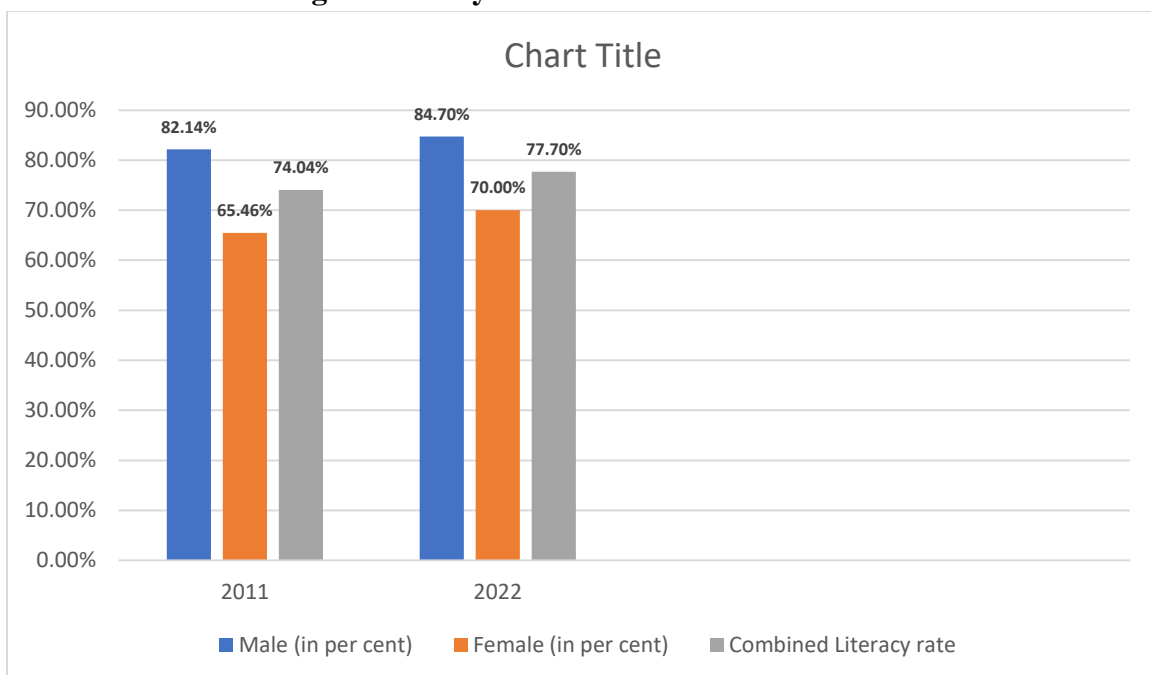


Figure 1: Data showing the literacy rate in India

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Education System in India

Here are some of the key impacts of COVID-19 on the Education System in India:

The closure of educational institutions resulted in a significant disruption of traditional classroom learning. Students had to transition to remote learning methods, which posed challenges for both teachers and students, particularly in areas with limited access to technology and the Internet. The shift to online learning highlighted the existing digital divide in India, with many students lacking access to computers, smartphones, or reliable internet connections. This disparity disproportionately affected students from low-income families and rural areas. The sudden shift

⁶ Literacy, available at, <https://knowindia.india.gov.in/profile/literacy.php#:~:text=The%20results%20of%202011%20census,males%20and%2065.46%20for%20females>, (visited on June 5, 2023).

⁷ Why educating women is more important than we realize, available at, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/why-educating-women-is-more-important-than-we-realize> (visited on June 5, 2023).

to online and remote learning modes led to learning loss for many students. The lack of face-to-face interactions with teachers and peers, along with varying degrees of engagement in online classes, impacted learning outcomes. Board examinations, competitive exams, and university admissions were postponed or altered due to the pandemic. Uncertainty surrounding exams and evaluation methods caused stress and anxiety among students. Teachers had to adapt quickly to online teaching methods, which required training and support. Managing online classes, connectivity issues, and addressing the individual needs of students became new challenges for educators.

The economic impact of the pandemic, particularly in vulnerable communities, led to increased dropout rates as some students had to work to support their families or lacked resources to continue their education. The pandemic's disruptions, coupled with the fear and uncertainty it brought, had adverse effects on the emotional and mental well-being of students and educators. The pandemic also spurred innovations in the education sector. Schools and institutions adopted various online teaching tools, learning platforms, and digital resources to enhance the learning experience. The pandemic prompted discussions on reimagining assessment methods, moving away from traditional exams, and incorporating more continuous and formative assessments. The pandemic highlighted the need for robust education policies and infrastructural improvements, including enhancing digital infrastructure and teacher training to ensure continuity in education during the crisis. The long-term impacts of the pandemic on education in India will continue to be studied and understood as the country navigates the recovery phase. Efforts are ongoing to mitigate the challenges and bridge the learning gaps caused by the COVID-19 disruption.

Impact of COVID-19 on Girl Education

The aftermath of COVID-19 on girl education in India has been marked by several challenges and concerns. The pandemic's impact exacerbated pre-existing gender disparities and introduced new barriers to girl education. Here are some of the key aspects of the aftermath of COVID-19 on girl education in India:

The economic impact of the pandemic disproportionately affected vulnerable families, leading to increased dropout rates among girls. In some cases, families facing financial hardships may prioritize boys' education over girls, leading to girls leaving school. **The pandemic's economic fallout may have increased the incidence of child marriages, particularly in areas where families faced financial difficulties.** Early marriages often result in girls discontinuing their education. The shift to online learning during the pandemic exposed the digital divide in India. Girls from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and rural areas faced challenges in accessing digital devices and reliable internet connectivity, hindering their participation in remote learning. With schools closed and families spending more time at home during lockdowns, girls often had to take on increased domestic responsibilities. This burden, combined with limited access to education resources, could negatively impact their learning opportunities.

The closure of schools also meant that girls lost access to essential sanitation facilities. The disruptions caused by the pandemic could have long-term effects on girls' higher education prospects. Limited access to quality education during the critical formative years might impact

their eligibility for higher studies and future career opportunities. The stress and uncertainty of the pandemic, along with the challenges in accessing education, may have adversely affected the mental health of girls, potentially leading to reduced engagement and motivation to continue their studies.

Efforts to address the aftermath of COVID-19 on girl education in India should focus on implementing targeted interventions that address these challenges. This includes providing access to digital devices and internet connectivity, promoting community awareness about the importance of girl education, investing in safe and inclusive learning environments, and offering support and resources to girls facing economic and social barriers. Additionally, incorporating gender-responsive policies into the education system can help create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all children in India.

Corrective Measures to Be Taken for Girl Child Education After COVID-19

After the COVID-19 pandemic, several corrective measures have been taken to promote girl child empowerment and improve their education prospects in India. To bridge the digital divide, initiatives can be launched to provide girls from marginalized communities with access to digital devices and internet connectivity. This can involve setting up digital learning centres in underserved areas and providing scholarships or subsidies for digital resources. Creating safe and inclusive learning environments is essential for girl education. This includes measures to prevent and address gender-based violence in schools and providing gender-segregated sanitation facilities, especially for menstruating girls. Conducting awareness campaigns at the community level to promote the importance of girl education is essential to dispel myths and stereotypes that hinder their access to education.

Implementing conditional cash transfer programs that incentivize families to send their daughters to school may be helpful to increase students' enrolment. Such programs can provide financial support to families on the condition that their girls attend school regularly. Providing teachers with training on gender sensitivity and inclusion in the classroom is also necessary. This can help create a supportive learning environment where girls feel valued and encouraged to participate actively. Offering life skills and vocational training programs to girls, equipping them with practical skills and knowledge that can lead to better employment opportunities and economic independence is also helpful. Government should Implement affirmative action policies that reserve seats or provide additional benefits for girls in educational institutions, particularly in fields where girls are underrepresented. Offering flexible learning modalities that accommodate the diverse needs of girls, including part-time schooling, distance learning, and blended learning options is good. Involving parents, local leaders, and community members in promoting girl education can help in encouraging parents to send their girl's children to schools. Engaging communities can foster a supportive environment for girl education and challenge prevailing norms that hinder their progress. Establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress and measure the impact of corrective measures will help identify areas of improvement and ensure the effectiveness of interventions. Implementing mentorship programs where successful women from various fields can mentor and inspire girls to pursue

their educational and career aspirations and they can promote their physical well-being, give the inspiration to do work in a team, and build their confidence in all fields.

The government can also organise workshops and programs to promote girl participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, addressing the gender gap in these areas, conducting career guidance sessions that expose girls to diverse career options and empower them to make informed decisions about their future. Providing financial literacy training to girls, helping them understand money management, savings, and investments are good initiatives for girl child empowerment.

Offering entrepreneurship workshops to encourage girls to develop business ideas and entrepreneurial skills should be developed. Organizing awareness campaigns and events to advocate for girls' rights and gender equality will be helpful in encouraging girls to express themselves through art, writing, music, and other creative outlets, fostering self-expression and confidence.

Conducting workshops on reproductive health, hygiene practices, and menstrual health management to promote girl well-being can be helpful to provide better health policies. Engaging girls in community service activities, promoting social responsibility and a sense of empowerment through contributing to their communities will be helpful to increase the participation of women in social activities and increase their representation in administration.

Creating networking opportunities and support groups for girls, providing them with a sense of community and peer support will help them to understand the complex diversity of India which will be helpful to increase social stability and set up peace and harmony in society. Offering digital literacy workshops can help girl children to use technology and access online resources effectively. Organizing self-defence workshops to empower girls with the knowledge and skills will be helpful for them to protect themselves for their legal rights.

These corrective measures should be part of a comprehensive and sustained effort involving government agencies, educational institutions, NGOs, and civil society to ensure better education facilities and equal opportunities for girl children in India.

Girl Child Empowerment

Empowering girl children and ensuring their access to quality education is crucial for achieving gender equality and sustainable development. "Empowerment of women is a phenomenon of the nineties and represents the fourth phase of the policy approach towards the involvement of women in the process of development. This is considered the most rational and appropriate approach adopted to date. Empowerment is defined as 'giving power to', 'creating power within' and 'enabling'. Hence empowerment is a multidimensional process which should enable individuals or groups of individuals to realise their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It is a comprehensive process which includes: awareness, confidence building, the realisation of self-worth, organising, participation in decision making and finally having access to and control over resources in fair and equal proportion. Empowerment is a 'process' and not an 'event.' It is, therefore, time-consuming and may have several phases. Each phase or step may be an effort by

itself It can be built only gradually by constructing each step solidly.”⁸ Girl child empowerment involves providing opportunities and resources to girls to build their confidence, skills, and knowledge, allowing them to make informed decisions and reach their full potential. Empowered girls can contribute significantly to society's progress, economic growth, and the overall well-being of the nation. By investing in girl child empowerment, we can create a more equitable and inclusive society where girls can thrive and contribute to the betterment of their communities and the world.

Conclusion and Suggestions

“To educate girls is to reduce poverty.”⁹

-Kofi Annan

Since ancient times our society has been influenced by gender-based inequalities and women have been the constant victims of discrimination in all spheres of their lives. With the spread of education and awareness in society, many measures have been implemented to reform their unfavourable conditions and bring them justice. Just as the movement was gaining momentum, destruction in the form of a deadly pandemic: Covid-19, entered the scenario and totally reversed the progress. It pushed society several decades in past, threatening years' worth of development and rigorous efforts. The unexpected arrival of the virus had a major impact on society as well as the economy of the world, especially the developing nations like India where women and girl children were once again deprived of their basic rights and life opportunities. Though the disaster has relatively subsided as of now, it left a trail of long-lasting effects on the development of society, especially women. These severe repercussions are being dealt with by elevating women's participation in diverse domains and introducing policies favourable to their conditions. The main focus remains on teenage girls, who need appropriate and timely guidance for their growth and to achieve a successful place in society in the future. This aim can only be achieved with the dedicated contribution of the teaching force who are the eminent figures in this fight for equality.

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⁸ Vineeta Singh and Kishore Kumar, “Empowerment of the Rural Woman”, Vol. LXXIII, No. 3, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, pp 453-456, July-September 2012.

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